

Thursday, March 4, 2004

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

WAS CONGRESSMAN McCRERY PLAYING HAMLET OR HARDBALL?

Some observers felt that Fourth District Congressman Jim McCrery had been doing some soul searching in the past few months. "To run or not to run; that was his question!" Or was he just playing hardball with the Republican leadership in Congress as well as the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee? For whatever reason, he took the speculation in both Louisiana and Washington off the table as he announced his re-election plans yesterday.

Some observers who might be a bit cynical could have assumed that McCrery was being a bit coy with the Washington Republican establishment in hopes of bargaining for more perks. One can only speculate as to his demands.

More important committee assignments? A firm commitment for the chairmanship of the Ways and Means Committee? A major campaign fund commitment from the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee? A bigger office with a fireplace? The speculation is rampant and the possibilities are endless.

Congressman Jim milked it for all it was worth. He told a press conference yesterday that phone calls from both the President and the Vice-President failed to sway him. Family values rose to the top, and he was going to retire to stay home with his wife and kids. But wife, Johnette, saved the day. "I knew he couldn't retire. It wouldn't be right. I woke up Thursday morning and came up with this solution," she said. "The whole family will move to Washington". Hummmmm. I wonder if any other member of Congress has thought about that solution?

In any event, the Republican wannabes can go back to concentrating on their present jobs. But the Democrats are still looking.

Shreveport Mayor Keith Hightower, who would be a strong candidate whether McCrery is in or out of the race, will pass up the chance to run. He is term limited to run for re-election, but will keep his options open for a chance to run for either the legislature or a possible statewide office four years from now. Maybe even sooner. Don't be surprised if the Mayor and close supporters are in John Kennedy's camp for the U. S. Senate race. State Treasurer Keith Hightower? Has a nice ring to it.

New PSC member Foster Campbell is also out, but is letting supporters know he is still eyeing the U. S. Senate race this fall. Look for Campbell to be on the speaking tour statewide in the months to come as he sizes up his chances.

Shreveport attorney John Milkovich, who ran last time, receiving 27% of the vote, says he's still in the race.

Probably the strongest candidate for the Democrats could be state Rep. Taylor Townsend from Natchitoches. He is a proven money raiser, with a solid base in the southern part of the district. If he runs with national party support, McCrery will be far from a shoe-in when the election takes place this fall.

MARTHA STEWART UPDATE

The jury in the Martha Stewart case is deliberating her fate as this column is being posted. It's obvious to any reader who follows this column that I have a personal interest in following this trial. There are many similarities in her case and mine. So far, she has received a much more fair shake, and was able to obtain all of the evidence used against her. Particularly helpful were the actual handwritten notes of the FBI agent who interviewed her initially. Her lawyers effectively showed that there were discrepancies between the FBI agent's handwritten notes, and the typewritten statement prepared days later. This will certainly be helpful. It would not just have been helpful to me. It would have proved my innocence and set me free.

The judge threw out the major charge against her last Friday involving obstruction of justice. This was played up as a major victory for Martha and it certainly helped her cause. But she still has made a tactical mistake. She should have testified on her own behalf.

Jurors just want to hear your side of the story. This is particularly true when a high profile defendant is involved, and jurors have a lot of advance knowledge about whose fate they are deciding. Her lawyers had months to prepare her for her cross-examination by the prosecutors. The case itself is pretty simple. And she is a polished performer, having been interviewed thousands of times in her life.

Right now, I think it's a close call. The jury can go either way. If she is found guilty, her lawyers will have some questions to answer. In my opinion, Martha should have taken the stand.

There has been some first rate news coverage in recent weeks about how the Louisiana Teachers Retirement System has lost millions of dollars by investing in risky funds with a firm whose CEO owns the Texas Rangers and the Dallas Stars. The Baton Rouge Business Report did a good job of pointing out numerous instances of mismanagement

and ethical violations by board members. For a good take with an athletic slant, pick up this week's *Tiger Rag* now on the newsstands. Public Relations Executive Rannah Gray gives a comprehensive view of the difference between wining and dining public officials, as compared to corporate executives who can open up new businesses in the state. It's a column worth reading.

THE RIP-OFF OF THE WEEK

Over Mardi Gras, the "Ticket Police" were out in force in New Orleans. The city properly posted signs on parade routes that prohibit parking several hours before and after a parade took place. It just makes common sense. But the Ticket Police went a lot further.

Under apparent orders from their superiors, numerous women who make up the ticket brigade were writing tickets on vehicles blocks away from the parade route. When questioned about it, their answer was they were following instructions, and that signs were "supposed to be" posted on the streets where the tickets were being given. No signs were visible, and cars were often parked three or four blocks away from the route. Yet illegal parking tickets were being given out by the hundreds.

Many of the cars were from out-of-state. The fine is \$25.00, and not worth the effort to file a protest. A cynical observer might determine that there was a calculated effort by operatives in the city to ticket anyone close to a parade route with the hopes of generating undeserved income. It's wrong and takes the luster off of the normal good job the regular police officers do in patrolling the huge crowds that attend Mardi Gras in New Orleans. It's nothing but a rip-off. Mardi Gras revelers deserve better.

MOVIE REVIEW

Everyone who has seen Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ* comes away with strong personal feelings about the movie. There is no middle ground. I watched the film at a private showing with family members the day before it opened to sold out audiences around the country. It was a mixed audience of friends and church leaders in our community.

When the film ended, no one rose from their chair and not one word was said for several minutes. It was hard for any of us to respond to the wrenching emotional experience we had just witnessed.

Actually, my personal feelings were mixed. I can not recall seeing a more brutal film as I watched Jesus initially flayed to the bone by Roman soldiers. The Man is literally skinned alive. Then we watched as Christ's blood spurts and the nails audibly penetrate His flesh. The thought came to mind that we were witnessing this torture while, in the present day, the world is driven with primal violence in the name of God.

I also thought about how Gibson, perhaps, makes it too simple. He seemed to be giving us Jesus in the same way Gibson portrayed William Wallace in *Brave Heart* – a bloody “action hero” who could take all of the punishment his evil enemies dish out. I guess I was looking for a more complicated Christ, who even through His suffering, would evoke the love and wisdom of His teachings that flow throughout the gospels

And in semi-defense of Mel, perhaps we were expecting too much. Maybe Gibson was not making the film to convert secular disbelievers, or those with little faith. Gibson is a doctrinal Catholic who is strong on tradition in the Roman Catholic faith. Therefore, you can make the argument that he produced the movie for those of us who already believe, and wants us to experience our faith more deeply.

It's obviously a must see movie. And you've got to hand it to Mel. He has the whole country outwardly talking about religion, and making many of us look introspectively to what we really believe. With all of the superficial issues that dominate the news, this means a lot.

Our government officials occasionally stumbled on the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.

-- Sir Winston Churchill

If thine enemy offend thee give his child a drum.

-- Chinese Curse

Peace and Justice to you and your family,

Jim Brown