

Thursday, March 23rd, 2006
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

JIM LESLIE'S MURDER
THIRTY YEARS AGO IN BATON ROUGE

My wife, Gladys and I were in Shreveport last week attending a funeral. Because of a houseful of guests at my mother's house, we decided to stay at the Horseshoe Hotel and Casino, a bustling enterprise on the Red River in Bossier right across from downtown Shreveport. Gladys wandered off to the gift shops as I went up the elevator with the bellman to check in our room.

"Mr. Brown," the middle -aged bellman said: "I just want to tell you that my dad was Jim Leslie."

I knew the name immediately, and a flashback took me back exactly 30 years to 1976 in Baton Rouge. Jim Leslie was gunned down in the parking lot of the Prince Murat Hotel.

I was just beginning my second term as a State Senator where I represented six parishes in northeast Louisiana. Labor-Management issues were not a big thing in my part of the state. I didn't know a card carrying union man from there, and there was little industry of any size. But a proposed "Right-to-Work" law had become the major focus and controversy during the spring of the '76 session of the Legislature.

Louisiana's existing law then required that when there was a union contract in place, all employees had to contribute part of their dues to that contract whether they belonged to the union or not. This was standard fare in most states throughout the country where there was a significant union presence. But the newly formed Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, headed by then president Ed Stiemmel, wanted to have "open shops" where the worker had a choice about whether or not to contribute union dues from his or her salary.

There was no middle ground on the issue. No compromise. Edwin Edwards was governor, and had strong support of union interests throughout the state. But he, as well as most of the other elected officials around the Capitol, were on the hot seat from advocates on both sides of this controversy.

It wasn't that big of an issue for me, although I certainly received a lot of pressure. Like I pointed out earlier, there was virtually no union presence in my district, and even the smallest businesses were for a "Right-to-Work" law. This issue dominated the whole legislative session, and tensions filled with both sides actively lobbying legislators every day at the State Capitol.

To help promote its Right-to-Work effort, L.A.B.I. hired political consultant Jim Leslie to produce a series of T.V. spots. Leslie produced four T.V. spots that ran on every

station in the state continually for two weeks. The timing was set right before the final vote in the Senate. The State House of Representatives had passed the Right-to-Work bill several weeks earlier, and the Leslie T.V. campaign was designed to build huge support when the final vote came to the Senate.

The debate lasted all day in the State Senate, and you could cut the tension with a knife as I sat in my seat in the Senate. By a slight margin, Louisiana's new Right-to-Work law passed the Senate in late afternoon on Wednesday, July 8th, 1976.

Jim Leslie was killed a few hours later.

The Right-to-Work supporters had a victory celebration that evening, and then Leslie and several friends headed back to the Prince Murat Hotel on Nicholson Drive. No one knows exactly what happened. Gun shots were fired, and Leslie slumped over dead in the parking lot.

Rumors ran wild, and some alleged that Mafia thugs tied to organized labor might in some way have something to do with the murder. This proved to be untrue, and it was a terrible time for those trying to find some rhyme or reason out of all the debate and the ultimate price paid by Leslie.

As it turned out, the story became even more bizarre. Leslie had handled the campaign of Shreveport Public Safety Commissioner George Dortois. Back then, the office that was basically the Chief of Police of Shreveport was elected. Dortois wouldn't pay Leslie the fee he owed him for campaign related public relations work although Leslie continually complained. Finally, Dortois sent a check on an account from the City of Shreveport. Leslie sent it back saying that a city check for campaign work was improper.

A local state thug with ties to Dortois named Rusty Griffith was ultimately tagged as the trigger man. Griffith himself was assassinated up in my home of Concordia Parish some months later. Some say it was to shut him up from trying to blackmail Dortois.

Dortois was charged with Leslie's murder, but before he could be tried, he died of a heart attack. So many questions were left unanswered and no one knows for sure exactly what happened.

The whole Leslie affair and his efforts in Right-to-Work is part of the fascinating political history of Louisiana over the past century. Most of you reading this will never have heard of Jim Leslie. I too had forgotten the incident. But his son, now 34 years old, brought it all back to light by merely saying hello to me in a hotel elevator and mentioning his dad.

I told him I knew his father as a highly respected public relations expert who was eagerly sought after by those who wanted the best in the business to put out their message. He certainly would have been proud of his father.. He thanked me, and said he appreciated

the fact that his dad, through such a terrible tragedy, would continue to be part of the lore and history of Louisiana.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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