

Thursday, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
New Orleans, Louisiana

**A BARNBURNER OF A RUNOFF  
FOR MAYOR OF NEW ORLEANS**

In the New Orleans mayor's race, the two run-off candidates began posturing late election night when it became obvious that the incumbent and the Lieutenant-Governor would face each other for the top prize. Their messages were pretty much the same. Stick to the issues and keep race out of the run-off. And you know what? Ain't gonna happen.

In the first primary, with 22 other opponents facing the eventual two leaders, both Mayor Ray Nagin and Lieutenant-Governor Mitch Landrieu shied away from any personal digs or outright attacks against each other. And it made sense then. In Landrieu's case, his opponent in the first primary was not Nagin, who was a cinch to make the run-off. Landrieu was competing against other white candidates. So attacking Nagin would not necessarily result in votes coming to Landrieu.

Considering all of the controversy he has faced, the Mayor did better than expected. His focus was on the Black community – Ray Nagin garnered almost 70 percent of the African-American vote. And he has the potential for growth here. A large number of Black voters, even those living in New Orleans, just did not participate.

In the 2002 election, African-Americans had 62 percent of about 135,000 votes. In this past Saturday's election, Black voters cast 52 percent of approximately 108,000 votes. There are a number of Black voters who, for a variety of reasons, just didn't show up.

So what does each candidate do now?

The Lieutenant-Governor's first call Sunday morning should have been to New Orleans attorney Rob Couhig, who finished fourth with 10,287 votes. Couhig proved to be a blessing for Landrieu. In the final weeks of the primary, third-place finisher Ron Foreman (18,734 votes), who runs the zoo and aquarium in New Orleans, was coming on like gang busters. Couhig's effective television spots and aggressive campaigning slowed down the Foreman momentum allowing Landrieu to comfortably slip into the run-off. Since both Couhig and Foreman have been advocates for "complete restructuring and change in the city," it's going to be difficult for both of them not to support Landrieu in the run-off. The ball is in Landrieu's court, and he will have made a big mistake if he didn't begin courting both of these solid white candidates in the hours after the election Saturday night.

There are three things Landrieu needs to do if he is going to win this election set for May 20<sup>th</sup>. First, do whatever it reasonably takes to bring Foreman and Couhig forces on his team. That may mean including both of these fellows in a future administration, but that may be necessary if he hopes to win.

Second, he needs to go after the Mayor. No more mister nice guy. Landrieu is naïve if he thinks Nagin is not going to attack the Lieutenant-Governor's record, particularly his 16 years in the Legislature. Landrieu is not considered "pro-business" and a lot of the votes he has cast can be fodder for good television spots. The ball is in Landrieu's court. The queen city of the south is in shambles, and the buck stops with the mayor. Not a lot was happening pre-Katrina. And you would have a hard time finding any reasonable person who feels like the post-Katrina response was adequate. So Landrieu has to stop smiling at the camera, and bring on the attack. Not directly himself, but there is some creative ways to point out that the mayor's checkered record. Landrieu has the best media people in the business, and if there was ever a time for them "rise to the occasion," now is it.

Third, Landrieu has to find the "passion." He speaks with authority, makes sense, and always gives a polished speech. But his campaign, so far, has lacked passion. Goodness gracious, his family lives in New Orleans, and a number of their homes were destroyed. Katrina hit about as personally home as you can get. His life has been centered around New Orleans. But the passion that you assume he certainly feels just didn't come across in the first primary. He can do better the second time around, and he needs to if he is going to win.

Can the mayor be re-elected? Yes, but he faces a yeoman's task.

Ray Nagin did get almost 39 percent of the vote in the first primary. The conventional wisdom is that the incumbent needs to win the first time around, or he's in trouble. Not particularly so. There are numerous examples around the state where an incumbent didn't win in the first primary (yours truly – missed it in my third re-election effort, and I won going away in the run-off). The uniqueness of this election gives Nagin some opportunities to grow.

He has two challenges if he is going to have a shot. First of all, aggressively come after Landrieu and lump him as a major part of the problem. There are some opportunities here for some white growth. There are specific Republican concerns with the Lieutenant-Governor's voting record and similar concerns with his sister, the U.S. Senator. A sense of a "Landrieu dynasty" out in some circles has been portrayed in popular video cartoons circulating the websites. Nagin needs to run a very aggressive media campaign saying that Landrieu has had ample opportunity to deal with many of the problems facing New Orleans, with little results. A Nagin aggressive attack will at least "muddy the water" and put both candidates on a more equal footing.

Second, he shouldn't build his whole campaign around what the state's largest paper called the "crossover vote." Yes, Nagin needs more white votes. But it's imperative he expand his base in the Black community. He needs to increase the Black turnout in the city by an additional eight to 10 percent. And that's possible. Just not the out-of-state voters had difficulty voting. There were a number of Black voters in New Orleans who did not show up. So there are some opportunities here.

And there are votes to be gained in the often overlooked Vietnamese community. Father Vien Nguyen, pastor of Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church in the predominantly Vietnamese neighborhood of Versailles in New Orleans East, said that although his community's church

groups and business leaders endorsed Forman last time, no decision had been made about whom to support in the runoff. The city's Vietnamese population numbered 20,000 before Katrina..

The bottom line is that Nagin needs 80 percent of the Black vote. If he gets this, and does an aggressive attack on Landrieu, he has a chance.

Three-and-a-half weeks to go for this soap opera to run its course. There is plenty of time to let these strategies effectively play out. Whichever candidate most effectively implements such a game plan will be the winner. No television drama could play out a more fascinating scenario. We will all be watching.

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### **THOUGHTS FROM THE CAMPAIGN:**

**Most lackluster performance** – In the final national campaign debate where all the major candidate were involved. They all almost put the viewers to sleep. No sparks flew, no fresh ideas were expressed, and even the he most articulate candidates came across as lackluster. Even “tough guy” Chris Matthews and his cohort, local television anchor Norman Robinson, looked like they were going through the motions.

**Cheapest shot from the national media** – Syndicated talk show host Don Imus (seen each morning on MSNBC) said about candidate Ron Foreman: “After watching the debate last night, the guy that runs the zoo down there ought to be in the zoo.”

**Most divisive and dumbest candidate comment** – An easy one. The mayor’s view of a “chocolate city.”

**Big winner in Saturday’s New Orleans election** – Apathy and the status quo – some two-thirds of the registered voters in the city didn’t show and declared little interest. Political prognosticator C.B. Forgotson observed: “More people attended the French Quarter Festival this past Saturday than taking the time to go to the voting places and vote.” An incumbent mayor led the first primary handily, and other incumbents overwhelmingly were re-elected.

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Another big winner in Saturday’s New Orleans election was Secretary of State Al Ater. He had earlier announced that he would not run for the office that he has held for almost a year, following the tragic death of then Secretary of State Fox McKeithen. But friends close to Ater say his decision has never been “etched in stone.” As one advisor to Ater said recently, “Al’s future hinges on this New Orleans election. He will be in the spotlight and all over the news for weeks. If all goes well, don’t be surprised if he reconsiders his decision not to run. He has received the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of dollars of free publicity, and most of it is in a positive light.”

Others feel Ater is not about to pack up his bags and move back to the family farm in Waterproof, Louisiana. If all goes well in the May 20<sup>th</sup> election (and there is every indication it will), look for Ater to run a poll and seriously consider jumping back into the race.

The Democrats are savoring such a decision, since there is no major Democrat in the race at this time. Republican Senator Jay Dardenne and former Republican State Chairman Mike Francis both have announced for this spot, and were looking towards a two-man Republican donnybrook. But Ater, if he decides to run, will change the whole scenario, and will immediately jump out as the favorite. Expect a decision by the first of June.

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### **NOTABLE QUOTES FROM THE CAMPAIGN**

"There have been too many people who said we were dead, too many people who said we were way too divisive. There were too many people who said this city should go in a different direction. But the people have said they like the direction." **Mayor Ray Nagin, who led all candidates in the mayoral race.**

"Today in this great American city, African-American and white, Hispanic and Vietnamese, almost in equal measure came forward to propel this campaign forward and loudly proclaim that we in New Orleans will be one people. We will speak with one voice and we will have one future." **Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, who will face Nagin in a May 20 runoff election.**

"Do you want change? Yes. But what kind do you want? How bad do you fault a man for a few problems during a disaster? There are just a lot of things to weigh and decide." **Rosalie Ramm, 52, on the difficulty of choosing a candidate after Hurricane Katrina.**

"The present mayor needed to go under all circumstances. Crime was high before the storm. Deterioration of the infrastructure was here before the storm. There was no economic development in the neighborhoods. So Katrina was just the icing on the cake. Nagin had no plan to bring people out of poverty. He didn't do what he needed to do and he had long enough." **Social worker Sharon Alexis on why she voted against Nagin.**

"We are facing in New Orleans ... a calamity of an election, an embarrassing crisis in contradiction. We fight for democracy in Iraq and there's an absolute denial of it here in New Orleans today. This election lacks the legitimacy afforded us in the 1965 Voting Right Act." **The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who says he'll challenge the election's outcome in court, even if black candidates do well.**

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"Win or lose, we go shopping after the **election.**"

[Imelda Marcos](#)

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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