

Thursday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**LOUISIANA SECRETARY OF STATE'S RACE**  
**A POSSIBLE SURPRISE?**

Would you believe it? The nation focused on the recent Mayor's Race in New Orleans and you would assume there would be a break. Not so. A major election, involving the selection of two statewide officials as well as congressmen, and many other local officials, is only four months away.

A hotly contested race is already underway to replace outgoing incumbent Al Ater. He took over at the untimely death of Fox McKeithen and faced some tough times in handling what many believe could have been a disastrous recent election in New Orleans by organizing what most agree was a smooth process.

I have written a number of articles complaining about the election delay. But give credit where credit is due. Ater stepped up to the plate, brought in a lot of outside help, and reversed any initial criticism he received. And he had a lot on the line. But don't expect the Ferriday native to drift off into the sunset. Many were surprised he did not run for this office in the fall in the first place. He would have been the odds-on favorite to win. If Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu had been successful in his quest to be Mayor of New Orleans, Ater would have been a leading contender for an appointment to this office by Gov. Blanco.

The first candidate to announce was former Republican State Party Chairman Mike Francis. He has signs plastered throughout the state, and has made it clear he will spend his own money to win the office that is second in line to the Governor. A surprising development is the recent endorsement of Francis by former Governor Mike Foster. When Foster served as Governor, there was no love lost between these two, and it often became public. But some type of divine intervention came about, and Foster is now on the Francis team.

Another Republican in the race is State Senator Jay Dardenne from Baton Rouge. He has a "good government" image in the Legislature, but has been quiet since his announcement. Dardenne advisors have urged him to lay low in this legislative session, and raise money. Dardenne reportedly has some \$700,000 on hand to wage a primarily T.V. battle for this office that normally develops little excitement. Dardenne was a strong supporter of many Foster proposals, including key tax increases. Many were surprised Foster would opt for his former enemy Francis and cut ties to Dardenne. The Baton Rouge Senator seems unconcerned, and feels he can wage an aggressive race statewide.

A Democrat emerged last week in a race which looked like it may be an all Republican foray. Representative Carla Dartez of Morgan City announced just a few weeks ago. She and her politically active husband, Lennie Dartez, are well connected both in Democratic circles and with various elected officials throughout the State. If she can raise the necessary money to wage an aggressive T.V. campaign, Dartez could be formidable, but money for her is the key for an office where it is difficult to raise campaign funds.

She too has a close tie to Foster. Dartez is one of the “trailer girls” in Foster’s 1995 successful gubernatorial campaign. Foster made his endorsement before he knew Dartez was in the race, and look for him to be of help financially and otherwise behind the scenes.

The fourth candidate that just emerged is Shreveport coin collector and real estate developer Jim Crowley, who has never run for public office before. Crowley has hit the ground running, and has appeared on local radio shows. Look for others to emerge in the post-Katrina atmosphere. There are a lot of potential candidates who just want to make a point and are willing to pay the qualification fee.

So are there any really viable issues in this race? In the past, the office has not attracted a lot of interest. Now remember that I do know something about this spot. I was in a barnburner of a race back in 1979, and won in a tough run-off against Sandra Thompson, who now heads up the Atchafalaya Basin Commission. Luck shown on me four years later when I was able to win a re-election victory with no opposition.

So what should the issues be in the Secretary of State’s Race? Not that substance often plays a significant part in a race like this. In 1975, Senator Paul Hardy pulled off a victory against Representative P.J. Mills by running T.V. ads accusing Mills of voting to raise taxes. The issue had nothing to do with the office, but allowed Hardy to get elected. I chalked up a victory for this office in 1979 by raising questions about endorsements received by my opponent. Again, it was irrelevant to the office, but allowed me to pull off an upset. And who can forget the classic “Fox in the Hen House” T.V. spot that almost allowed newcomer Doug Schmidt to pull the upset of the decade over incumbent Fox McKeithen in 1995. This time around, hopefully there will be some discussion of key issues affecting this important office.

And the office has reached a fairly dramatic increase in both visibility and importance in recent months. Because of the New Orleans election controversy, voting issues have become much more visible and controversial. People now care much more about who runs elections. And the buck stops with the Secretary of State. He or she is the Chief Elections Officer, and there are a number of high profile issues in the election’s realm that need attention.

New electronic voting machines are more efficient, but also can raise some questions about the integrity of the election process. A number of people in the know have raised questions about glitches that can come about because of these new machines that are being installed all over the country, including Louisiana.

Many Louisianans will be voting on unfamiliar equipment for the first time this election cycle. As Doug Chaplin, President of Electionline.org, a non-partisan group that studies elections, recently stated: "The theory that new technology results in error seems to be born out early in the process." Questions have been raised about paper backup to the computer count that takes place. All these problems still need to be worked out on a statewide basis. The next Secretary of State should be thorough and cautious in rapidly moving towards a new system.

And how long will Louisiana be saddled with the federal Voting Rights Act that was passed in 1965? Louisiana is one of a handful of states that continues to be saddled with having every single step of the election process approved by the Justice Department. If the polling location is moved one foot, Justice Department approval has to be obtained. How long is Louisiana supposed to continue as a second-rate state? The cloud brought on by the Voting Rights Act certainly doesn't help in recruiting multicultural companies into Louisiana. Who among the candidates will have the courage to step up to the plate and raise questions about the continuing propriety of this outdated legislation?

In 1980, I sponsored legislation to create the Elections Integrity Commission. It was a strong symbol to be a watchdog for any election irregularities. For reasons that make little sense, the legislature, in its wisdom, abolished the Commission in the 1990s. It should be reinstated. There have been too many reports of elections irregularities in recent years not to have a stopping point for any such irregularities to be investigated. Any legitimate candidate should strongly push for the re-establishment of this important Commission.

In another area, the Secretary of State is actively involved as a business officer of the State. If you want to start a new corporation or any type of business, the first stop is at this Department. The Secretary of State also serves on the Bond Commission, and then in these duo roles, to be much more actively involved in business development in the State. The Lieutenant-Governor tried for years to assume more business orientation in his office. There was little support from the Governor. But the Secretary of State has the authority right now to deal in a number of business issues. He or she in the future should be much more aggressive in being a voice for business development in Louisiana.

What about the State's historical significance? Few other states in the country have the history one finds here in Louisiana. And we have hands down the finest State Archives of any state in the country (an admission here – I built it, but the consensus still seems to be that no other state has anything close, if you are interested in genealogy and the protection of your heritage and history.)

Many local museums are in need of a lot of coordination and help. There is an expanding role for the Secretary of State's office to be of assistance in developing programs to tell the story of local parish history, and offer help in obtaining federal grants that are available.

So what's the big surprise? Don't count Ater out of the picture. A number of insiders in Baton Rouge who like Ater felt he had a good shot at being appointed Lt. Governor if Landrieu stepped down. This option is now off the table. In the past few days, there has been a flood of calls discussing whether there is any chance Ater will re-consider and run for re-election. A number of clerks of court, who have worked closely and well with Ater, have even discussed a public appeal for such a move. So have several legislators. So the door may not be closed on revived interest in an Ater candidacy. Stay tuned.

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*"Oh Lord, when I die, please let me be buried in Louisiana, so I can stay active in politics."*

**- Former Governor Earl Long**

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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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