

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25TH, 2005

BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

LOUISIANA GOVERNOR'S RACE
MAY BE HEATING UP!

Jockeying for position in the 2007 Louisiana Governor's race kicked off last week. Most of the press commentary centered on the possibility that former Attorney General Richard Ieyoub would switch political parties, and be the GOP standard bearer next time around against incumbent Kathleen Blanco. But the political prognosticators missed a more realistic candidate who fired his initial shot. Is north Louisiana Public Service Commissioner Foster Campbell gearing up to run?

First, the Ieyoub scenario. There's no doubt he is a disgruntled Democrat. The three term former A.G. finished a close third in the 2004 gubernatorial election, and campaigned hard for Blanco in her successful runoff bid against Republican challenger (and now Congressman) Bobby Jindal. But Ieyoub feels ignored by both the Governor and Democratic Party Chairman Jim Bernhard.

Ieyoub's problem is that it's unrealistic to expect consensus support from the state Republican hierarchy. The GOP is notorious for being unable to gather support for one candidate, especially early on. Remember the Terrell-Cooksey fight in the U.S. Senate race in 2002, and the 2000 Governor's race with several major Republican candidates?

And one message has been sent out from Washington loud and clear. All roads to the statehouse for any Republican candidate pass by Louisiana's junior Senator. David Vitter feels he has the right of first refusal for any united GOP support if he decides to run. And that's an option he is seriously considering.

As analyzed here in previous columns, Vitter makes no bones to his friends that he has his eye on the White House. And he's well aware of the fact that the last four Presidents first served as governor. As one close friend of Vitter recently observed: "His game plan was to wait until 2011 to run for Governor when there would be no incumbent. But he now feels Blanco is ripe for being defeated, and he is seriously re-considering his options."

If Vitter decides to pass on his own candidacy, he will have a major voice in who any consensus candidate might be. And there is a pecking order. Next in line is Congressman Bobby Jindal who lost a close race against Blanco in 2003. Jindal would rather that Vitter run, hopefully win, then appoint Jindal to fill out Vitter's unexpired term in the U.S. Senate. But if Vitter passes, Jindal can run and not give up his House seat, so a free shot.

Baton Rouge Senator Jay Dardenne has hopes of being the consensus GOP candidate, and is certainly not enthusiastic about an Ieyoub switch. As a Dardenne confidant surmised: "Ieyoub can switch and we would welcome him. But he needs to pay his dues and be an active Republican for a while. Otherwise, he will be viewed as an opportunist."

Several longtime Ieyoub supporters urged him this week over lunch to consider other options. One would be to stay a Democrat and run for a down ballot race. This keeps him in the public eye, and he can get an early start on a bid for Governor in 2011. For now, Ieyoub is keeping his options open, but remains a disgruntled Democrat.

And what about Foster Campbell? The Public Service Commissioner sent a stinging letter to the Governor this week complaining about high energy costs, and the role the Governor should be playing in getting reductions. "Louisiana has among the highest electric bills in the nation. She (Blanco) needs to tell her good friend, Renae, (Renae Conley, CEO of Louisiana Entergy) we need to get this straight before we can do anything else.," Campbell said.

Entergy is in the middle of a dispute with the Public Service Commission now over how soon refunds will be paid to Louisiana rate payers that Campbell says could total more than \$250 million. "That's \$125.00 annual cut for every residential customer, and Entergy needs to go ahead and pay this money," according to Campbell. Friends of Campbell say this will be one heck of an issue in the coming Governor's race.

Campbell says he is just doing his job trying to force lower utility rates. But others close to the longtime elected official from Bossier City see his actions as a significant step towards the Governor's mansion. A close friend observes: "Energy and gas prices are going sky high. A lot of people are wondering why we live in a state where much of the energy comes from, yet we pay some of the highest prices in the country? It's been Foster's issue for sometime, and costs going up only help his standing."

Campbell also feels Blanco is making a mistake spending time on trade missions to Southeast Asia. "This energy problem is going to drive International Paper and other major employers out of Louisiana. That should be her first priority."

Campbell is aggressively raising money as Public Service Commissioner. But under state law, any funds raised can be transferred to a campaign for Governor. His next financial report is due at the end of the year.

If he runs, Campbell will be a serious, well funded candidate. And there will definitely be a strong Republican in the race. The next election is a little more than two years away. It looks to be a real barn burner.

Sometimes in politics one must duel with skunks, but no one should be fool enough to allow the skunks to choose the weapons

Joe Cannon

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown