

Thursday, October 20th, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

FIRST SHOTS FIRED IN THE 2007 LOUISIANA GOVERNOR'S RACE

Any post Katrina civility and bipartisanship was thrown out the window last week, when Louisiana Senator David Vitter threw down the gauntlet. "It's easy to look like a giant in a land of pygmies," Vitter told a republican group in Lafayette. Is this the first shot to be fired in the 2007 Louisiana governor's race?

Vitter left little doubt as to where he was pointing his political guns. When he was asked if Governor Kathleen Blanco is "doing anything," he didn't hesitate. "If you give me a recall petition, I'll sign it."

Key staff members of Louisiana's junior Senator confirm that Vitter has his eye on the governor's office. They refer to a picture being circulated around the capitol showing the Governor on the front of a toaster. "She's toast in 2007. It's just a question of who will replace her." And they make it clear Vitter wants the job.

Why would a U.S. Senator want to leave Washington and come back to deal with the biggest mess in Louisiana's history? Well, if you want to be president, history also shows it's the best route to take. Vitter's staff offers two reasons to make the switch.

First, four of the last five presidents have come from the governor's office. You have to go back to John F. Kennedy to find a sitting US Senator who was able to ascend to the presidency. Vitter feels, with justification, that serving both as a US Senator and a sitting governor gives him a solid background in a race for the White House.

Second, anyone who can take on the role of Louisiana Governor and make any significant headway in constructively rebuilding south Louisiana will have some strong credentials to point to in the future. Says one Vitter aide: "By anyone's measure, there's a massive void of coordination and leadership right now. The present Governor has done poorly in working with both the President and the Mayor of New Orleans. There is a golden opportunity for someone offering strong leadership to really shine in the vacuum that exists,"

Sounds like the Senator has things well thought out without any stumbling blocks. Well, maybe just one. A really big one. The guy that almost won last time. Bobby Jindal is letting it be known that, at least for now, he's not stepping aside for anyone. The Jindal camp knows how close they came to winning the governorship two years ago, and feel they have a right of first refusal when it comes to major Republican support.

"Bobby came within a whisker of getting elected last time," says a Jindal operative. "And he's in a team player in Washington, and worked hard to build up the party

back in Louisiana. He still has a serious interest in being governor, and don't think he's going to step aside to easily. Maybe he and Vitter can work something out. But we're serving notice and want to make it clear. Bobby still has the desire of being Governor."

Maybe "working something out" means a commitment from Vitter to appoint Jindal as U. S. Senator if Vitter is successful in winning the Governor's seat. If Vitter did become governor, Louisiana law would allow him to appoint a successor. Bobby has to decide if "Senator Jindal" has that nice a ring. A number of Republicans are salivating over visions of what might be. First Governor Vitter, then Senator Jindal. And the following year? A race for the U.S. Senate.

As one key Republican observed: "We really could have some unbelievable opportunities. A big segment of the vote that supported both Blanco and Landrieu are living in Houston, Dallas, and other cities outside Louisiana. Their margin of victory just isn't around anymore."

Vitter and Jindal aren't the only Republicans smelling blood. Baton Rouge Senator Jay Darden is making phone calls indicating he's available. He is term limited, and would like to be the backup candidate in the event that the two members of Congress eventually decide to pass on the race. Right now, that seems unlikely, so expect to see Darden eye another statewide office. He's been urged to consider either the Secretary of State's office in a special election next fall, or the Insurance Commissioner's job in 2007.

And Senator James David Cain from southwest Louisiana is definitely in the hunt. He's made over 70 speeches in recent months throughout the state on tax reform. His folksy humor and biting satire has helped him build high name recognition as he considers one of several statewide races. Oil and gas interests have urged him to look at the governor's office. A key aid to Cain says he is seriously considering this option. "He will not run if either one of the two members of congress make the race. But if they both pass, James David would be a serious candidate. His focus now is raising money, and he's doing a good job of it."

What they all agree on is the Governor Blanco, from their perspective, is vulnerable and open to a major challenge. And this poses a perplexing problem to the second in command, Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu. Although he and Blanco have had their differences, Landrieu has indicated a contentment in running for reelection, serving four more years, then setting himself up for a gubernatorial bid at the end of Blanco's second term in 2011. But if the Governor cannot be re-elected, this puts Landrieu on the back burner for at least an additional four years. 2015 is a long time to wait around in a secondary role.

So what are his options? How about following his father's footsteps, and taking on the job as the most high-profile mayor in America? The eyes of the country and of the world are focused on the Crescent City. The present mayor, Ray Nagan, seems

to find someone else to blame almost daily. Did you catch his statements last week, were he feels he is "going it alone?"

Landrieu has the opportunity and the once-in-a-lifetime challenge of stepping in to the frying pan and jumping into the fire all the same time. But what a chance to shine. If you're in the middle the firestorm, you can crash and burn, or you can seize the moment and become a visionary, a la Rudy Giuliani. A second Mayor Landrieu could become America's Mayor. He would have the opportunity to be recognized and be a participant on the national scene, with few exceptions, like no other mayor in the history of our country.

So Landrieu's options are to possibly wait around for another 10 years or so playing second fiddle to whoever is serving as governor, or take on one of the biggest challenges ever presented to any elected official at any time, anywhere in the United States.

If not Landrieu, who else in the democratic camp is interested? PSC member Foster Campbell has been positioning himself for a potential race for some time. Campbell offers a populist message that takes on Big Oil. Look for him to be beating the "high utility rate" drum this winter, and raising questions about the Governor's "too cozy" relationship with Louisiana's largest utility company Entergy. The company's president has been a major insider in the Blanco camp.

Campbell's gubernatorial plans are presently going through a re-evaluation now post Katrina. How many democrats are still around? As a Campbell insider said recently, "Blanco's margin of victory in the last election is living in the Astrodome in Houston. The Campbell camp have to evaluate how many of these voters will come home, and are there enough who are disgruntled, who will move into the Campbell column."

State Treasurer John Kennedy's name is also being battered around. He has been all over the state recently like Paul Revere sounding the charge of potential fraud in spending all the new money coming into the state. He even has his own website with his daily missive. And you can find Kennedy in the company of Sen. Vitter; as they rally the troops to oppose the massive spending fraud that, according to both officials, will surely take place.

Is Kennedy a potential candidate for governor as a democrat, or has he set his sites a little beyond? Some insiders envision Kennedy as switching parties, then hoping to become the consensus republican challenger to Mary Landrieu in 2008. Stay tuned on this one.

Which brings us to the governor herself. Is she "toast?" Hardly. Other potential candidates can talk the talk. But for now at least, she has the job. Some observers are predicting she won't run. Don't bet on it. Not running for re-election would be

tantamount to admitting that she failed in the recovery effort. Backing down is not an option.

But she too has to grapple with a bewildering new political landscape. More than one million people evacuated their homes during Katrina and Rita. How many will return and from what political persuasion all are paramount questions to any Blanco re-election effort.

Don't be surprised to see the Governor encourage a Mitch Landrieu campaign for Mayor of New Orleans. It would surely be in Blanco's interest to have a newly elected Crescent City mayor actively involved in her re-election campaign. And there is certainly no love lost between the Governor and the present Mayor. Nagan backed Bobby Jindal in the last governor's race.

Blanco has taken her share of hits in not being more decisive during and after Katrina. But she is still the state's leader, and will have two more years to retool and charge this perception. And in politics, perception is reality. In Mississippi, Gov. Haley Barbour gives the impression that the state is speaking in unity with one voice...his. So far, there have been many voices speaking for Louisiana. Too many cooks in the broth?

But possession is 9/10s of the law, and she has the job. Potential challengers will have to show what they did more competently during the ongoing crisis. Virtually every challenger will have a record to defend.

So the jockeying has begun and the initial shots have been fired. Two years seems like a long way off. But decisions made in the next few months by all these candidates could well have a major affect on who ends up at the helm of state when the next election cycle comes around.

“Being governor don't mean a thing anymore in this country. We're nothing. Just high-paid ornaments is all. I'm thinking of running for president myself.”

*****Alabama Governor George Wallace

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 ready his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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