

Wednesday, November 25th, 2003

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

POLITICAL NOTES FROM OLE MISS

The big news last Saturday was, of course, LSU's huge victory over the Ole Miss Rebels at Oxford. The main event dominated, but political related happenings made the big game all the more memorable.

Courthouse Square, Center of town, downtown Oxford. Fifteen or so old and new friends, some wearing purple and gold and others in red and blue sharing memories. For a while it was football; then to state politics (Mississippi also has a new governor), then to an event that happened forty years ago. We all shared thoughts of where we were the day John Kennedy was shot.

If you are under fifty, it just doesn't register with the same impact. To those of us who were enthralled by this new young President, November 22 had every bit a dramatic and chilling impact as did 9-11.

I had just finished a workout at the old Sugar Bowl stadium on the Tulane Campus in New Orleans. I was walking across the quad back to the law school when a girl I never know ran up and hollered "He's dead! He's dead! They've killed him!" She then sat on the grass and cried uncontrollably. After a minute, she calmed enough to tell me it was President Kennedy. He had been shot.

Just like the whole country did two years ago, I went back to my apartment and didn't leave the television set for the next three days. Forty years have gone by. Yet it still important enough for us to stand in the Oxford square for a while, and one by one, share where each of us were when an event happened that touched, and in some instances, changed our lives.

The downtown Oxford bookstore, Square Books, is simply the finest small-town bookstore I have ever come across. If you love reading about the South, twentieth century giants, like Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Willie Morris to contemporaries like Barry Hannah and Larry Brown, you won't find a better selection anywhere that compares with that found at Square Books.

I was walking out of the door, with a bag full of purchases. I needed to head towards the stadium where I was to meet up with my wife, Gladys, who was waiting for me at the Archie Manning tent in the Grove where all of the Ole Miss tailgating takes place.

A distinguished looking fellow was walking right in front of me wearing a red Ole Miss shirt, and I stopped him asking for directions. He couldn't have been more gracious. "Pardon me for asking, but you look so familiar," I said.

"I'm William Winter from Jackson," he said. I immediately recognized him as a man who many think was Mississippi's most progressive governor.

"Governor, I'm Jim Brown from Baton Rouge."

"Jim, I know you. In fact, you are almost as notorious as me," he grinned.

"I'm hands down ahead of you in Louisiana, Governor. And I've always admired the work you did for Mississippi."

"Boy, you've got a fine state. So many natural resources and so much talent. How's this new Governor of yours going to work out?"

"If she'll just follow your lead, and push some of the creative ideas of yours I read about, we ought to do OK. If she's smart, she'll give you a call," I told him.

"I'm around," he said. Then he gave me directions to the Grove and we both went our separate ways, each hoping for a different result when the game was over.

A fifteen minute walk from downtown Oxford and I was in the middle of some several hundred tents all set up for Mississippi tailgating. We were the guests of the Manning family as were a number of other Louisianans. Under a large tent, food galore was spread out New Orleans style. Jambalaya, chicken wings and numerous other choices to eat. And interestingly, divided loyalties. The Louisiana fans were all decked out in purple and gold. And many of them were wearing red pins that simply said "Eli". They wanted LSU to win, but there was great respect for the Ole Miss quarterback, Archie Manning's son, Eli. He is a contender for the Heisman trophy award for the best player in college football this year.

Nobody seemed to have a problem or care that many of the fans wanted it both ways. They wanted a big victory for the Tigers, but they were also pulling for a Louisiana boy who will follow in the footsteps of his brother next year in moving on up to the NFL.

The same divided loyalties existed in the recent governor's race. Many average citizens had a hard time understanding how Richard Ieyoub and Buddy Leach could fight so hard against Kathleen Blanco in the first primary, and openly embrace her in the general election. The same goes for candidates like Hunt Downer who was critical of Bobby

Jindal in the early fall, yet climbed on the Republican bandwagon the second time around.

Actually, there is a little “honor among us thieves”. Close personal and political relationships have existed between the likes of Governor-elect Blanco, Buddy Leach, Richard Ieyoub, Hunt Downer and many of the other statewide candidates that go back for years. The relationships are “tested” and sometimes even put on the back burner during a heated campaign. But it’s not surprising that losers and winners come together towards the end. Besides, before you know it there is another election and another campaign. It’s foolish to burn bridges in public life. Coming together, at least for the next three years. Maybe not four, but almost. Some things just need to get done. “It ain’t perfect.” But it’s the one important way to make the system work.

In war, you can only be killed once, but in politics, many times.

Winston Churchill

I am forty-three years old, and I'm the healthiest candidate for President in the United States. You've traveled with me enough to know that I'm not going to die in office.

John F. Kennedy

Peace and Justice to you and your family over Thanksgiving.

Jim Brown