

Thursday, November 20, 2003
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

WAS THE BLANCO VICTORY REALLY A SURPRISE?

If you were listening to the radio talk shows this week, the consensus seemed to be that Kathleen Blanco's gubernatorial victory this past Saturday was a real shocker. Bobby Jindal was supposed to have won, and won big! He was the fair-haired boy who had captured the hearts and minds of Louisiana voters, and was destined to win. In the debates, he was quicker and more knowledgeable. He had the Governor and the Mayor of New Orleans behind him. Following his big lead in the first primary, it seemed he was almost "certain" to win a race that would create international attention.

A few reasons why Blanco won:

1. She ran by far the longest campaign compared to any other candidate. Kathleen Blanco was on the campaign trail well over a year and a half ago, traveling throughout the state. And don't forget, that as Lieutenant Governor, she has done just that for over eight years. She was far out front of any candidate in "retail politicking." No one shook more hands, and made more individual contact than did Blanco. And she generally made a positive impression. In fact, looking over the very early Vern Kennedy polls some six months ago, Blanco not only lead the race, but was the solid second choice of a majority of voters throughout the state. People were comfortable with Kathleen Blanco from the get-go.
2. The Blanco gang is far from being the "new kids on the block". Kathleen's husband, Ray, has been a stalwart in numerous campaigns going back to the early 60's. The governor-elect and her husband were key players in the Bennett Johnston campaign for governor in 1971 and his successful senatorial race in 1972. They have weathered a number of campaigns, had their share of wins and loses, and, through all of this experience, built a great sense of "timing" that would play a critical role in decisions made during the final ten days of the campaign. More on this later.
3. Jindal made the mistake of running "above the crowd" like he did in the first primary. He ran his own race, and ignored the other candidates the first time around. He tried to do the same thing with Blanco, but the strategy backfired on him. He never differentiated himself from Blanco philosophically. About all he said was that she was part of the old crowd and was tied to Edwin Edwards. Well who isn't? This charge rolled off of her back like water.

Jindal failed to pick apart Blanco's record as a legislator and a member of the Public Service Commission. Far from painting Blanco to the left, and wrapping around her a lot of the traditional democratic interest groups, he left her alone, giving her the opportunity to define him in the final week of the campaign. Philosophically, a lot of people felt like it made little difference who was elected.

4. We heard a lot in the second primary about the "Bubba's for Bobby". But the Bubba's left Jindal high and dry, particularly in north Louisiana. Parishes that normally vote 2 to 1 for major Republican candidates did just the reverse and voted for Blanco. They might not have been enthusiastic about Blanco, but they were comfortable with her. She wasn't threatening, she smiled a lot, and hey, she even had a hunting license. And Jindal was, well, different. It wasn't so much a racial factor. He always wore a suit, and that same red tie. He didn't hunt or fish. And boy did he talk fast. In the end, comfort won out and many rural voters ended up not identifying with Jindal.
5. The runoff was one of personalities, not substance. The Baton Rouge and surrounding areas have been consumed by serial killers. No one even mentioned crime in the whole campaign. So when it came to personalities, Blanco won out.
6. Jindal hurt himself by hollering so much about negative campaigning on the part of Blanco. Man, you can tell he's new to Louisiana statewide politics. He "ain't seen nothin'" like some of the campaigns I've been through. This was pity-pat politics. And Jindal used some tricks to attack Blanco. His campaign put out press releases accusing Blanco of negative campaigning. His people would send these press releases to several of the internet websites where they were printed verbatim. Then the Jindal campaign pulled language out of their own press releases, attributed as the source the campaign website, and put the "charges of negative campaigning" on television inferring that those were conclusions reached by the press. Nothing illegal, but in this day and age of numerous political websites, you could now almost create your own press headlines.
7. Some people thought Mike Foster was a negative. Don't be misled. Without Mike Foster, Jindal would not have even come close to making the runoff. He took a 32 year old unknown bureaucrat of Indian decent and came quiet close to making him governor. That's a heck of a feat. Any candidate, Democrat or Republican alike, may be making a mistake not to want Mike

Foster in your corner. Look at me. Most of you readers know what I went through four years ago to win my victory, and I never hesitated to put Mike Foster in my TV spots. Just ask Hunt Downer about the effectiveness of Mike Foster. He might have been governor-elect today if had not fallen out with the Governor.

8. Back to the experience factor I talked about at the beginning of this column. The Blanco gang developed a first rate sense of timing through all their political experience over the last forty years. I don't think it was in panic that the Blanco camp made a decision to go negative on Jindal. They knew they were taking chances in criticizing Jindal. It's difficult for a woman to attack a male candidate. She can look mean-spirited and calculating. If it wasn't handled right, it would undermine the image of Kathleen Blanco being warm-hearted, concerned and caring. But Ray Blanco knew when to pull the switch. He had been advising the governor-elect and others for *too many years* not to know that it was time to go negative with about five days to go.

So when you go back and add it all up, should it have been that much of a surprise that Kathleen Blanco was victorious? There have only been two Republican governors elected in this state over the past one hundred and fifty years. With the exception of Secretary of State Fox McKeithen (who is really a Democrat at heart and may possibly switch parties in the coming months) every other statewide office is held by a Democrat.

Don't underestimate this woman. Oh, she's not the greatest debater and maybe she reminds some of the younger voters of their mother. But she started early, outworked the other candidates, and sits today as the governor-elect of Louisiana. And you can't argue with that.

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So what's the future about Bobby Jindal? I heard one radio commentator that he was probable washed up, and was finished in Louisiana politics. What? He's only 32 years old, has a base of hundreds of thousands of citizens behind him, and came within a whisper of being the governor of Louisiana. Anybody who says there's no second acts in politics is wrong. Bobby Jindal certainly has a bright future. No, he's not going to be Louisiana's next U. S. Senator. I think he will take some time off, go into the private sector, make a good income for his family, and consider some options in the years to come. He could wait for twenty more years and still be younger than most of the candidates who ran for governor in the past election. We will certainly be hearing from Bobby Jindal in the years to come.

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There was certainly significant interest in the Louisiana Governor's race internationally. One quick story for you.

Two weeks before the election, I was browsing in a bookstore in Oxford, England. I was in the country on business, and took a short break to visit an area close to where I had attended college some 41 years ago. There was a small coffee area to the side of the bookstore with just a few seats. One chair was vacant at a table with two young female students and they graciously motioned me over to sit with my coffee.

"Where are you guys from"? I asked.

"We're studying here at Oxford, but our home is India", one of the girls responded. "How about you"?

I told them I was from the U. S., and my home was Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Without any pause, and almost in unison, they both spoke out "Jindal! Jindal!" They then wanted to know if I thought he could win.

"The odds are against him," I said. "Louisiana is still a democratic state, but he certainly has come a long way." One of the girls responded "But even if he doesn't win, it certainly says a lot about Louisiana that someone so young and of Indian ancestry could come so close to being Governor of a southern state. Win or loose, it should make people in your state proud. It means you are very progressive there." And you know what? She makes a pretty good point. With either candidate, Louisiana has certainly come a long way.

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*"One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics
is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."*

--Plato

Peace and justice to you and your family.

Jim Brown

p.s. Visit Jim Brown's website at www.jimbrownla.com . You can also find his column listed with other Louisiana political news at www.politicsla.com