

Thursday, November 11th, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

(I received over 200 emails about last week's column on why the Democrats did so poorly in Louisiana. Many of those emailing wanted to know my thoughts on just what future the Democratic Party had in Louisiana, as well as the entire south. That will be the focus of next week's column.)

THE LOUISIANA WINNERS

There is still another election to go in Louisiana (December 4th – we have this quirky, open primary system that puts us out of step with the rest of the country). But we can certainly identify some of the big “winners” from last week’s election results.

Obviously, a big winner is newly elected Senator David Vitter. The three-term Metairie Congressman owes a major debt of gratitude to the President whose vote totals were significantly higher than the new Senator’s. Much of the Kerry resentment, as well as good will for the President overflowed in Vitter’s favor. Let’s be realistic. Without the President, Vitter would be in a hot run-off, and with the demographics of strong Democratic grassroots, he would be in a real dog fight.

The major factor, other than the President, in the first primary was the quality of the television spots – Vitter’s were first class and his opponents were third rate. And there was virtually no play by Vitter on the nationwide three Gs message (gays, guns, and God). Vitter’s T.V. spots didn’t touch these sensitive and controversial areas. While all three major candidates talked about Canadian drugs, Vitter was the only one (supposedly) actually there. It was no doubt a prop, but the message seemed to be more real. And when all the candidates talked about family, we saw Vitter’s kids hooked up to tubes in their early years, while the candidate talked about the importance of family rather than being a Democrat or Republican. You never saw the families of his opponents.

The knock on Vitter is that he can be confrontational, and has made his share of enemies in public life. But he is off to a new start, and that’s all in the past. At his young age, he is certainly a bright newcomer in the Republican Party.

Senator Kip Holden’s successful uphill battle to be the new mayor of Baton Rouge has to be the biggest victory for an African American candidate in memory. He was facing an incumbent who was having problems with his approach to governing, but still held a 60-

percent favorable rating with voters in East Baton Rouge Parish. Baton Rouge went overwhelming for Bush in a city where the Black vote is less than 27 percent. On paper, considering the Republican sweep of other offices including U.S. Senator, Kip Holden should not have had much of a chance. But he won going away, and he is now “the man.”

Not just in Baton Rouge either. Few other African American politicians have shown the ability to cross both Party and ethnic lines with the large numbers produced by Holden. In fact, there is not another major city anywhere in America where an African American has been elected as mayor with such a large percentage of the city being white. If Holden continues to build his base, and reach out on behalf of the city’s image through the Legislature where he already has good relationships and to the state as a whole, he should emerge as one of the three or four most influential political figures, white or black in all of Louisiana.

In the media ring, the Marmillion-Gray Group hit another knockout and walked away from the in-state competition. You can spread around all the credit you want as to who elected Kip Holden. But Rannah Gray, a founding partner of this national firm along with co-founder Val Marmillion, set out a day-in, day-out strategy campaign that rivaled anything Karl Rowe ever contemplated. Holden’s T.V. spots looked high tech, vibrant, and a right-on message picturing the Senator making his case that he could run the huge business of Louisiana’s second largest city.

Holden was hanging by a thread in the first primary, with little money and even less white support. When the flock started honing in during the run-off, Gray was masterful in refereeing who played what role in the final weeks of the campaign.

Two other names of note in the mayor’s race. Baton Rouge lawyer Scott Crawford has emerged as the “man behind the scenes” and the “man to know” when it comes to tapping major resources both locally and throughout the state. Crawford continues to be the best fundraiser in the business and was able to bring on a diverse group of major contributors to the Holden campaign from top business groups like Shaw to a cross section of trial lawyers. When major Louisiana campaigns run in the future, Crawford will be first on any serious candidate’s call list.

And political consultant George Kennedy did his predictable panoramic, big-picture images in spreading a message for BRNext in the third-party effort to undermine the incumbent mayor’s re-election efforts. His track record of successes gets longer, and no one makes a better looking television commercial.

Another winner? Republican Congressman Rodney Alexander. He went from one of the most scorned and controversial members of Congress to an overwhelming winner in his bid for re-election. And there is little concern about his Party switch throughout his home district.

I remember calling the Congressman's office in Washington for a quote a day or two after his Party switch. His whole staff in Washington quit, and his only aide was a young, former reporter from the Ruston newspaper named Adam Terry. Adam and I go back over the years, and he tried to be optimistic, but it was obvious the Congressman felt his back was against the wall. Boy did that quickly change. With the re-election of the President, and a strong Republican majority in the House, Alexander is expressing no regrets. Because of the ridiculous reapportionment efforts by the legislature some years back, Democrats have little chance of winning this strong, conservative northeast Louisiana district. He will have to stumble badly to face serious opposition in the coming years.

And finally, the big winner. Whether you like it or not. It's Bobby Jindal. The newly elected first-district Congressman, who was former governor Mike Foster's fair-haired boy, followed the path of former Louisiana Senator Bennett Johnston. You will recall that Johnston lost a close race for governor in 1971 against Edwin Edwards. He bounced back the next year to begin a long and respectable career as a U.S. Senator.

Frankly, Jindal would have made David Vitter take a second look at even running for U.S. Senate. Early polls showed Jindal way ahead of any other candidate, and he would have been the odds-on favorite to take this post. Jindal opted to play it more conservatively and run for the House.

Outside of the President no other candidate received the international attention showered on Jindal. Headlines worldwide played up his victory.

“A Coming of Age for Indian Americans” – International Economic Times

“Jindal Congress, History in Tow” – Hindu Stand Times

“Bobby Jindal Mirrors the Immigrant Aspiration” – New Kerala

“The Return of Bobby Jindal – An Extraordinary Life Story” – Power Line

And the one that tops them all?

“From the Hobbsonline” – a major international website.

“The Dems Have Got Barack Obama. The Reps Have Got Bobby Jindal. Jindal versus Obama in 2016, perhaps?”

Well, that just might be pushing it a bit. But the fact remains that Jindal is starting off surrounded by high aspirations about his future. Both Senator Mary Landrieu and Governor Blanco would do well to keep an eye over their shoulder on Jindal's activities in the months to come. Before you know it, election time rolls around again.

My friend, Andy Borowitz just doesn't let up. A day does not go by when I don't get a fresh perspective on "what really is going on." A few post-election Borowitzisms:

"In other news, President Bush used his acceptance speech Wednesday to reach out to supporters of Sen. John Kerry, telling them, 'You can run, but you can't hide.'"

"Meanwhile, in his first statement since being voted out of office Tuesday night, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle said, 'Do you want fries with that?'"

"Elsewhere, experts said that exit polls may have falsely predicted a Kerry victory because Kerry voters exited while Bush voters stayed behind and voted again."

"And at a press conference at the White House, President George W. Bush relished being elected legitimately this week, telling reporters, 'We didn't even have to go to Plan B.'"

"Elsewhere, the Pentagon announced that U.S. fighter jets missed a target in southern Iraq today, strafing a middle school in New Jersey."

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown