

Thursday, June 16th, 2005
Oxford, Mississippi

**FROM THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA:
BOTH POLITICAL PARTIES ON THE WRONG TRACK!**

If public opinion from a coffee shop in this small Mississippi Delta college town is a reflection of our national psyche, the country is heading in the wrong direction. The president is taking his lumps. But the consensus seems to be that both political parties carry their share of the blame. And neither side of the isle is putting much on the table to get us out of, what is perceived to be, a deeper and deeper hole.

I was in Oxford earlier in the week for a book signing at Square Books located (not surprisingly) on the courthouse square. A number of locals gather here for morning coffee, and, in the course of about an hour and a half, we were able to solve most of the country's problems.

Now Ole Miss and Oxford are a far cry from being labeled as centers of flaming liberalism. The Rebel flag is still highly visible in abundant locations. Few other states, even in red America, gave the Republicans a bigger show of support in the past national election. But there's a consensus of frustration here that "has legs," and recent polls show the same frustrations are both reflected and growing throughout the country.

A gift shop owner on the Square seemed to speak for the group in expressing a "loss of patience" with the pace in Iraq. "We've been supportive of the president, but this war looks like it's never going to end. I think most of us felt like we'd be in Iraq for maybe a year. But now it looks like it's going to go on and on. We've got some local boys over there that need to come home."

Several recent national polls conclude that half of the American public believes the war in Iraq has not made United States safer, while three quarters of Americans say the number of casualties is unacceptable. In last week's Washington Post - ABC news poll, 52% say the war in Iraq has not contributed to the long-term security of the United States, and four in 10 Americans believe the U.S. presence in Iraq is becoming analogous to the experience in Vietnam.

The Republicans in general are taking their share of the licks both nationally as well as here over morning coffee. According to a local banker: "Mississippi is a strong Republican state. Our governor, our two U.S. senators, most of the state vote is overwhelmingly Republican. But they are running the show now. They've got it all, from the President, the Congress and the Supreme Court. It's time to bite the bullet and show some results. When you control the whole operation, you get the credit, but you have to take the blame. And let's face it. Things aren't going real good right now."

National polls seem to agree. In a new numbers poll from the Pew Research Center, President Bush's approval rating has plummeted to only 43%. These low ratings, according to the pollsters, are being driven by negative marks with regard to the president's handling of the economy, where only 35% of Americans approve.

Here in Oxford, the republican-controlled congress didn't get off too lightly either. "When those folks come back down here from Washington, all we hear is how well they're doing. But they seem to be spending a lot of time squabbling over things that really don't make too much difference to us. The economy seems weak, and nothing seems to be happening on Social Security. I'm not sure what they're accomplishing up there," suggested a local trucking operator.

The Washington Post -- ABC news poll made the same conclusions. Six out of 10 respondents said the president and the GOP leadership are not making significant progress on the nation's problems. In the Pew poll, only 29% approve of how the president and the republican-controlled congress are handling Social Security, while only 35% approve of how they are dealing with the economy.

But there is little reason for Democrats in Congress to get real excited about these polls. Their numbers aren't any better. Some 56% of those polled disapproved of Republicans in Congress. However, an identical proportion disapproved of how Democrats are conducting their business. It seems like there's almost a race to the bottom. "How low can you go?"

Some major shifting could occur when Bush gets his first crack at the next Supreme Court nominee. Both sides will try to paint the good guy -- bad guy scenario. In politics, you always have to beat up on the bad guy. After 9/11, it was easy. The bad guys were "over there," and we had to go and find them, root them out, and destroy them. But the wear and tear of the war in Iraq is taking its toll, with no light at the end of the tunnel. So it's close to time to start looking for a new bad guy.

Domestically, the next Supreme Court nominee may offer the best opportunity for both parties. If the President offers a nominee from the far right, the Democrats will surely make him the bad guy. Look for the President to paint the opposition as the bad guys. The problem is that when it comes to judges, even at the Supreme Court level, it's more an insider's game. The average voter is not that hung up as to who serves on any federal court. That's certainly one of the reasons why, as a whole, there is such a mediocre group of federal judges in this country.

By half way through my second cup of coffee (and, I'll admit, my second piece of banana bread), the subject shifted to Louisiana. A local car dealer bemoaned how many opportunities that have been wasted. "You folks have so much more going for you over your way than we do. We don't have all your oil and gas. All that sulfur, and a lot more seafood because of all the coastline you have compared to us. You've got a lot more of the river for the big ports you have down towards New Orleans.

We just don't have all those resources in Mississippi. And you know what? We haven't done all that bad. Most of the lists that come out put Louisiana and Mississippi about side-by-side. But you've got so much more going for you. Too bad you haven't done more with it."

Another chimed in: "Oh, we're behind and have a long way to go. But look at that Nissan plant, just north of Jackson. There's nothing that big in Detroit. We seem to be doing a better job with people, while you folks depend so much on your natural God-given resources. More power to you. It just seems you should be a lot further ahead of us than you are."

I couldn't have agreed with them more. But I just kept on listening and poured my third cup of coffee.

The danger our policymakers are facing today in Washington, DC as well as Baton Rouge is a growing disillusionment of "no confidence" by a weary public who wants more results. From the coffee group in Oxford, to the radio talk shows in Louisiana, there seems to be a "disjuncture" between the upbeat rhetoric of our elected officials and the realities the public perceives.

Simply put, are those who represent us becoming too out of touch?

I bid my new friends adieu, and told them I would be back for more coffee and conversation on the morning of November 19. Why? Where else would I be? It's LSU-Ole Miss.

You can't give the **government** the power to do good without also giving it the power to do bad - in fact, to do anything it wants."

Harry Browne

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown