

Thursday, December 16th, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

CHRISTMAS AND POLITICS

In Louisiana, you can't even enjoy the Christmas Holidays without politics creeping in. It happened to me back in 1980 when I was serving as Louisiana Secretary of State. I was about to attend the Christmas concert of a lifetime – Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin – when Governor Dave Treen stopped me cold. He really didn't mean to. But that year, he was my Christmas Grinch.

When the holidays come around, my two favorite singers have always been Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. Martin used to host a Christmas special with stars galore every year. He was always funny, irreverent, the perfect host for a spirited Christmas TV extravaganza. It was a show my family and I never missed.

And when it came to singing Christmas music, Sinatra was the best. He was then and he is now. No one does a better version of "I'll Be Home for Christmas" (But Only in My Dreams). It's always been my favorite Christmas song. I don't have to remind you there was a Christmas several years ago where being home for Christmas was "only in my dreams."

Back to 1980. I was just completing my first year as Louisiana Secretary of State. It was early December, when the annual convention of Secretaries of State from throughout the country was taking place in Atlantic City.

These two musical giants were performing what was billed as their last public concert together. The venue was the Resorts International Hotel right on the Boardwalk, about a block from where the Miss America Pageant was held each year. This was Atlantic City's first major casino hotel, built in 1978, and was a renovation of a landmark hotel on the waterfront called Chalfonte Haddon Hall. Tickets were \$125 a seat. Now remember, this was 1980. Think what the same seats would cost today.

It was late afternoon and I was finishing a series of meetings with my colleagues on election reform issues. Some of you older readers might remember that we had a barn burner of a governor's race in 1979 where election challenges were filed and fraud was alleged. I eventually passed legislation to create an Election's Integrity Commission which is still active today. The meetings in Atlantic City served as an important foundation for future Louisiana legislation.

As the meetings were winding down, I was looking forward to a few hours of rest before the anticipated concert. Sinatra's voice and Dean Martin's humor. The two key members of the "Rat Pack." The Chairman of the Board and the guy Jerry Lewis let get

away. Both movie stars. Both headliners in Las Vegas and wherever they performed. Simply put, the concert of a lifetime.

The phone rang in my hotel room. It was Governor Treen's executive counsel, former Senator and my long-time friend Sonny Mouton.

"So what are you doin' J.B.?, " he drawled in his staccato Cajun accent.

"Well, I'm sure glad I'm not back there with you in Baton Rouge, Sonny," I replied. "I'm about to see my two favorite singers perform in the biggest concert I've ever seen. I'm sure you're jealous, and I'm glad I'm not back there."

"Bad news, J.B. Dave Treen asked me to find you pronto. We just gotta have you back in the state before midnight tonight."

"You've got to be kidding, right?" I told him. "I just told you I am about to see the big guys. Probably the last time they will ever perform together. You're crazy if you think I'm leaving here. Why on earth would you ask me to do that?"

According to Sonny, the Governor felt it was imperative to call a special session of the Louisiana legislature. Because of some changes in federal policy, Louisiana was going to lose millions of dollars involving federal funds if Louisiana law was not immediately brought into compliance with new federal regulations. But current Louisiana law required that a three-week notice be given before any special session of the Legislature could take place. To make everything work, the "official call" from the Governor to the Legislature had to be signed by midnight.

The problem was that both Governor Treen and Lieutenant-Governor Bobby Freeman were out of the country. It fell on the next statewide official in succession to sign the order calling a special session. And that was yours truly.

"So you're telling me that according to the Governor, you as his legal advisor, and all of the other legal minds you have there, that if I don't sign the order in the State of Louisiana by midnight tonight, there can be no special session and millions of dollars are at risk?"

"That's it in a nutshell big fellow. Sorry, but we don't have any other options," he answered.

Former Speaker of the House, E.L. "Bubba" Henry, also an old friend, was the Governor's Commissioner of Administration. He got on the phone with us.

"Bubba, you really believe I have to be back there by midnight tonight for all of this to work?"

"That's right," he said. "Otherwise, we don't think anything we do will be legal."

So what was I to do? I had my tickets in my hand, anticipating this really great musical event, but duty called. I remember, it was four o'clock in the afternoon and I was a long way from Baton Rouge. I reluctantly had a car rush me to the Philadelphia airport (about an hour and a half from Atlantic City), barely made the Delta connection in Atlanta, and the plane arrived at the New Orleans airport at 11:46 P.M. Sonny Mouton had his executive assistant, Chuck Zatarain, fly down in the State Police helicopter to meet me. The helicopter landed right by the plane as we taxied up, I met Zatarain on the runway, dribbled my signature on the prepared executive order at 11:56, and the lawyers breathed a sigh of relief. The special session of the legislature could now go forward.

I then realized that I didn't even have a way to get back to Baton Rouge. After a few phone calls, the State Police arranged for a Trooper to get me home. I slept in the car, and arrived at my house exhausted about 2:00 A.M.

Sure I was disappointed. I really can't say that Governor Dave Treen was the Grinch that messed up my Christmas concert. Coming home was part of the job and certainly the right thing to do. Before I went to bed, I pulled out an old Christmas album with several songs by Sinatra and Martin. Real albums. Thirty-three and a third. I listened for awhile, probably shut my eyes, and thought about the concert I missed.

I was there with you guys the last time you sang together. Even if it was "only in my dreams."

*"I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six.
Mother took me to see him in a department store and he
asked for my autograph."*

- Shirley Temple

*"Whatever else be lost among the years, let us keep
Christmas still a shining thing; whatever doubts assail us,
or what fears, let us hold close one day, remembering its
poignant meaning for the hearts of men. Let us get back our
childlike faith again."*

- Grace Noll Crowell

Peace, Justice, and Happy Holidays to you and your family,

Jim Brown