

Thursday, October 21st, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**POLITICS AND THE SERIAL KILLER--
REFLECTIONS ON LIVING AND DYING.**

Within the same hour last week, I witnessed the exhilaration and bountifulness of life, and the stark reality of a man who will be put to death. All within the same hour. And the contrasts could not have been more striking.

First, came the celebration of a full life. Friends from all over Louisiana came to the old State Capitol last week to honor Louisiana Congressman Billy Tauzin. He is soon to retire after 30 years in public life.

Billy and I started off together in public life serving in the legislature back in 1972. We were both from small towns, both lawyers, and certainly both ambitious. We worked together to pass a number of important laws that are still on the books today.

One joint effort was to pass a law opening up state lands for more competitive oil leasing, which would bring more revenue to the state. The proposed law was strongly opposed by the major oil companies who had a monopoly on state oil and gas leases. On the final night (and in the final minutes) of the legislative session in 1976, I was trying to get to the microphone in an attempt to pass the legislation in the Senate. I finally was able to get a roll call vote in favor at 11:55pm. Five minutes left before the legislature by law would shut down.

Billy hovered in the back of the Senate. When the proposed law received the necessary Senate votes, I stuck the written version in front of the Senate secretary to sign, then handed it to Billy. He ran across the capitol hallway to the House chamber, and with only a few seconds to spare, was able to get approval from the House of Representatives.

Billy and I ran against each other in the Governor's race of 1987. We joked at one debate, then tore into each other at the next. Both of us felt we would win. We ignored Buddy Roemer, who slipped up from behind and beat us both.

The crafty Cajun went on to a highly successful career in Congress. First as a Democrat then as a Republican, Billy charmed Washington with his humor, his cooked up Cajun recipes, his toughness as a committee chairman, and his general joie de vivre that made political life more human and enjoyable.

Then came the biggest challenge of his life -- a major bout with cancer. Six months ago, the news was not good. He was even given his last rites and made

his final will. Few survive the type of intestinal cancer Billy was fighting.

But now, after months of treatment, he's over the hump and well on his way to full recovery. Billy Tauzin has brought a passion and a unique flavor through his life of public service. He leaves a solid legacy that will be a hard act to follow.

I left the Tauzin reception and headed toward my parked car about a block away across from the East Baton Rouge Parish courthouse. It was eight o'clock in the evening. As I approached my car, I could see numerous television lights and a large crowd on the front steps of the courthouse.

"What's going on?" I asked one of the reporters I knew.

"The jury's still deliberating whether Derrick Todd Lee lives or dies."

Lee had been pegged the "serial killer," and had been accused of committing a number of murders in and around Baton Rouge.

"Will they come up with a verdict tonight?" I asked. "It's getting late."

"That's what we hear. They are supposed to push on till they make a decision. They all want to go home," he answered.

I walked into the courthouse and took the elevator up to the sixth floor to the courtroom of presiding Judge Richard Anderson. Sheriff's deputies were everywhere and security was tight. I went through the metal detector, and walked into a packed courtroom.

Colonel Greg Phares stopped to visit. He was in charge of the numerous deputies surrounding the wall in the courtroom. Angola Prison Warden Burl Cain and I talked awhile. "Whatever happens, I've got a full night ahead of me," he mused. "Lee will go to Angola tonight for the rest of his life, however long that is."

About then, the bailiff quieted the courtroom and the jury filed in. The process was short. A signed verdict sent to the clerk, who read out the decision that Lee should be put to death. Then tears and sobs from the victims' families; from Lee's relatives, even the district attorney's wife wiped away a few now that the ordeal was over.

So should Derrick Todd Lee die? There is overwhelming community feeling that he should. The guy is charged with killing seven women. And there may be more. If you are looking for a poster face for the death penalty, you can't do better than Lee.

Putting aside any arguments for opposing the taking of anyone's life, what possible reasons would there be not to execute him? One is money. It costs on average four to five times more to invoke capital punishment as it does to put him away for life. The costs of appeal, including attorneys fee that are almost

always paid for by the state, and often run over several million dollars. It's much cheaper to stick him in a cell and spend about \$2.80 a day to feed him.

And you can make a pretty good argument that if you want to put someone through hell, stick them in a maximum security prison where he will either be brutalized by the prison population, or confined in solitary where he lives almost like an animal in total boredom. Some would argue this punishment is worse than the death penalty.

But we demand an eye for an eye. Oh, it may take a decade or more. But the odds are, one day Lee will die. John McKeithen, Edwin Edwards and Buddy Roemer each told me the toughest decisions they ever faced as Governor were whether to let a condemned man die. It was the first decision Roemer had to make the day he was sworn in. But they always let it happen.

Two different people at two different events. Both on the same day in the same hour. One a celebration of a full and continuing life. The other, just a block away, a decision to take away a life.

The challenge, of course, is to live a life of dignity. To see your own existence as a heightened example of universal experience -- a life that is fulfilling in a way that is somehow larger than life. One succeeded and one failed.

William Cullen Bryant was only twenty-seven years old when he added a final section to his contemplation on death, Thanatopsis, but he already understood, as poets often do:

So, live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To the mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown