

January 6, 2004

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

SENATE RACE WON'T BE THAT CROWDED

Following the intense interest in the recent gubernatorial election, the general assumption has been that there will be a number of major candidates vying to fill the U. S. Senate seat being vacated this fall by long time incumbent John Breaux. Not so! When qualification time comes around, you can count the number of major candidates on one hand.

Numerous newspaper columns have touted several unsuccessful gubernatorial candidates as sure qualifiers. The columns point to the 1996 race when Mary Landrieu bounced back from a gubernatorial loss and captured the seat from several other statewide elected officials.

But there was one factor that wasn't there in the '96 race; the presence of any members of congress. Invariably, a Louisiana congressman has a "leg up" on the competition. A congressman has the inside track to Washington PAC money. Go back to 1986 when democratic congressman John Breaux won a close victory over republican congressman Henson Moore. Both Congressman served in Washington for years, and had developed close relationships within their respective party structures as well as national PAC's that financed more that two-thirds of both candidates' campaigns.

The same will be true in 2004. Congressman David Vitter from Jefferson parish has been focusing in the race for the past year. He has approximately one and a half million dollars in his congressional campaign fund that can be used in a U.S. Senate race.

On the democratic side, Congressman Chris John from southwest Louisiana has some one million dollars in his congressional account. and is hoping to put together the Breaux organization statewide. With their congressional base and a lot of money in the bank, both of these candidates, on paper, are far out front.

There are other candidates being mentioned. Treasurer John Kennedy was on the phone looking for support after Breaux's announcement. So was Attorney General Richard Ieyoub. But the bottom line is money, and many potential givers in Louisiana are "tapped out" after the governor's race. In the U.S. senate race, look for more than two-thirds of the money spent by the two candidates who make the run-off to come in from outside the state. It shouldn't be this way. A Louisiana senator should be beholden only to Louisiana voters. When you take more than two-thirds of your money from out-of-state, that support comes with a price. There ought to be a law that all campaign funds have to come from within the state. But don't look for that to happen.

What you should look for is that John Kennedy will stay as state treasurer, be a little frustrated over his options, and “hang in there” in the coming years with the hopes that another opportunity will open up for him. As for Richard Ieyoub, he has a big family, and will take the opportunity to make a sizeable income after being in public life over the last 20 years. Expect him to announce a tie with a major law firm, probably Adams and Reese, within the next few weeks.

So is there any other candidate out there that can take on the two congressman? Republican oilman Bill Fenstermaker from Lafayette considered the governor’s race, and his name has been floating around. But don’t expect him to run.

There is one potential candidate that has both congressman worried. He’s never run for office before. If he does decide to make the race, he could be favored from day one. Baton Rouge businessman Jim Bernhard is receiving calls from a cross section of potential supporters to consider the race. Bernhard is the founder and CEO of The Shaw Group, one of the few Fortune 500 companies in Louisiana. He was Richard Ieyoub’s finance chairman in the recent gubernatorial race and presently heads up Governor-elect Blanco’s transition team. If he runs, Bernhard will have the best of both worlds. Because of his political relationships with a number of elected officials, he can quickly build a statewide organization. Both Congressmen are well-known in their district, but have little name recognition and organization in other parts of the state.

Besides his own political resources to put into the race, Bernhard is well-connected to the business community in Louisiana as well as having the ability to raise money through Shaw contacts throughout the country. He will also have the advantage of being able to lump both Congressman together and run against the Washington establishment. A lot of Louisiana’s problems come from being short-changed in Washington, and Bernhard can lay the blame on those who are serving there now.

If he runs, Bernhard will have to make a fairly quick decision. John and Vitter are both actively working to put together their state organization, and courting money sources throughout the country. Look for the field to be pretty well set by the first of February.

Do you listen to any of the daily radio talk shows? If not, you are missing, shall we say “interesting” commentary.

Rush Limbaugh wanabe Moon Griffon who hosts a radio show on several stations throughout the state in the weekday morning hour, seem to do a regular tirade on Gannett columnist John Hill. John is the Capitol bureau chief for the Gannett chain (papers throughout the state including Monroe, Shreveport, Alexandria, Opelousas and Lafayette) and has been writing political commentary for a number of years. I was listening last week as Griffon blamed virtually all the state’s ills on John Hill. Now I suppose John

should bear “some” of the blame. He is very opinionated. On the other hand, he is a likable fellow with good taste. A real “sense” of Louisiana political history. If there is to be a first rate political commentary written about the last fifty years in Louisiana, John is the fellow to write it. But according to Griffon, John’s typewriter makes him dangerous. Maybe that’s why a person can like him so much.

On another front, I hope you haven’t missed former governor Dave Treen’s daily radio talk show. You can hear it on 640AM out of Thibodeaux, and the signal is strong enough if you tune in anywhere south of I-10. He gives a one-hour weekday commentary from 4 to 5 PM, talks about everything you can imagine, focusing on state and federal issues. I turned in last week and he was reading jokes off of the internet. The more I think of it, perhaps, Moon, Governor Dave, and John Hill should all team up. They could really keep us entertained in the morning hours.

Did you happen to see the front page of the New York Times last week? Here are the three main stories, side by side.

1. The former governor of Illinois was indicted on charges of racketeering, conspiracy, mail and tax fraud and lying to law enforcement officers. The investigation centered around granting lucrative state contracts to friends while receiving gifts, cash, and luxury vacations in return.
2. This story made headlines about charges against the Governor of Connecticut who supposedly made false statements about accepting free work on his private home from companies doing business with the state, as well as other benefits.
3. A lengthy story about former Senator Strom Thurmond who built his career on a segregationist platform, yet fathered a mix-raced daughter with an under-aged black domestic who worked for the Thurmond family.

So big scandals in Illinois, Connecticut, and South Carolina. We always hear “only in Louisiana.” Don’t kid yourself. Most states have their share of political embarrassments.

And speaking of political embarrassments, a wonderful cartoon appeared recently in the Philadelphia Daily News, about how 2003 was a bad year for bully boy conservatives. It pointed out “Ole Strom”, and included “Slot Machine” Bill Bennett, a loser of 8 million dollars with his gambling addiction, and of course “Pill Poppin” Rush Limbaugh. Newt Gingrich was also thrown in the mix because of his divorce problems. These four have been preaching family values to us for years. It’s not that they made a mistake. To err is human and to forgive is divine. No, it’s not the mistake. It’s the two-faced bigotry.

“We paid \$3 billion for these television stations. We decide what the news is. The news is what we tell you it is.”

David Boylan of Fox affiliate WTVT in Tampa

“I believe there’s something out there watching over us. Unfortunately, it’s the government.”

Woody Allen

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown