

Thursday, February 2nd, 2006
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

BLANCO: APPOINTING A NEW LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR

In Louisiana, politicians are always looking to the next political race, or a new vacancy that needs to be filled. And with speculation that present Lieutenant-Governor Mitch Landrieu is about to announce his candidacy for Mayor of New Orleans, the rumor mill has already begun as to who will take his place if his campaign for the new job is successful. The consensus seems to be that Landrieu is all but a shoe-in to win the New Orleans Mayor's race come April 22nd. So if he steps down in May, who fills his vacancy?

First off, there will be no special election. The Louisiana constitution makes it clear that the vacancy will be filled by an appointment. Article 4, Section 15 states:

“Should a vacancy occur in the office of Lieutenant-Governor, the Governor shall nominate a Lieutenant-Governor, who shall take office upon confirmation by a majority vote of the elected members of each house of the legislature.”

If Landrieu takes office in May, the Legislature will be in session. Therefore, the Governor can make a selection, and have it confirmed while the Legislature is meeting. The process is clear and easy. Here's the hard part. Who does she pick?

Obviously, political considerations will be on the front burner in considering the Governor's selection. She's in hot water, post-Katrina and needs a strong second in command to bolster present sagging political fortunes. By making an appointment, the Governor and her choice will be, for all practical purposes, running as a team in 2007. Note that her selection does not trigger any special election. Her choice serves out the entire term, and is not prohibited from running again in the regular gubernatorial election less than two years away.

It goes without saying that she will be bombarded with requests from suitors galore who want the job. So who is both qualified, and offers solid political help?

You can probably rule out a woman candidate. Two women at the top of the ticket, though palatable to many, may not offer her a broad enough umbrella to bring in more conservative Democrats. How about an African-American? It might be considered a bold move to pick the first African-American statewide official of the last century. But considering the fact she will probably face Republican Congressman Bobby Jindal, her advisors may feel she has African-American voters in her corner anyway.

So who would be on the list of white, male, moderate Democrats who have fairly solid credentials and name recognition? There is a good list out there, starting with her opponents in the last Governor's race. Richard Ieyoub, Buddy Leach, and Randy Ewing all fit the profile, who having reached for the top job, may well be willing and anxious to join the Blanco team.

Shreveport Mayor Keith Hightower is available, interested, and would certainly bring strength to the Governor's rebuilding effort. He is a popular mayor of the state's second largest city, is term-limited and looking for a place to land. His present campaign war chest is close to \$750,000, and there is geographical balance from his north Louisiana home base.

There is another possible pick that is tan, rested, and ready. He served in both the legislature and U.S. Congress, ran for the job of Lieutenant-Governor in the past and spent over \$6 million in his quest for U.S. Senator. Former Congressman Chris John has let it be known to close friends that he is considering getting back in the state fray, and would consider a statewide race in 2007. John is an aggressive campaigner, who still maintains his home in Crowley, and just may be a good fit as part of a Blanco team for the future.

What about a businessman who has never been in public office before? There are certainly a lot of them around. But when all is said and done, few want to venture into the murky world of Louisiana politics where a job who has few specific duties other than being a possible stepping stone some years down the line for higher office. A number of names will be batted around, but when all is said and done, Blanco will no doubt find few takers in the private sector.

With all the hits the Governor has taken in recent months, making a solid choice for Lieutenant-Governor and coordinating a team effort as 2007 approaches could be a major step in the Governor's effort to rebuild her image as a stronger, more effective leader. She has a long way to go. But this will be an important place to begin.

It seemed like a day did not go by in the past few weeks, when we wouldn't hear of the loss of another major political figure in the state. I wrote at length a few weeks ago about the loss of Camille Gravel, counselor to both governors and presidents, who had a major influence on the laws and political persuasions of the state for a half century.

Longtime friend, Sam Hanna, known in some circles as the dean of Louisiana politics in the newspaper publishing business, passed away a little over week ago. Sam was owner and publisher of three northeast Louisiana newspapers, and his column on politics, "One Man's Opinion," was probably the most read political column in the state, admired by thousands, Democrats and Republicans alike.

Sam, a 1955 graduate of the LSU Journalism School, was inducted into the journalism school (J-school) hall of fame at LSU in 1993. One year later he was inducted into the Louisiana Political Hall of Fame at Winnfield.

When Hanna was inducted into the journalism school hall of fame, the Louisiana Legislature invited him to speak to the House of Representatives and presented him with a resolution passed by the House and the state Senate, congratulating him on his career and his induction.

He would criticize me one day, and praise me the next. He was cantankerous, opinionated, sometimes bull-headed, and one of the best newspaper people this state will ever produce.

Former legislator and prominent Baton Rouge attorney, Rolfe McCollister also died last week. He was the mentor to numerous Louisiana public officials. Rolfe and I practiced law together back in the 80s, and he was a marvelous source of both wit and wisdom over many years.

He was elected to the Legislature in 1952 while he was serving in the Korean War overseas. Can you believe that? Beat an incumbent while serving his country as an infantry officer. Rolfe was awarded the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars during his service. He was just an all-around good guy

Billy Nungesser also passed away last week. He was one of the most important and influential figures in the Louisiana Republican Party for many years. When Dave Treen served as Governor in the 1980s, Billy was the “go to guy” when things needed to get done. He served in a number of key governmental positions, and was considered by all who knew him as a real reformer.

And finally, anyone around the Capitol in the last 50 years had dealings with Ed Reed. He was an all-purpose guy, a reporter, political consultant, lobbyist and a writer. His extensive research on Huey Long changed history, as he was able to convincingly conclude that Long was accidentally shot by his own bodyguards, not the infamous Doctor Weiss as was previously thought.

Like the others named, Ed had a great overview of Louisiana politics. I had the honor of attending each of their funerals. All of these gentlemen were friends, and will be missed by many.

BOOKNOTES

When it comes to selling books, certainly the most influential individual in America, hands down, is Oprah Winfrey. When she picks her book of the month to suggest to her

viewers, sales skyrocket into the millions over night. Her book this month is a story about the Holocaust by Nobel Prize winner, Elie Wiesel.

When I was taking a “six-month vacation” a few years ago, my weekly column always included a book review (I had a lot of time on my hands then). One of the books I suggested reading was “Night.” I have always felt that it was a must read on anyone’s list, particularly for young people who have no concept of what went on in Nazi Germany just 70 years ago. The following is the review for this compelling book I wrote in January of 2003.

“I received several letters and emails from readers of my recent Christmas column inquiring as to why I asked each of my four children to read Elie Wiesel’s “Night.”

The book is an anguishing and wrenching effort by the author to find meaning in the horror of the Holocaust. I wanted my children to understand that even in strong Christian countries like Germany in the 1930s aberrations of belief can take place that can turn into a searing genocidal tragedy.

Wiesel, the Nobel Peace laureate who has written more than 40 books, struggles with the intolerable question of how these monstrous events could occur. In his memoirs, he writes:

What in the world was the good Lord doing while His people were being massacred and incinerated? And what about my faith? I would be within my rights to give it up. I could invoke six million reasons to justify my decision. But I don’t. I never gave up my faith in God. Yes, my faith was wounded and still is today. In *Night*, my earliest testimony, I tell of the boy’s death by hanging, and conclude that it is God himself that the killer is determined to murder. I say this from within my faith, for had I lost it I would not rail against heaven. It is because I still believe in God that I argue with Him. As Job said: “Even if he kills me, I shall continue to place my hope in him.”

The short book (98 pages) is the terrifying account of the Nazi death camp horror seen by the author as a young Jewish boy. He survives, but only after witnessing the death of his family, and the death of his innocence.

Wiesel and his father were imprisoned in Birkenau, Auschwitz, and Buckenwald. Soon after the initial arrival, their group was lined up to walk by a German officer who pointed either right or left as each prisoner passed. This was the first selection process as the majority of the new, less fit arrivals were gassed within a few hours.

The book describes how the brutality of the camp life, the starvation, the beatings, the severe cold and lack of sleep conspired to break the spirit of the prisoners. Many inmates lost the will to carry on, while others fought to keep their will to live. Wiesel attributes this determination to a person’s ability in choosing either to give up or to preserve a

vestige of spiritual freedom.

Wiesel's plea, found in all of his writings, is that we must not forget. "For the dead and living, we must bear witness."

I just wonder what lessons the world has learned from the Holocaust? The Bible tells us "Do not be indifferent to the bloodshed inflicted on your fellow man." Camus wrote that not to take a stand is in itself to take a stand. Yet in each succeeding decade, more slaughter continues.

Stalin is said to have killed between 20 and 30 million of his own people. In China, Mao may have even killed more. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge murdered several million in this small country. About a half a million Tutsi were killed by the Hutu in Rwanda. And the slaughter has continued in Latin America, Yugoslavia, other parts of Africa, the Arab-Israeli conflict ... and, of course 9/11. The sanity of the human condition is still tenuous at best.

Nietzsche wrote that: "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how." And that's really what Wiesel's body of writings are all about. It's true he is embittered (justifiably so) and continually reminds-demands that we remember the horror that took place. Yet, he still leaves the reader with hope, cautious hope, for humanity's future.

Elie Wiesel's *Night* is not just a recommendation. It should be required reading and shared among your family members."

(In Baton Rouge, there is a nice selection of Elie Wiesel's books at Cottonwood Bookstore by the Perkins Road underpass.)

A final thought for the week.

*"Persecution cannot harm him
Who stands by Truth."*

- Kalil Gibran

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown