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NEW REPUBLICAN OPPORTUNITIES IN FUTURE LOUISIANA ELECTIONS?

How quickly the playing field can change. Six months ago, there wasn't much chance that any statewide elected official in Louisiana would face a serious challenge in the 2007 gubernatorial election. But state Republicans now think they see some opportunities. There is a new ongoing effort to recruit candidates two years before the qualification date opens.

Republican Party state chairman Roger Villere was all smiles and full of election optimism, as he made the rounds at a recent wedding reception in LaPlace last week.

"The situation has really changed in the past few months, and opportunities for Republican candidates have improved dramatically for a number of state and local offices. From the governor on down, we really feel confident that some great strides are going to be made in 2007."

Villere feels the Governor "overreached" in the past legislative session. "Voters are looking for results, and not a lot happened in this past session to give them much optimism. There are a number of solid Republicans looking at the top spots, as well as other statewide offices."

The number one concern is who will take on the Governor. The Republican leadership agrees that there is a pecking order. And whoever wants to get party support and be the consensus candidate is going to have to get in line.

The first right of refusal goes to Senator David Vitter. And according to party insiders, he is spending a great deal of time weighing his options. Many would wonder why a US senator would give up the good life in Washington, and return to the trenches of guerrilla war that seems to constantly swirl around the State Capitol and the Governor's Mansion. But you have to understand where Vitter is coming from. It's simple. He wants to be President. And the governor's chair, from his way of thinking, would seem to be the best route to get there.

Four of the past five Presidents have served as a Governor. Even Richard Nixon tried to run for Governor of California and failed. The Governor's office has proven to be the best springboard to the Presidency for most of the 20th-century. And Vitter feels the time spent in Washington as a US Senator, coupled with the administrative background that flows from the Governor's office, would give him a solid foundation to launch a Presidential campaign. The big question for Vitter is the timing.

Additionally, he had assumed Governor Blanco would hold her spot for two terms. That would allow him to stay for six years in the nation's capitol, then come back to Louisiana and run for an open seat. Eight years as governor would set him up for a major shot at the White House in 2016. He would only be 55 years old. But he's now rethinking the time schedule. Does he move up his agenda up four years?

Another close watcher who will be affected by Vitter's decision is New Orleans area Congressman Bobby Jindal. His future is influenced by Vitter's decision in several ways. If the Senator opts not to run for Governor, Jindal is next in the pecking order. Does he try it again? He lost a close race to Blanco in 2003, and still yearns for the job. And it's a "free shot" for him since he retains his Congressional seat if he would lose.

When they both were first elected, there was some initial rivalry between the two new kids on the block in D.C. Jindal received lots of attention nationwide being the only Indian-American in Congress. But they soon realized it was in each one's best interest to "get along." So Jindal now feels that Vitter might just be his best meal ticket up the political ladder

Jindal has now become Vitter's cheerleader in a possible gubernatorial bid. Remember that if Vitter wins the Governor's job, he gets to appoint his successor in the Senate. How about Senator Bobby Jindal? He feels it has a nice ring to it. But if Vitter opts out of the race, look for big pressure from state GOP leaders to push Jindal in.

If those two pass, anyone waiting in the wings? Most definitely. Next down the pecking order line, as some Republican watchers see it, is Baton Rouge Senator Jay Dardenne. He's term limited and seriously looking at the top spot unless Vitter or Jindal run. If one of them does, Dardenne will pick a statewide spot. The political junkies are presently handicapping him as a candidate for Governor or Insurance Commissioner.

Villere also remains optimistic about the other statewide races. "We plan on having major, well-funded candidates in every statewide office. Some are certainly more attractive than others, but several of the statewide are obviously having their share problems right now. This presents some better opportunities for us. We want to keep the Secretary of State's office. If Fox McKeithen is unable to run again, we will surely have a strong candidate. We already have some solid people talking about Insurance Commissioner and Agriculture Commissioner. And we will have a major push to elect a majority of Republicans in the legislature."

Money will be an important key and potential stumbling block for any coordinated GOP effort in the state. It's always easier for an incumbent to raise campaign funds. And as one Baton Rouge consultant pointed out, the congressional delegation has really been soaking the donor list.

"There's only so much political campaign money out there. Even though the congressional elections were just over, these folks in Washington are really pushing hard to fill up their war chests. It seems like I get a letter almost weekly from Bobby Jindal, complaining how "they" are out to get him, whoever "they" are. All these folks are trying to build a huge war chest early. Mary Landrieu's election is over three years away, yet she's having fund raisers left and right. If you're going to run for statewide office in 2007, you better be starting now, and you better be ready to put a little of your own money in the race."

So it looks like the state campaign season will start much earlier than normal. Political consultants, pollsters and the media buyers are certainly happy about this

turn of events. As for voters? Don't count on my excitement or anticipation. It always seems to start way too soon.

"I think the greatest curse of American society has been the idea of an easy millennialism -- that some new drug, or the next election or the latest in social engineering will solve everything."

Robert Penn Warren

"Which one of the three candidates would you want your daughter to marry?"

H. Ross Perot

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown