

Thursday, November 18th, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

SO WHERE DO THE DEMOCRATS GO FROM HERE?

Now the soul searching begins. The Democrats, even in Louisiana, painted themselves into a corner, and in the minds of some prognosticators, have become almost irrelevant because of the three Gs (God, guns, and gays). Is there really any hope? Are the rats leaving the sinking ship? Is the whole future of the Democratic Party tied to regaining the “moral values debate?” Of course not!

There is no question the Democrats in Louisiana and throughout the South were hamstrung and even hogtied by a national party and a presidential candidate who, for all practical purposes, wrote us off the map. It was a big mistake. But can it be overcome in the next four years, where the Democrat running in the south can “connect” on local and regional issues, and still not be reticent or even ashamed to be tied to the national party? Of course they can. Republicans did it following the Goldwater debacle in 1964. And the Democrats put major disasters aside from the McGovern campaign in 1972 and the Dukakis fizzle in 1988.

Let's be realistic. In spite of the gaffs that seemed to come from the Democrats almost daily, the election was still extremely close. A change of 64,000 votes in Ohio, and John Kerry would be President today. Any Republican claims of a mandate will ring hollow when you look at the fact that the results were razor-thin in many states. Bush needed 270 electoral votes to win and he received 286. Not exactly an overwhelming victory. Exit polls throughout the south showed that voters are still deeply troubled about Iraq, dissatisfied with the economy, and sharply divided along racial, cultural, and religious lines. So there is plenty of growing room for Democrats in Louisiana and throughout the south in the months to come.

When it came the three Gs, the twenty-two percent of voters who felt these issues were the overwhelming reason to support a particular party were going to lean heavily toward Republicans anyway. The Bush team did a very good job of creating key wedge issues on the moral values front but they were helped tremendously by a Democratic candidate who was aloof, elitist, and surrounded by upscale professionals offering little encouragement that a Kerry administration would either relate or champion specific problems facing our part of the country today. The guy just didn't connect. And that made it hard on Democrats in Louisiana and the rest of the south running for any other office.

Were the problems insurmountable? Of course not. When all is said and done in our part of the country, the Democrats just flat got outworked. To a great degree, the victory by

the GOP was procedure more than substance. A victory on strategy, and not so much on policy.

Take a look at Louisiana's major statewide race – the open seat for U.S. Senate. Can you name any of the philosophical differences between the winner David Vitter and his two top opponents? None were pro-choice, none were for gay marriage, and all were for importation of Canadian drugs. And when you compare the voting records of the two congressmen running, they were pretty much the same. What happened is fairly simple if you stand back and look at it. This time around, the Democrats just didn't work as hard or produce when it really counted. A few examples:

State and local races were certainly hurt by the national Democratic Party's decision to abandon Louisiana, as well as the rest of the south. No national television ads ran during the final two months of the campaign. The Republican team kept the ads running. This was certainly a boost for Republican candidates who could feed off the national advertising, knowing full well the President would win a solid victory in Louisiana and the rest of the south. It certainly hurt local Democrats. And how can a presidential candidate ever be successful if he writes off a major portion of the country?

So is there is no future for national Democrats in the south? How soon we forget. It was only four years ago that Bill Clinton, despite his personal problems, continued to hold high favorable marks in Louisiana and in most southern states. And no matter how much anyone grumbles, it's just a plain fact that if Clinton had been on the ballot this time, Bush would have been toast in Louisiana and many other southern states.

If you want to see a good example of how Democrats were outworked, just look at the results in New Orleans, the largest city in the state. Democrats always win big in Orleans Parish, the largest Democratic conclave in the state. The average turnout for all of Louisiana was sixty-eight percent, but in New Orleans, it was less than sixty percent. In spite of all the talk of a major organized effort to get out the vote, it just wasn't successful. Democrats have a tradition in New Orleans, as well as other Democratic strongholds, of organizing precinct by precinct, even block to block to push Election Day turnout. But the effort this time seemed half-hearted, and failed to match, by far, past get-out-the-vote efforts. If New Orleans had voted at the same percentage level of the rest of the state, David Vitter would be in a run-off with no incumbent president at the top of a ballot, and would be in the fight of his life. New Orleans Democrats alone kept this from happening.

So where were all the young people? We kept hearing about major efforts in key cities throughout the south to register our young people to vote. "Vote or Die!" said the t-shirts. Voting this time was supposed to "hot" and "sexy," or at least according to the MTV spots. The leaders of the national organization to get our

kids to vote were rapper 50 Cent and attention-crazed heiress Paris Hilton. And guess what? Neither one are even registered to vote.

These efforts funded by national and state Democrats, were trying to make voting a thing that was “cool.” The voting patterns of young citizens are heavily influenced by the relationship to voting that was forged in their childhoods. Make it “cool?” No, you have got to do a lot more than this.

Louisiana Democrats made a big mistake in not doing more in the past to educate young voters. Remember that sixty to sixty-five percent of these younger voters will vote Democratic. Yet state officials did little to encourage any major effort with our youth. Louisiana colleges are given federal funds to push voter registration drives and educational efforts. But efforts at most Louisiana colleges were meager if there was any particular effort at all. Most of our colleges are not doing their job, and the Louisiana Democratic Party (you would think) would call them on the carpet for their failure to do the job they received federal funds to do.

And what a big mistake it was to shut down the schools on Election Day. Our school officials were handed a gift, and they really dropped the ball. A marvelous opportunity was missed in educating our kids about the importance of the democratic process. Granted there is a lot of activity on Election Day, and schools are often used as voting precincts. So what’s the problem? Maybe you have to make the gym “off limits” for one day as voters come into the school to vote. But boy did our educators miss an opportunity to have a full “celebration day for democracy.” Special classes could have been held at all levels to teach our kids about our democratic system, and how important it is to vote. Legislators and other local officials could have come into the classroom and spoken on the democratic process. Our kids could have felt the “buzz” of all the activity around the school as so many of their parents and neighbors came in to cast their vote. And for just a little additional money, an extra voting machine could have been provided at the other end of the school for students to cast their own vote in a mock election to further educate them about the process.

No, it was too much trouble, so our kids just “hung out” for the day and gained little knowledge about the importance of participating in the process that protects our freedoms. And look you Democratic leaders. Your Party benefits the most from these new voters participating. You will be making a big mistake if you don’t push to change the law in the coming session of the legislature to keep the schools open. Let Democracy breathe and enter in, and have a tool that will build enthusiasm for our kids.

What about the Christian right? Has it slipped away to the R column? Oh it’s sliding a bit, but only because a number of Democrats are letting it happen. Following the election, I touched base by phone with a number of conservative Christian religious leaders, primarily in north Louisiana. Yes, they confirmed,

they and their members were openly supporting primarily Republican candidates, but not solely because of moral issues.

“Kerry was so abstract and distant,” one minister told me. “Not anything like Bill Clinton. We didn’t always agree with Clinton, but he was open, accessible, and we felt like he was a President who at least listened to our point of view and tried to meet us halfway. No one from the Democratic Party offered us any encouragement to develop any dialogue with Kerry or key people around him.”

And several other ministers commented on the Louisiana U.S. Senate race. “It seemed like a week did not go by where a number of us, particularly in the Pentecostal Church, did not receive a call or a visit from David Vitter. We rarely saw the Democratic candidates.”

The consensus seemed to be that Clinton set the tone of not always supporting stronger conservative positions on abortion, stem cell research, and gay marriage. But, it was at least a “perception” that he was struggling with all these issues, and tried to find a common ground to keep the discussions open. Senator John Breaux was of this mold as was former U.S. Senator Bennett Johnston, former Congressmen Jerry Huckaby and even Rodney Alexander before his switch.

“We’ll support good Democratic candidates who will differentiate between their views and stand up for Louisiana compared to what’s going on nationally,” another minister told me. “We didn’t see the distinctions happen this time.”

So what does the future look like for both national parties as for Louisiana and the South? You can make an argument that it is brighter for the Democrats than the Republicans. Don’t laugh.

An effort is being made to change the Constitution so that California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger can make a run for President in the Republican primaries four years from now. America’s mayor Rudy Giuliani is also starting to organize with the same goal in mind. Schwarzenegger and Giuliani are both pro-choice, for gun control, for stem cell research, and pro gay marriage. Even Arizona Senator John McCain, who is extremely popular with a cross section of voters, is much more moderate on these key issues.

On the other hand, there are some bright, emerging leaders within the Democratic Party from the South. Governor Mark Warner is quite popular in Virginia, has strong, rural roots, and even sponsors a NASCAR racing team. He is being talked about as the next chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Also, keep an eye on Senator Bill Nelson of Florida. He and I both worked together when we were Insurance Commissioners, and he was the first member of Congress to go into space as an astronaut. A moderate from a key state, you will see Nelson traveling throughout the South a good bit in the months to come. They join a group of other moderate to more conservative leaning Democrats who have

strong, rural roots, and seem a lot more in touch with average voters. In that column is Senator and former governor Evan Bayh of Indiana, and newly elected Senator Ken Salazar from Colorado. Salazar solidly beat the president of the Coors Beer Company who was a rock-solid Bush supporter. So there is certainly hope among key Democratic operatives that a more solid, moderate to conservative Democrat will emerge with core family values and an ability to “connect” with voters in the south. Who would you have as President? A Virginia Governor who hangs out with the NASCAR crowd or the Terminator who seems right in step with most liberal elements of the most liberal state in the country?

So hang in there you Democrats.

Two other changes need to be considered and supported by the leadership of the Louisiana Democratic Party. They both involve the candidate selection process at both the state and national level.

There is a lot of talk right now about changing the open primary system in Louisiana. But even with a major push by the Governor, this is going to be an uphill fight. Another option would be for Louisiana Democrats to hold a major Democratic convention six or eight months before the election. The State Party has come under severe criticism for giving last-minute support to the “leading” candidate in the final weeks of the election. If you’re going to get behind one Democrat, do it way in advance with a formal apparatus that brings several thousand key Democrats together. Let these candidates lobby all of these delegates with the hope of a “consensus” candidate emerging from the convention. If one candidate can garner sixty percent of the delegates, then he or she should receive the blessing from the Party apparatus come election time. It’s an idea that ought to be explored.

On the national level, the south needs to get much more involved in the Party primary apparatus. This part of the country is being left out in the cold by a primary election process that allows the Democratic nominee to be selected by a handful of more liberal states. Kerry was effectively selected by the 135,000 who voted for him in Iowa and New Hampshire. Why on earth would Democrats in the South allow Iowa and New Hampshire to dominate the whole process? Southern states should seriously consider the option of a “southern primary.” And do it early so that the ripple effect can allow either a candidate from the South or a national candidate who offer more of a comfort level to our part of the country.

There is much on this buffet table to be pondered and discussed. Louisiana and southern Democrats have a big job ahead of them. When the dust settles and the soul searching is put to rest, the fact remains that there is a solid opportunity for Democrats to rebuild and refocus in the months to come.

Vote: the instrument and symbol of a freeman's power to make a fool of himself and a wreck of his country." --Ambrose Bierce, "The Devil's Dictionary"

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown