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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

LOUISIANA REPUBLICANS GET THEIR ACT TOGETHER

After a decade of internal bickering and dissention, there are signs that the Louisiana Republican Party is finally getting focused and much better organized. For years, there has been more open warfare within the state party leadership than between the two political parties themselves. But it would seem to be different this time around.

This weekend, over 1000 delegates will converge on the Cajandome for what is billed to be a three day love fest. A number of national speakers are lined up including Sen. Elizabeth Dole of North Carolina, Governor Bill Owens of Colorado, and conservative commentator Michael Reagan, the son of the late President. As new state chairman Roger Villere is touting: "We are attracting a lot of younger people, we agree on philosophy and we are more united than ever before. It's more than just about re-electing the President."

Unity has not been a hallmark with in the state party for number of years. You have to go back to the Dave Treen-Billy Nunguesser days in the 70s to find less dissention. A huge opportunity was missed during the 90s when Gov. Mike Foster seemed to be in a continuing battle with the state party faithful. It seemed that Foster and then party chairman Mike Francis lobbed grenades at each other on a weekly basis. And Foster did little to raise dollars or assist in building any party organization.

For this weekend's convention, the state Republicans have lined up a number of conservative speakers that reflect the standard party line. As one Party operative expressed: "We're not being inconsistent here in Louisiana like they seem to be at the national level. When we have our gathering, you won't be listening to speakers who espouse many positions we oppose." He of course was alluding to the National Republican Convention three weeks away in New York. The first four Republican speakers who will address delegates all favor abortion, stem cell research, and gay partnerships. (Rudy Giuliani, Arnold Schwarzenegger, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Gov. George Pataki). The next speaker who actually embraces the Republican view is a Democrat, Sen. Zell Miller of Georgia.

The star attraction of this weekend's event will be Sen. Dole. She ran for President in 1992 and has emerged as the leading female Republican voice in this country.Pres. Reagan appointed her Secretary of Transportation; she was Secretary of Labor under Bush One and, for a number of years, headed up the American Red Cross.

I sat with Sen. Dole at a private dinner in Natchez, Mississippi back in the early 1970s. At the time, she was working as Deputy Assistant to President Nixon for Consumer Affairs and was dating Mississippi Congressman Sonny Montgomery (now deceased).

In making conversation, I asked her where she thought she would be in 20 years.

“Probably raising six kids on a small farm somewhere. Perhaps in North Carolina where I was brought up,” she answered.

Libby Dole went on to run one Presidential campaign at the side of her husband, Sen. Bob Dole in 1992. Whether or not President Bush loses in November, look for her to join the jockeying for the nomination in 2008. Dole vs. Clinton? A rerun of the 1996 campaign, but with the wives heading up each ticket? Two women battling it out for the Presidency? A far cry from six kids and a farm.

So what do the party operatives think about their chances in the U. S. Senate race with lone candidate David Vitter? After all, I pointed out, two recent solid Republican candidates for statewide office lost runoffs to Democrats in the past two years. With the Governor and most of the statewide officials in the Democratic column, and a state party structure that is well organized, how serious are Vitter’s chances?

Much better this time they say. When both Suzie Terrell and Bobby Jindal ran statewide, they were fighting other Republican challengers in the first primary. It gave them only 30 days to consolidate Republican support for the runoff. Vitter is the only game in town for Republicans, so he can concentrate, so their theory goes, on independents and undecideds.

Vitter’s larger problem is explaining back home why he’s having trouble in Washington garnering Republican support for Louisiana wetlands as well as quotas for both imported sugar and shrimp.

So I checked in with my local political bookie connection.

“Can Vitter win?” I asked.

“Yeah, but he will need a good bump from Bush. I still have him at 5 to 2, slightly behind the two Democrats either of whom could make the runoff.”

“How do you figure?” I asked him.

“Vitter will lead in the first. But Bush will determine how much. First, Bush has to win the election. If he loses, so does Vitter in the runoff. The local GOP will be demoralized and the momentum will shift to the Democrat who makes the runoff with Vitter. But Bush also has got to carry Louisiana big. Not beat Kerry by three or four points. It needs to be six or more. This will fire up the local GOP. A close Presidential election, no matter who wins, helps the Democrat.”

”Will the odds stay the same till Election Day?”

“Depends” he answered. “Money and TV quality. Voters have been bombarded with tons of political spots for two years. They’re getting pretty savvy as to what is effective and believable, and what’s not. Just saying you will support Kerry or support Bush won’t cut it. You got to connect. I don’t know how, but you just got to connect. So far, all these guys are running on party support and name recognition. It will take a lot more than that.”

“Good analysis my friend. I’ll check in from time to time.”

“Maybe place a bet?”

“I’ve been betting on myself in elections for 30 years,” I told him. “We’ll see.”

So I was at Dillard’s this past Sunday for their big fall sale. 75% off. Then, 25% off the 75%. I mean, how could you pass it up. I’m over in the sock section, and there right in front of me is Tony Clayton. Yes, **the** Tony Clayton. The guy who’s the special prosecutor who is trying to convict the serial killer. That’s right! The trial of the decade. Derrick Todd Lee. And Tony is the prosecutor trying to put him away.

“So let me get this straight,” I tell him. “This is the biggest trial of your life. Reporters from all over the country will be there covering your efforts. Your future reputation is on the line. You start picking a jury in the morning. And what are you doing? Buying socks!”

He laughed and told me he had been working day and night to prepare his case, had done all the pre-trial prep of witnesses and potential jurors, and was ready to get to work. “I’m just taking a short break, but I’ll be back in my office once I leave here. And I’m ready.”

Tony is as good a prosecutor as there is in the state. Other lawyers hire him just to help pick a jury. I suggested that he keep notes in the coming weeks for a book he might write one day.

He will be in court for at least another two weeks. He certainly will be well prepared. And the good news is he will be wearing new socks.

*“It does not take a majority to prevail,
But rather an irate, tireless minority’
Keen on setting brushfires of
Freedom in the minds of men.”
Samuel Adams*

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown