

Thursday, August 12th, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

ALEXANDER SWITCH A DEMOCRATIC WAKEUP CALL

The general perception throughout Louisiana is that the major political controversies and knock-down drag-out political battles are fought in New Orleans or South Louisiana. Not so in recent Congressional races. The Fifth Congressional District had a barnburner of an election two years ago. And this time around, with lawsuits, charges of betrayal, comparisons to “Benedict Arnold” and numerous counter charges, Northeast Louisiana continues to be the center of nationwide attention.

This wild story began calmly last Wednesday when then Democratic Congressman Rodney Alexander quietly filed for re-election at the Secretary of State’s office in Baton Rouge. He did end up with one major opponent in Alexandria attorney and former state legislator Jock Scott. But with a war chest of well over a half a million dollars and few controversial issues at stake, Alexander looked well positioned and hard to beat. True, the Fifth District is more conservative than most of the state, but Alexander often voted with Republicans and talked about voting “his district” shunning party labels.

All this changed on Friday when, without any notice, the one term Congressman filed a second time at the Secretary State’s office as a Republican. He had apparently earlier submitted a “change of party” form to the clerk of court’s office at his home courthouse of Jackson Parish in Jonesboro. There seems to be some question as to when the “change of party” form was actually filed and when it was dated, which could prove to be relevant as this controversy unfolds.

Jock Scott was obviously upset over Alexander’s switch. He had received significant encouragement from both the state and national party, and was hoping for an influx of major campaign funding. He had researched the incumbent’s voting record and felt he had plenty of political ammunition to lump Rodney in with the national Democrats. “He has voted the Democratic party line much more often than most people in the district think. I really have some solid issues to run on, and there are major differences between my philosophy and his,” Scott mused. “And whatever party label he’s running under, I’m in this race to stay.”

So what’s this law suit all about? Yesterday afternoon, a Fifth District voter, one Jeremy Lacombe from the New Roads area just north of Baton Rouge, filed suit in Iberville Parish (part of this parish is in the 5th District). Here’s his beef: He argues (or his extremely effective lawyer Chris Whittington argues) that once Alexander filed for re-election as a Democrat, he was prohibited from switching to the Republican Party until after the election takes place. The source that is cited is the Louisiana Election Code (R.S. 18:463) which states that “no candidate shall change or add his political party designation....after he has qualified for the election,”

Alexander will no doubt respond by saying he filed two sets of qualification papers, and that the last set filed will be the one that applies, keeping him in compliance with the law. The Secretary of State's office takes the position that the last document filed is the one they accept. Since Alexander has changed his party registration on the second form, Whittington will argue that the first papers have been put aside, the second set is invalid, therefore the Congressman is out of luck and disqualified from running at all.

The Secretary of State's office admits there is some confusion. Most observers agree it's probably going to take a judge to sort all this out. (A side note: Guess who was the Secretary of State when the present election code was adopted? Would you believe it was yours truly?)

The case has been set for tomorrow (would you further believe Friday the 13th? Who is that a bad omen for?), at 4:00 pm at the Iberville Parish Court House across the river from Baton Rouge in Plaquemine. Whatever happens there will certainly be appealed to a higher court, so this soap opera still has a ways to go. Stay tuned.

Some key Democratic Party insiders see the Alexander controversy as a "call to arms." There's a feeling among some of the party faithful that too many actions by Republican Congressmen have gone unchallenged. It's time, they say, to draw a line in the dirt.

When Congressman Jim McCrery did his public soul searching about retiring, then up and moved his family to Washington, conservative north Louisiana talk show host Moon Griffon had strong words about packing up and leaving the Congressman's constituents. It was pointed out that McCrery produced a T.V. attack ad against his opponent, Democratic Congressman Jerry Huckaby, criticizing Huckaby for not living in the District, when the two incumbents ran against each other in the early 1990s. The state Democrats said nary a word. And not much has been said about Republican Congressional candidates Bobby Jindal (First District) and Billy Tauzin III (Third District) having spent virtually no time in the district for which they are running.

New Democratic Party Executive Director Derek Wooley says all this is about to change. "We have an obligation to point out these inconsistencies of Republican candidates. You will see a much more aggressive Democratic Party in the future," he says. It's certainly not going to be a dull election this fall.

ABSOLUTELY THE FINAL WORD ON MARTHA

I know. I know. I said I would quite commenting on what happened to Martha Stewart, but an article appeared last week in the New York Times that really needs reviewing. A short quote follows. Bear with me. This hits pretty close to home.

“The delinquents in Ohio who didn’t pay attention to local power failures and thereby caused the blackout last August that cost this society millions of dollars were not sent to prison or publicly reprimanded. We have never heard the names of the C.I.A. and F.B.I. employees who ignored information that could have put some hijackers in custody before 9/11 and possibly kept down the planes that struck the World Trade Center. Were they punished?”

“American justice doesn’t charge a price for irresponsibility regardless of the resulting destruction. But take a hard-working, successful gentlewoman who hasn’t caused any big catastrophe but who was foolish enough to answer questions put to her by a government agent, and she gets jail. Injustice. American –style!”

New York Times
July 21, 2004

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown