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# THE VIEW

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## A TALE OF TWO PARTIES

BY

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The March 1 qualifying deadline has passed, and the fields are set for the 2007 statewide elections. Many will note who is missing from the Democratic field. Late in the qualifying process Secretary of State Eric Clark decided to take a break from politics, and former officeholders Mike Moore and Ronnie Shows were nowhere to be found on the list of candidates.

It is clear from a perusal of the Republican and Democratic tickets, respectively, that the Republicans, with Haley Barbour as the titular head of the party, got as good as they could hope for from the Democrats in their efforts to spread Barbour campaign largesse across the down ticket statewide races and in the all important effort to close the gap, if not gain an outright majority, in one or both houses of the Mississippi Legislature. While there are two qualified candidates for Governor in the Democratic column neither are expected to present a formidable challenge to perhaps the top Republican political strategist in the country. It is hard to mistake the anticipation of the Republican troops for the upcoming election. Why might this be so? What are the stakes?

If Barbour and the Republicans retain the Governor's seat in 2007, at the end of that term we will look back on twenty years of politics in which the Republicans have held the statehouse for sixteen of those years, the lone four-year interlude being that singular term of Democrat Ronnie Musgrove. The impact of the period will last even longer. The governing structure in Mississippi was built around the expectation that a Governor would serve a single four year term. When one considers the Governor's appointments to statutorily defined boards and commissions, one does not have to think long to

understand the impact of 16 years of Republican appointments in the last 20 years. Barbour has expounded on the importance of taking the “long view” in the implementation of political strategy. One can be certain that he is planning to leave no stone unturned in maximizing the Republican base. Only last week did long time Democratic Senator Tommy Gollott qualify to run as a Republican, thus delivering the Senate to the Republican Party. A full court press is underway by the Republicans to capture every Senate and House seat and the Lieutenant Governors seat being vacated by a term limited Amy Tuck. The big question is what will be the response of the once vaunted Democratic Party?

The Democratic Party stronghold is clearly in the Mississippi House of Representatives. House Speaker Billy McCoy has fought valiantly to hold together a Democratic majority capable of providing balance to the debate with the Barbour-led Republicans. Much of what enables the Democrats to act authoritatively and with a sense of resolve rests with the ability of the Democrats to maintain this stronghold. In fact, the ability to maintain a viable two-party political system over the next four-year term may very well hinge on the ability to maintain a clear Democratic Party majority in the House. Amazingly, there are troubling clouds on the horizon and they are ironically of the Democrats' own making.

One of the biggest mistakes that parties make when they fear sinking into minority status is to make a big show of purging the party of ideological interlopers. Hence, they believe they are upholding the purity of the party, but are falling on their swords in the process. Recent news that various litmus tests will be applied to current Democratic Party members, and that those who fall short will be shown the door can only be troubling for those trying to match the Republican base numbers-wise. In a time of hand-to-hand combat for the hearts and minds of one member at a time, the notion that a scheme has been devised to expel all but the most ideologically pure Democrats seems counterproductive at best.

It was Haley Barbour himself, when he took the reigns of the national Republican Party at a time when that party seemed hopelessly and permanently mired in second place, who cajoled the party into putting aside stringent litmus tests and loyalty oaths in favor of pursuing “big tent” status. He believed, and ultimately demonstrated, that these internal debates are more fun to solve when you are the majority party than they are when you are on the outside of the throne room looking in. Of course the result of the Republican’s acceptance of this advice was the 1994 Republican revolution that resulted in a Republican

Party majority in the U.S. Senate and House. The Democratic Party has a long and rich tradition in Mississippi. Names like John Stennis, Sonny Montgomery, Jamie Whitten, William Winter and many more created a noble history for the party. It is hard to imagine how one would explain to any of these giants of the Democratic Party why the party would crumble in the face of the long awaited challenge to build a two-party state. No doubt the Republicans are gleeful in hopes that Democratic Party efforts at “purifying the party” are quite the success.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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