



THE VIEW

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THE WILD, WILD FIRST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

BY

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The political pot in Mississippi is boiling over. Announcements of retirements and resignations have set in motion a predictable chain reaction as candidates scramble to fill the now or soon to be open seats in the First and Third Congressional Districts and the unexpired term of Mississippi's junior Senator Trent Lott.

The evolving contest(s) to fill the First District Congressional seat being vacated by veteran Congressman Roger Wicker as he accepts Governor Haley Barbour's appointment to fill Lott's unexpired term present a tremendously intriguing picture from several angles. For quite some time when one thought of the First Congressional District, the population center radiating out from Tupelo and Lee County came immediately to mind. In fact many simply thought that as the Tupelo area went so went the First District. Indeed 13 year veteran Congressman Roger Wicker calls Tupelo home. As is usually the case when an open seat becomes available, pent up desire to run for the office manifests itself and in the process observers commence the game of handicapping the chances of the respective candidates based on their experience, name recognition and where in the district they are from.

When one examines the First District through the prism of the current crop of announced and potential candidates they are in for some interesting discoveries. To begin with, this district that spans almost the entire way across North Mississippi from the Alabama line in the east stopping at the edge of the Delta dominated Second Congressional District has now developed a second

major population center. Upstart, but increasingly powerful, DeSoto County has grown rapidly, and that growth continues so that population-wise it has reached virtual parity with the traditional population center of Tupelo/Lee County. Thus, the potential for a significant east/west rivalry for influence has developed in the First District. The entry into the race of former state legislator and current Mayor of the DeSoto County city of Southaven, Republican Greg Davis serves notice that the western part of the district is ready to play for keeps. Already at least three candidates from the Tupelo area have made their intentions known, and there will likely be others. Former Tupelo Mayor Glenn McCullough, a Republican, and Democrats Travis Childers, Chancery Clerk of Prentiss County and Tupelo Attorney Brian Neely have announced. Although there was a point at which it might have seemed that the Tupelo/Lee County eastern part of the First District was in danger of being swamped by the population growth in the DeSoto County dominated western part of the district, such concerns have abated with the arrival of the Toyota auto manufacturing facility and the growing number of announcements by auxiliary manufacturers.

Just as Tupelo has long been thought of as the "Capital" of the First District, conventional wisdom has labeled this a Republican District. No doubt this was due to Wicker's affiliation with the Republican Party. How quickly we forget the nearly 50-year tenure of Democrat Jamie Whitten. Recent elections clearly prove that residents of the First have not forgotten, and that there is plenty of evidence that a member of the Democratic Party can indeed be a viable candidate in the First. Furthermore, this Democratic viability extends across racial lines. One need look no further than the election of State Senator-elect, Democrat Eric Powell to fill the seat of retiring Senator Travis Little. Powell, an African-American won handily in a heavily white district including parts of Alcorn, Prentiss, and Tishomingo Counties. The eastern two-thirds of the First District is one of the remaining areas of high concentrations of what are often referred to as New Deal, TVA, Jamie Whitten Democrats. As one travels westward in the First they will encounter a growing African-American population that also votes heavily Democratic. A candidate who can pull together these two "brands" of Democrats can be successful in a First District race.

Some attention must also be paid to the impact of the mechanics of the election. Candidates for the race for the First District Congressional seat in the November general election must file by the end of the day on January 11. Candidates for the special election will file a few days later even though the special election will be held before the general election. All candidates in the

special election will run together regardless of party with the top two making the runoff provided no one candidate gains a majority of the votes. It is unknown at this point what the date of the special election will be, but the primary for the general election will be March 11. Perhaps if both elections were on the same day voters would have to vote on two separate ballots. If this were the case, what if the winner of the non-partisan special election failed to win his party's primary for the general? Or what if the winner of the party primary was not elected to the seat in the special election?

One final consideration has to do with the context of Election Day. Special elections often have lighter turnouts than general elections. How would the prospects of the prospective candidates differ in a special election as compared to a heavily attended Presidential Election with the historic possibilities of Democratic ticket headed by Barak Obama or Hillary Clinton?

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