



THE VIEW

Issue #10

May 19, 2009

CAMPAIGN TIME IN SMALL TOWN MISSISSIPPI

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

Grassroots politics is not all that its cracked up to be. Electioneering at the grassroots level is often portrayed as being characterized by friends and neighbors gathering under the shade of oak trees around a table groaning with homemade foods and deciding who will make the crucial decisions in their behalf for the next four years. Similarly, the search for votes is nothing more than an occasional stroll down a tree-lined street to engage those same friends and neighbors on the politest of terms. Many politicians craving the chance to serve in a municipal office have visions of economic development grandeur dancing in their heads as they await the certain voter endorsement.

Most candidates for municipal office quickly discover that reality is quite a bit different. They likely find out that when running for local office the weighty matters of State give way to what the government “closest to the people” is going to do about potholes, stray dogs, yard sales, the residues of leaky sewers, ineffective drainage ditches, old abandoned cars and innumerable other annoyances that hinder our ability to live in close proximity to one another in Mississippi’s small towns.

I have recently been rather heavily involved in a family member’s race for mayor in one of Mississippi’s growing municipalities. It is clearer to me now than ever why I have held fast to my beliefs about political participation. I prefer to observe the passing political scene and let others do the playing. Give me season tickets on the fifty yard line of the game of politics, but excuse me when its time to suit up and get in the game. My brush with campaigning has informed several observations that I would pass along to anyone tempted to hit the campaign trail in small town Mississippi.

Observation 1: Every Mississippian apparently owns at least one dog. Know the clues in your surroundings when engaging in the seemingly endless rounds of campaign canvassing. For example, when you are approaching the carport entrance to a potential voter’s house and you encounter a number 10 washtub full of drinking water, next to a pickup truck hubcap full of dry dog food and you see a broken chain leading into an old refrigerator lying on its side with the door removed, pass that vote up.

Observation 2 (also about dogs): A Rottweiler is only as bad as the length of the long chain to which it is tethered. You learn to estimate its length to the steps of the porch you are standing on even if it is coiled up.

Observation 3 (even more about dogs): Chihuahuas are small, but most of them think they can leave a bloody stump at the end of your leg. Likewise, I have come to believe that a Basset Hound is a cross between a Dachshund and a snapping turtle.

Observation 4: This one involves a myth that I have been lead to believe all of my married life. I found with great relief that most people's garages and carports are far more cluttered than my wife ever allows mine to be. Most people have carefully discovered a quite convenient way to put everything that they have no immediate use for in the garage, and leave exactly enough room to pull a vehicle in somewhat sideways even if they can't open the car door once they are inside. This is as it should be.

Observation 5: There are many differences in how we spend our money for creature comforts. On the one hand, there are the mansions that look like they belong on fraternity row of a large Southern university. These are usually equipped with doorbells that sound like the chimes at the National Cathedral, and they are surrounded by small automobiles made in Europe. At the other extreme, there is the single-wide house trailer with a \$50,000 pickup, a \$30,000 bass boat and a gas grill big enough to roast a whole boar hog and flock of chickens at the same time.

Finally, a political observation: Parties matter little in municipal politics. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats have demonstrated superior prowess in patching potholes, fixing sewer leaks, or corralling a stray pit bull. There are still those out there who want to link everyone with a "D" by their name directly to Nancy Pelosi and Bill Clinton and everyone with an "R" by their name to Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin.

The common denominator is that all of these would-be voters have a unique story and, most of all, they all have a vote. The trick is whether or not you can match your candidate's platform with these voters' stories and ultimately get their votes to the polls. I can truly attest that this is tougher mentally and physically than it looks. From now on let me watch this contest, but don't make me play.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's email is marty@sig.msstate.edu.

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