The John C. Stennis Institute of Government

THE VIEW

Issue #14 July 13, 2009

THE GOVERNOR DOESN'T WALK OR QUACK LIKE A LAME DUCK

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

Mississippi is preparing to host the National Governor's Association's annual conference for the first time since 1935. Some 40 governors are expected to be in attendance. We have perhaps missed our chance to have Sarah Palin in town in her role as Governor.

Governor Palin announced her forthcoming departure from that office and in the process offered a less than flattering description of the plight of "lame duck" Governors who are, according to Palin, simply playing out the string at the taxpayer's expense. Palin would have surely tempered her characterization of those who won't have another shot at the endorsement by the electorate had she been in Mississippi observing Governor Haley Barbour in his final term. Governor Barbour, agree with him or not, has so far defied the imposition of the lame duck label on his administration. It has been only a couple of weeks since the Governor grabbed the budget process by the throat, wrestled it to the ground, and only let it up when it had cried "Uncle".

Pundits and the public alike have for decades taken for granted the conventional wisdom that the office of Governor, a creature of the old stinker of an 1890 Mississippi Constitution, was created to be weak and that's just the way things were. True enough there have been governors who acted with bold strokes – sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. William Winter successfully took his case for education reform to the public and got the legislature to take historic action. Theodore Bilbo used his populist appeal to, among many other things, cost the State's universities their accreditation after firing faculty members and otherwise flexing muscle he didn't have. One of the major impediments in the 1890 Constitution is the requirement that all statewide officials must be elected by the people rather than appointed by the governor as is the case, for example, with the United States cabinet . In recent years Governor Kirk Fordice railed against the fact that he had to work with 7 out of 7 Democrats who shared the executive branch with him.

Why then has Haley Barbour seemingly operated from a position of strength rather than traditional weakness? From the day he arrived as a candidate Barbour brought with him several attributes that have served him well. No one under estimates his tremendous

political fund raising capability. While this has been significant in the success of his own campaigns, it has garnered the attention of those aspiring to higher office who have less access to campaign funds. They believe that there is no need to anger the goose that just may lay a golden egg for their own use. Beyond the money variable, Governor Barbour brought the very latest in technology and techniques for identifying and activating a base of support. The same databases filled with names for campaign purposes have been continuously maintained and put to good use in the important legislative battles to follow. Legislators learned early on in the first Barbour administration that the Governor would have as much contact with their constituents as they themselves did. This was proven beyond doubt during the Barbour-inspired push for tort reform when Governor Barbour communicated regularly with the grassroots who in turn contacted their respective legislators. House Judiciary Committee Chairman Ed Blackmon acknowledged the difficulty of opposing what he labeled "the Barbour juggernaut" in conceding the fight on tort reform.

Governor Barbour has made good use of his understanding of the nuances of the political philosophies of Mississippians. This knowledge has helped him to understand that conservative Democrats could be cajoled to vote like Republicans on many occasions and thus he has been able to exploit the narrow Democratic majority in the Mississippi Senate. To enhance this ability Governor Barbour has made unprecedented use of the veto and the special session. On numerous occasions Governor Barbour has helped wrestle legislation to a stand still only to call the legislature back to Jackson to a special session where the Governor specifies the agenda. Rather than using the veto only to be overridden consistently by the legislature, as was the case with Governor Fordice, Governor Barbour has learned to make the vetoes stick.

Events of recent weeks offer proof enough of these Barbour political skills. When the 2009 legislature reached a stalemate in the difficult task of passing a budget in these unusual economic times, the ball was passed to Governor Barbour's court. He was able to call a special session and exclude the battle over Medicaid and Medicare funding until the legislation approximated his demands. While this was impressive enough there was another event that may have been more so. Senate Bill 3197 was designed to save cut and sew jobs for the furniture industry by offering tax credits to the furniture companies who hired employees with these skills. This bill passed without a dissenting vote in both houses of the Mississippi Legislature. Governor Barbour vetoed this bill for reasons that he thoroughly believed in. Despite its unanimous approval, Senate Bill 3197 was not even brought up by the legislature for consideration of an override. Governor Palin may need to exempt Governor Barbour from her lame duck category.

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.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

Mississippi State UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.