

A Greene Victory in South Carolina?

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June 17, 2010

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Al Greene's victory in South Carolina has puzzled everyone - Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. When I first heard of the victory of the unemployed veteran, I immediately remarked to my wife that name recognition of the Rev. Al Greene had been a factor.

More specifically, it reminded me of a 1992 comedy starring Eddie Murphy entitled, "The Distinguished Gentleman." The movie featured a black con man named Thomas Jefferson Johnson who decided to shorten his name to Jeff Johnson in order to purposely confuse voters into thinking he was a dead congressman.

In a world in which people often imitate movies, some hapless voters were actually taken in by the name alone. These same voters admitted to national reporters that they thought they were voting for the famous gospel singer. To my father's generation, who fought for the right of minorities to vote, they would have seen this approach as irresponsible or squandering a "sacred right." Nonetheless, most voters come to primaries fired up and informed about only a handful of races.

Al Greene did not promote himself through the expected campaign activity of public appearances or campaign speeches. Yet, this "nobody" won South Carolina's Democratic Party nomination for the US Senate easily. So who is Al Greene really? Most of us have discovered that he is a novice at politics and is currently an unemployed veteran. He also has a very disturbing pornography charge that has been written about ad nauseum.

The Democratic Party is embarrassed by Greene's victory. There are at least two excuses for Greene's win. One group is convinced that Republicans have engineered this "hoax." The problem is that Jim Demint (the Republican incumbent) is probably unbeatable by anyone in the Democratic political stable. Therefore, it is illogical that the Republicans would take such a huge risk at this time.

Another group of people blamed the voting machines. One of the loudest machine blamers was David Axelrod, Senior Presidential Advisor. He stated that Greene's victory was "a mysterious deal," when he was interviewed on Meet the Press last weekend. A second person who blamed the machine was Greene's opponent, Vic Rawl. In fact he filed a complaint with the South Carolina Democratic Party. Rawl asserted that the voting machines were defective from the beginning. He said, the machines "were purchased surplus from Louisiana after that state outlawed them." Rawl made an even bolder assertion that voters have informed him that when they selected Vic Rawl in the voting booth, Greene's name appeared.

This week Congressman James Clyburn, a native of South Carolina, joined the chorus of machine critics. He appeared on Fox News and pretended to be separate from his home state's Democratic leadership. He boldly said that 49 states have rejected these very voting machines, while the South Carolina Democratic leadership wrongly sought to use the machines despite numerous complaints.

Regardless of the reason for Al Greene's victory, it does not reflect well on either his party or the primary voters in the state. If the machines are really the issue, it would suggest that the South Carolina State Democratic Party is not on its game. In fact they have issued a press statement that there is nothing wrong with their machines. The press release shows a low-level war within the party ranks. The national guys are crying "foul!" As a result, they are throwing their own state party under the bus, by claiming incompetence in their selection of equipment.

Perhaps the most salient point the South Carolina contest is showing us is that modern US politics has recently reverted to the level of our eighth grade class presidential races. Popularity, popularity, popularity was the only thing that mattered back then. The races were nothing more than popularity campaigns. Today, we would say name recognition is the only thing that matters, unless a candidate has earned the reputation of being corrupt or ineffective.

Further, the fact that an unemployed veteran got more votes than a former judge and four-time member of the South Carolina legislature makes a statement about the candidate (Vic Rawl). Even if a large number of machines were rigged, what is it about Rawl that caused some people to vote for a gospel singer who does not even live in the state.

Could a movie star (like Kiefer Sutherland) move to your city and just appear on the ballot and steal your party's full support from a candidate they have known for 20 years? If the answer is yes, then the candidate would have failed to earn true trust and respect from the voters. In reality, the landslide vote in South Carolina infers that the candidate, Vic Rawl, is probably in real trouble.

In the movie "The Distinguished Gentleman," Eddie Murphy's motive was to receive easy endorsements and lobby money. But when Murphy's character got to Washington, he realized that the system was even more corrupt than he was. As a result, Murphy decided to change his ways and to advocate for the rights of the people. He realized that the people of the nation deserved better representation than they were getting.

People all over the nation are having the same epiphany that Murphy did in "The Distinguished Gentleman." There are painful reminders of the corruption and lack of true public service existent in our political system - race by race, region by region, and party by party.

Americans of both parties and independents are vowing to be more vigilant in this election cycle than ever before. We need the right people in our elected positions. We need our officials to live up to the title - Distinguished Gentleman or Gentlewoman.