

CONCORD BRIDGE

December 2003 Volume II, Issue 4

A tale of two Americas
It was the best of times; it was the worst of times

JEFFREY FOWLER

“The South is not much different from other areas of the nation with regard to its racial or gender politics.”

If one is to believe this nation’s press, a revolution is underway in Louisiana, one of the most Southern of the Southern states. There, on November 15, for the first time in state history, a governor was elected who is not male and not white. The contenders in this historic race were Republican Piyush Jindal and Democrat Kathleen Babineaux Blanco. The first is a male of Indian origin; the second a Caucasian female. Yet, the story feels tired, as if it has been run before. And, indeed, it has. Far from being an aberration in a region traditionally seen as the greatest bastion of conservatism in the United States, this race is simply another refutation of the countless stereotypes of the ‘backward’ South hell-bent on resisting the ‘modern’ United States at large. The South, in fact, is not much different from other areas of the nation with regard to its racial or gender politics, a fact that has been illuminated by this campaign and that will sadly, but surely, be forgotten quickly after the spotlight has been removed and Blanco is settled in the governor’s mansion. History, it seems, must repeat itself.

Louisiana, like other states in this country, has had its share of embarrassing, and even scarring, moments. It was not many years ago that the state almost chose David Duke to fill the post that will now be filled by an individual who, needless to say, bears few similarities to the former Ku Klux Klan leader. Measured against this sad time in state history, the election of November 15 did mark a positive statewide progression and, in this capacity, should be applauded as beginning a new chapter in state history. However, of the articles that have been written addressing the racial and ethnic identities of the candidates involved in the campaign, few have attempted to circumscribe the uniqueness of the election within this specific, historical background. Instead, these articles have tended to make broad, sweeping statements about the arrival of a New South and of the shock that should be felt by anyone with any knowledge of Southern politics at the election of any politician who is not white and male. These statements refer to stereotypes of the South that are not only inaccurate in the current day, but have never been more applicable to the South than to other regions of the country. For example, no Jew has ever served in a higher governmental capacity within the territory of the current United States of America than Judah P. Benjamin, who served in three different capacities – including Secretary of State – in the Confederate cabinet under Jefferson Davis. It was the United States of America that expelled Jews from parts of the South controlled by Union armies during the Civil War, an order only rescinded by President Abraham Lincoln. It was the South who elected the nation’s first black governor, Douglas Wilder of Virginia (1990-1994).

It must be acknowledged that Louisiana, like the South, and like the rest of the country, has had a troubled racial history and has often been slow, rather than quick, in granting women the rights that they unquestionably deserve. Yet, when a woman is elected Senator of New York, as

Hillary Clinton was, or when a black man is elected Mayor of Denver, as in the case of Wellington Webb, nobody suggests that the Northeast or the Midwest is undergoing some cataclysmic change. These developments are considered part of the normal political process that, when facilitated correctly, identifies and selects the person best able to meet the needs and demands of the people, regardless of racial, ethnic or gender identity.

Such is the process Louisiana recently underwent. The citizens of Louisiana, like any other rational polity, examined the candidates presented to them and selected the two who best resembled their idea of who the leader of their state should be. They then compared Jindal and Blanco and decided that the latter was best suited to lead the state. To extol this decision as remarkable because of where it was taken and who participated in it is to denigrate that place and those people as somehow inferior and striving towards an ideal which has been imposed upon them and which they have been too slow to adopt, although in reality it is an ideal intrinsic to their culture. This attitude presupposes that those judging these 'backward' people have already realized that ideal and thus have the authority to judge, which they do not. The United States would do well to remember that it has sinned and succeeded as a nation, and that the failures of one portion and the successes of another are just as indicative of the state of the rest of the nation as they are of the region or state in which they occurred. Regardless of which candidate was elected governor of Louisiana, no new revolution would have occurred; this election simply marks yet another event in the ongoing revolution that is American republicanism, a process that makes it possible for a woman and an Indian to run for office. It is the creation of this possibility that should stand out in the national consciousness as remarkable. Whatever happens after this possibility has been brought into existence is neither new nor special - it is American.