

Dollars trump sense

by *Dave Featherly*

Republicans again worship at the altar of "It's your turn"

In 1996, Republicans had a golden opportunity to defeat Bill Clinton in his bid for a second term. But, as had become the Republicans practice, Bob Dole was served up to Clinton for defeat because, "it was his turn."

This year, Republicans generally didn't think they'd have much chance of retaining the White House, after eight years of mayhem and mischief under George the Younger, so it was easy to serve up John McCain. It was, after all, "his turn."

In 1988, it was Pete Simpson's "turn." In 2002, it was Eli Bebout's "turn" here in Wyoming. In 2006, after bringing in the Republican Blowtorch to take down Ray Hunkins four years earlier, the same Party insiders came around to thinking the 2006 election was Ray's "turn."

This year, for the U.S. House seat being vacated by Barbara Cubin after 14 unspectacular years, it was "the turn" of Cynthia Lummis.

The only career politician in the primary, Lummis overcame the \$1.2 million spent by Mark Gordon because it was "her turn." The Wyoming Republican Party doesn't amount to a pitcher of warm spit but Republican voters followed the national practice of rewarding party loyalty and service. When it's "your turn" by golly, it's "your turn." 2008 was Cynthia's "turn."

Apprenticeship in politics may have some merit but when Republicans practice it, it invariably leads to defeat.

Will 2008 be any different?

As many who regularly read the Cheyenne Herald know, I served as campaign manager for the Winney for Congress '08 campaign. I have come to know Bill Winney very well over the past two-plus years and my respect for him has grown over that time. As one would expect, his intelligence is high - he rose to the rank of Navy Captain and commanded a nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine. The respect expressed by his peers for Bill was exceptional.

This past Tuesday night, I was greatly disappointed by the outcome of the primary election for Congress. Bill ran against three opponents - Cynthia Lummis, Mark Gordon and Dr. Michael Holland. If only voters had come to know the candidate Bill Winney, the outcome might have been different. But, voter apathy remains high and voter turnout in this election proved that Wyoming voters simply won't be bothered with learning issues or personalities. Name familiarity or other false attributes of a candidate can often carry the day. Witness the six (counting Jack Spiker as an incumbent, even though it's as mayor, not city council) city council incumbents in Tuesday's election. Incumbents finished one-two, one-two, and one-two in every ward in spite of the WT-E efforts in Ward 1

and in spite of the recent voter rejection of the council's pet project, a rec center.

I haven't bothered to take the time yet, but I would bet that no incumbent in the state was defeated in the primary election - except Jack Knudson here in Cheyenne. It very seldom happens.

Name recognition and family ties are more important to voters than competence. How many think Cynthia Wiederspahn would have won on Tuesday? Doran's family name was as important to Cynthia as Larry Birleffi's was for Lynn when she ran for mayor back in 1988. How far do you think Hillary Rodham would have gotten this year?

Hell, we even had a candidate on the ballot in Laramie County who did not run using his legal name as is required to file for office.

The primary for U.S. House began last November 2 when Bill Winney filed a second time to challenge Barbara Cubin. No serious challenger had come forward, just Bill. In 2006, he garnered 40% of the statewide vote and won in Laramie and Teton counties, and nearly tied Cubin in Natrona County. No one but Bill had the courage to try to replace the entrenched but discredited incumbent - **UNTIL SHE CHOSE NOT TO SEEK RE-ELECTION!** Then, the courage juices began to flow and Cynthia Lummis and Mark Gordon decided to seek the soon-to-be open Cubin seat.

Almost as soon as the campaign began, a tip came to the Cheyenne Herald that Mark Gordon had a long history of donating to Democratic candidates, the national Democratic Party, and to the Sierra Club, a liberal cause linked to the Democratic Party. I first mentioned his support for the other party on February 14, 2008 and then expanded on the story with specifics on April 15, 2008.

Cynthia Lummis eventually picked up on those disclosures from the Cheyenne Herald and made them a focal point of her successful run for the nomination during heavy broadcast advertising in the final two weeks of the campaign.

Mark Gordon had conducted himself like Eddie Haskell all during the campaign, **UNTIL THE FINAL TWO WEEKS.** He then decided to become Triumph, the Insult Dog, and his chances evaporated in the August heat of the final 14 days. He spent more money on his pursuit for the \$170,000 a year job than all other non-incumbent candidates for Wyoming's U.S. House seat have spent since 1994 - **COMBINED!** His ambition could not overcome his record, however.

His financial support for Bob Shuster, Mike Sullivan, Kathy Karpan, Ted Ladd, John Kerry and even Gary Trauner simply could not be explained to Wyoming Republican voters satisfaction.

I did not lose a political campaign in which I had played a major role from 1993-2004. In northern Wisconsin (run from a distance) and here in Cheyenne,

I had compiled up a 14-0 record. I had run a successful referendum for a new K-12 school in my hometown, replaced all five members of that school board and had a direct and active role in campaigns here for city council and mayor.

Since the general election of 2004, I have gone 0-3. I can attest that it is much more enjoyable to win than to lose.

After the August 19th primary, I reflected on what had happened. What caused the resounding rejection of the best candidate - in my mind, at least? Could we have done better and was there any way we could have won this election - under the money constraints and other conditions that existed?

I will share with readers some of what I offered to Bill Winney about this election. Much of it, of course, I did not fully realize during the campaign but, in hindsight, came to believe as a result of that loss. What follows is most of the debriefing I did with Bill Winney the day after the loss:

1.) I think we seriously underestimated the "anti" Barbara Cubin vote from '06. Two things lead me to that conclusion - after this primary. First, how well the unknown Gary Trauner did against Cubin in the '06 general election. I think the primary results showed Cubin's vulnerability and Trauner confirmed it in the general. I don't think he will do as well this time around - even with a weak candidate like Cynthia Lummis as an opponent. Second, the results in Laramie County. One might argue that we didn't "sell" you well enough around the state but that wasn't the case in Laramie County. A majority of the voters filled in the oval by your name two years earlier and we continued the pitch for you for months leading up to this election. They knew about you but still chose her.

2.) I think we underestimated the advantage of being a native. Wyoming is a decade behind the nation in almost every important measurement and some of that is because we refuse to change. Cynthia and Mark are "natives" and you're not. You were never a Wyoming rodeo queen or serve in the Legislature or in state office like Cynthia nor chair a state agency as Mark Gordon had.

3.) I think your qualifications may have in some ways intimidated voters. They may be more comfortable with "one of us" - meaning someone who has stayed at home - a home provided by parents and/or grandparents - all their lives. No military, no working out of state. Cynthia's only education is within Wyoming. You are a world traveler and that may have made people a little uncomfortable instead of proving your credentials.

Being a Navy Captain with years in the Pentagon evidently wasn't as comfortable to voters as wearing Wranglers and being shown sitting on a bale of hay or wearing a borrowed cowboy hat.

4.) Wyoming voters may have come to regard this as our "woman's seat." Employers in the state do not pay women anywhere near on par with men and this office may serve to assuage guilt over that inequity. The gender advantage I was prepared for. The "right" of a woman to hold this seat after Barbara Cubin had it for 14 years may be shown in more subtle ways. To Republicans who own businesses and have employees, it was easier pay than higher wages that would come out of their pockets and profits.

5.) The money. When we discussed your campaign and I said I thought \$150,000 could do the job, neither of us had any idea that someone would enter the race and spend \$1.2 million, mostly his own money, to try to buy the seat. Even the half million dollars Cynthia will have spent is astronomical by any previous standard. Our media buy got us 50 good TV spots, mostly late night news programming. Mark's \$270,000 should have bought him 2,500-3,000 total spots of mixed network and cable placement. Cynthia's \$107,000 should have bought her around 1,000 or so.

6.) The behind-the-scenes machinations of Republican Party "insiders." It is apparent that the Party faithful delivered for Cynthia. She is more "one of them" than you are preceived to be. To them, she has paid her dues. The "insider" votes don't add up to many but votes of people close to them would add up.

7.) The media's early portrayal of this as a two-person race. Once they decided that, coverage for weeks reflected that biased sentiment. Without you being treated as an equal, voters reached the conclusion that the race was between only Cynthia Lummis and Mark Gordon. Their own late attack advertising also marginalized your candidacy.

It was a pleasure to have worked on the Winney for Congress '08 campaign. Bill worked as hard as any candidate ever has statewide. He was exhausted by August 19th. He went virtually everywhere he was invited and met as many voters as he could. Unfortunately, voters who pull the lever or fill in the oval on election day often know little about candidates or the issues. Voters choose their candidate(s) for varying reasons. Often it has nothing to do with a candidate's competence or positions.

Cynthia Lummis was chosen for reasons we may never fully understand. But, she was chosen. Can she withstand the brutal onslaught expected from the Democratic National Committee - a group that wants desperately to take "Cheney's seat" from the Republicans?