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Ronnie, Mel the Minstrel, 'racism': GOP wins sparring match on points

Why, I asked myself, did not Sen. Ashcroft give a better reason for wanting to keep Ronnie White off the federal bench?

Why did he harp on White's death penalty dissents on the Missouri Supreme Court, a weak reed to lean on, especially after the Missouri Democratic Party produced analyses showing White's record was not much different from those of Ashcroft appointees?

The answer, Republican operatives (though not Ashcroft operatives) said, was that it was "a political decision"; it jibed with the soft-on-crime theme Ashcroft would use, taking advantage of Gov. Carnahan's whimsical commutation of the execution of Darrell Mease because the pope asked him to.

Whether it was blind luck or wily Realpolitik, the Ashcroft gambit worked serendipitously.

Democrats took advantage of the flimsy "soft on the death penalty" argument by trumpeting that the real reason was Ashcroft's unmitigated bigotry. Hey, they said, last year, in a magazine interview, he spoke respectfully of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. He is against racial quotas for jobs and contracts.

Then, then—the leaked photograph from the Rolla Daily News showing Mel with blacked face and exaggerated white eyes and lips, taking part in a minstrel show in 1960.

John Hancock, Republican State Party executive director, is a ragtime historian and musician. He denounced minstrel shows as mockery of African-Americans, suggested Carnahan was at the least a hypocrite, and

made page 1 of the Post-Dispatch.

Carnahan was instantly and, one believes, sincerely contrite. But he 1) intimated that the 1960 show was the last put on by the Rolla Kiwanis Club because he and his family got them stopped and 2) did not call Ashcroft a racist but said there might be racial overtones and in any case did not contradict allies who called Ashcroft a racist.

The upshot:

- The Republicans came up with photos from similar shows, with Carnahan participating, in the two subsequent years. This kept the story alive for a couple of more news cycles.

- Carnahan did not come across as a racist (and he is not one) — but his persona as avuncular, dignified and pleasantly boring suffered greatly.

- Many people, including Republicans, said, Hey, it happened almost four decades ago! Get a life! Some criticized Hancock. Those critics saw the tactic but did not comprehend the strategy: the incident put Carnahan on the defensive. It made it harder for him or other Democrats to

play the race card against Ashcroft.

Actually, Ashcroft was not only not racist, but his using the weak death penalty argument against White was a recognition that the media will not allow a black to be criticized factually (Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Willie Horton.)

Ashcroft could easily have pointed out that White as a legislator broke his word blithely and as a judge wrote intemperate and unscholarly opinions. The Post-Dispatch wrote editorially a few years ago that one of his opinions, bordered on vituperation; now it demands that a vituperative man be placed on the federal bench for life.



—Columbia Daily Tribune

DOES AN OVERRIDING ISSUE OVERRIDE PARTY LABELS IN A CONFUSING RACE?

Loretto Wagner signed a fundraising letter for Ted House, a Democrat running for Congress in the 2nd District.

Mrs. Wagner is a former president of Missouri Right to Life. Sen House is an indefatigable opponent of abortion; he was the Senate handler of a bill outlawing partial-birth abortion that the General Assembly enacted over the Democratic governor's veto.

Mrs. Wagner was also a delegate to the last three Republican national conventions; a son, Raymond, held high posts during Republican John Ashcroft's gubernatorial years; and his wife, Ann, is Republican state chairman.

Mrs. Wagner signed a letter seeking funds for Barbara Cooper, one of the six Republicans running for the seat Jim Talent is vacating, but that has not quenched criticism from some Republicans, most if not all of them pro-lifers.

The incident raises the question: How does a public figure reconcile principle and party when they conflict or, as in this case, overlap?

"It's awfully difficult," said Rep. Gary Burton, R-Carl Junction, an influential pro-lifer who added: "I would not condemn her." He said it is better to have a member of the majority party, currently the Democrats, sponsor a controversial bill.

"Abortion is not a partisan issue," said Pam Manning of St. Louis, president-elect of Missouri Right to Life. "If there is a legislative solution to abortion on demand, it will not be found in either party alone."

She said the debate about partial-birth abortions "has made people more aware of the unborn baby's humanity." That is reflected in legislative attitudes and in the abortion rate, with fewer young women choosing abortion, she said.

House acknowledges that most statewide Democratic candidates "feel they have to be pro-choice" to get through the primary and hopes that will change. He said he aspires to be a Blue Dog Democrat, referring to a congressional caucus whose members lean conservative. Even though Bill Clinton and Mel Carnahan support abortion, he said, "the issue must never become partisan; it transcends party lines."

Samuel Lee, director of Campaign Life Missouri, is grateful for the national GOP's commitment but said that without pro-life Democrats, that commitment might weaken. There might be an attitude of "you've got to give us some slack, you have nowhere else to go," he said.

After the letter Mrs. Wagner and others had signed became known, Martin Duggan, a Republican who was editorial page editor of the defunct Globe-Democrat, protested that any Democrat would have to vote for pro-abortion Richard Gephardt for speaker of the House.

"Short term, he's got a point, but it's

flawed over the longer term," said Lee. "Political change flows from people's hearts. This should be a human rights issue; making it a 'wedge' issue cheapens it."

To Mrs. Wagner, mention of Gephardt is painful. She campaigned for him before he flip-flopped.

"Putting all your eggs in one basket is risky," she told me.

The 2nd District tilts Republican and pro-life, but there are pro-choicers in both parties. One may spin a scenario giving victory to any of the present candidates or someone who has not yet announced.

MEL PRAISES JET BANKS FULSOMELY AS DEMOCRATS SIGH WITH RELIEF

Gov. Carnahan and the Post-Dispatch editorial page agree on about everything; they both are for abortion, gun control, gay rights and tax increases; but they had opposite valedictories of of J.B. "Jet" Banks.

Said Carnahan, through a spokesman, after Banks - who had pled guilty to a felony charge of tax evasion - resigned his Senate seat December 15: "...Missouri is losing a fine public servant who dedicated his life to improving the lives of others."

A P-D editorial said he was "a dishonest politician who did a modicum of good before he finally got caught." It said "Banks' weak suit was integrity." It called him "corrupt".

Despite the governor's accolade, Democrats were relieved that Jet was leaving quietly. Even after sentencing he might have tried to hang on, because evidently only a legislative body may judge a member's suitability. Republicans would have introduced a resolution to boot him, putting Demo senators on the spot.

During the first part of the session there will be a 17-17 partisan tie, but so what? Lt. Gov. Roger Wilson could break any ties, and it is rare that major legislation is voted on early anyhow.

Banks's immediate successor will be elected at a special election March 7. That means the successor will be picked by a Democratic committee before then.

Rep. Paula Carter was seeking the nomination, as was Steve Chalmers, St. Louis chief of parking enforcement. Rep. Ronnie Auer was an aspirant, but withdrew and threw his support to Mrs. Carter.

Some years back, I was moseying down a Capitol corridor and saw a man enter an office.

He gave his name to the secretary and said, "I'd like to see Mr. Banks, please."

From an inner office there was a roar, a man shouting: "There ain't no Mister Banks here, there is a Senator Banks." The man departed.

J.B. "Jet" Banks was demanding respect and imparting fear, as was his practice. Banks, who was in his sixth term when he resigned, was from 1989 to 1996 majority

floor leader, the second most important post in the Senate.

Until the last year or two, when illness and perhaps worry about his legal woes tempered him, Banks was often a bully in Senate debate; he was flamboyant, changing color-coordinated costumes hourly on a session's last day; he filibustered anti-abortion bills by mumbling from the Bible for hours.

He had much influence, partly because he had a reputation for keeping his word to colleagues. Fellow senators excused his pugnacity because he had bootstrapped his way up from poverty in the Bootheel, the son of an illiterate sharecropper.

His rise did not occur without inspiring whispers and more.

In 1972, he defeated by 23 votes an incumbent ward committeeman who thereupon alleged fraud at the polls. The man was shot to death. Police questioned Banks, among others, but nobody was charged.

In 1969 then Atty. Gen. John Danforth filed a quo warranto writ, trying to oust Banks from his House seat because he was living not in his seedy north St. Louis district but in Richmond Heights. The evidence was overwhelming; in fact, it was uncontradicted even by Banks; but the Supreme Court said the constitution provides that only a legislative chamber may judge its members' qualifications.

In 1983 a credit union the senator controlled was put into receivership. A sidelight was that he used his taxpayer-paid newsletter to promote it.

More than a decade ago, an investigation of an airport limousine company Banks was running looked like it might bring him down, but it didn't.

He influenced promotions and assignments on the police force. Carnahan appointed his wife's goddaughter to the Board of Police Commissioners.

NEW BOOK WITH 724 BIOGRAPHIES HAS POLITICIANS OF YEARS PAST

Once in a while, late at night, the late Sen. Richard Webster would roam silent Capitol corridors, pausing to contemplate portraits of long-ago legislators, and sometimes I tagged along.

The Carthage Republican would ruminate about controversies and issues and politicians known by most people dimly or not at all. "How soon they forget," he would say wryly, drawing on a cigarette.

But he knew, and his anecdotes formed a montage of Missouri history.

I have something of the same feeling when reading "Dictionary of Missouri Biography," just published by the University of Missouri Press, that has 724 biographies. It was edited by the state archivist, Kenneth Winn, and three history professors, Lawrence Christensen of MU-Rolla, William Foley of Central Missouri State and Gary Kremer of William Woods.

It is a reference work that invites browsing. Did you know that Satchell Paige,

the famous Negro Leagues pitcher, ran for state representative and lost? (In the 1968 Democratic primary, the winner being the later-murdered Leon Jordan, a founder of the still-active Freedom Inc.) Or that painter George Caleb Bingham opposed secession (he was a Union officer), but approved of slavery?

All governors and U.S. senators are profiled, as long as they, like other subjects, were dead by Jan. 1, 1994, and other politicians are included. To someone wanting to understand 2000 voting patterns, some are still pertinent. For example:

- DeVerne Calloway (1916-1993), a black state representative from St. Louis, and her husband, Ernest Abner Calloway, a union leader. During World War II Mrs. Calloway led a protest racial segregation in the Red Cross in India.
- James Pendergast (1856-1911) and Thomas J. Pendergast (1872-1945), brothers and Kansas City political bosses.
- Joseph B. Shannon (1867-1943), leader of the Rabbit faction of Kansas City Democracy and later a congressman.
- O.K. Armstrong (1892-1987), a Republican state representative, congressman and journalist.
- James A. Reed (1861-1944), a U.S. senator who helped keep the U.S. out of the League of Nations.
- Jordan Chambers (1898-1962), who led St. Louis blacks into the Democratic Party.
- Roger T. Sermon (1890-1950), mayor of Independence for 26 years, World War I buddy of Harry Truman, candidate for governor in 1944 (losing in the Democratic primary to Phil Donnelly).
- Annie Baxter (1864-1944), who, 30 years before women were allowed to vote, was elected clerk of the Jasper County Court in 1890.

And Sen. Webster (1922-1990). Every book must contain an error. This one misstates the length of his House tenure that preceded his 28 years in the Senate. Dick would smile. "How soon they forget," he would say.

BILL PEACOCK, 1992 CANDIDATE HERE, RUNNING FOR CONGRESS IN CALIFORNIA

Where Are They Now? Department: Bill Peacock, then a St. Louisan, was one of 14 candidates for the Democratic nomination for U.S. senator in 1992.

The nomination went to Geri Rothman-Serot, who in November lost to Kit Bond.

In '92 Peacock touted his record as a Marine Corps captain in Vietnam and his status as a colonel in the Marine Corps reserve. He had some connections with the St. Louis business community.

Now he is a candidate for Congress in California's 15th District, in the San Jose area. Media have identified him as a "wealthy businessman" and he has put \$500,000 of his own money into the campaign.

The district is currently represented by a Republican, Tom Campbell, who is running for senator.



*You are invited on
New Year's Day*

My blackeyed peas are Y2K compliant!

There is a Southern tradition that eating black-eyed peas on New Year's Day is a prerequisite for good fortune.

For 45 years, I think, I've been trying.

As before, I shall serve blackeyed peas, along with a modest buffet, to all friends and others who show up between noon and 6 PM.

You are invited. Come if you like blackeyed peas, or if you just have nothing better to do. It's an open house, so feel free to bring along your own kin, friends or house guests.

The venue is 800 Washington Street, Jefferson City. If you need directions January 1st, call (573) 635-0901. A Southern battle flag will be flying out front.

JAILHOUSE TAPES ARE BIPARTISAN

A Missouri Supreme Court decision declaring Cole County jail surveillance video tapes to be public documents and thus available to the media centered on tapes of legislators being booked for drunken driving.

One showed Rep. Mark Richardson, a Poplar Bluff Republican, who was polite and cooperative. The other showed former Rep. Phil Tate, a Gallatin Democrat, who was not. Tate is now an official of the Dept. of Economic Development.

Tate, safely in the bureaucracy, suffers no political damage. Richardson should have no trouble being reelected in his House district, but if he decided to run for senator in the 25th District, whose incumbent is Democrat Jerry Howard, he could expect to see snippets of the tape appear in his opponent's TV ads.

POLITICAL PEOPLE

Died Sept. 3: **Robert F. Schlafly**, 83, Ladue, a St. Louis lawyer and civic leader who was a name partner in Armstrong, Teasdale, Schlafly & Davis, now known as Armstrong Teasdale.

Died Sept. 8: **Keith O. Wilson**, 74, Kirkwood, a former teacher and principal in the Wellston school district who from 1984 to 1992 was Democratic committeeman for Bonhomme Twp. He was a delegate to his party's national convention in 1980 and an alternate in 1984. In 1972 he was a Democratic nominee for state representative, losing to the Republican candidate, Robert

O. Snyder. One of his six children is Quentin Wilson, director of the state Dept. of Revenue.

Patricia "Patty" Brous, 55, president of Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri since 1990, died Sept. 24. She started with P.P. in 1974 as a volunteer and in recent years was its spokeswoman in legislative and litigation matters. She was a past president of the Kansas City Junior League and was active in other Kansas City area civic groups.

Died Sept. 14: **Thelma Mowry**, 87, Independence, a Democrat who formerly worked for the Jackson County Election Board and the county treasurer

Michael Walker, a Clay County Family Court commissioner, has resigned, effective Dec. 31. A newspaper reported he was being investigated by the Missouri Commission on Retirement, Removal and Discipline of Judges. His former wife was suing his present wife, a lawyer, for alienation of affection.

Died Sept. 24: **Donald R. Tharp**, 62, Platte City, who was general counsel of the Missouri Division of Insurance from 1982 to 1985. Earlier he was mayor of Platte City and an assistant Platte County prosecutor.

Died Sept. 30: **Betty Fischer-Zumwalt**, 55, who had worked for the Missouri Senate as a secretary and office administrator since 1981. She was a member of the Jefferson Democratic Club of Cole County.

Two of the six new members of the Missouri Academy of Squires have political backgrounds. They are **Richard L. Berkley**, a Republican, a former mayor of Kansas City and currently a member of the Jackson County Sports Authority, and **Frank P. Sebree**, a retired lawyer who is a years-ago member of the Kansas City City Council; he was, if I recall correctly, a Democrat of the anti-machine persuasion.

George K. Conant, 77, a businessman and civic leader, died Sept. 15 at his home in Clayton. His widow is Ellen Conant, a former Republican member of St. Louis County Council.

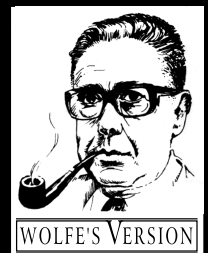
Robert E. Scheetz, 72, who was St. Louis police chief from 1985 to 1991 and a member of the force 41 years, died Nov. 26 at a nursing home in Naples, Fla.

Died Nov. 26: **William Ray Daniel Sr.**, a Springfield lawyer and active Democrat. Mr. Daniel, 83, was his party's Greene County chairman in 1954. He was a World War II veteran, former president of the Greene County Bar Association and former Chamber of Commerce president.

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