



Michigan COMMENTARY

... FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT

by Gerald A. Faverman, Ph.D.

There is a new undercurrent of caution as economic and political uncertainty begins to stir. The public mood grows more difficult to predict, and the body politic is hostage to forthcoming events.

The election campaigns for federal and state office loom ahead. In only 277 days, the key questions of who will be our U.S. senator, who will be our governor, and which party will control the legislative chambers in Lansing will be answered. While the rhetoric, the oratory, and the positioning of the contenders is all very confident, to the careful observer the forthcoming elections have a significant element of uncertainty and unpredictability. The overwhelming consensus currently is that both Sen. Carl Levin and Gov. James Blanchard will win their races and that the Democrats will continue to maintain control of the state House. They also are considered to have a significant opportunity to win control of the state Senate, needing only one more seat there in addition to the foregone capture of the one being vacated by Rep. William Sederburg (R-East Lansing).

It is the accepted wisdom that the contenders just need to follow the script—that this is a “no brainer” election. In Michigan, political change happens gradually, with incumbents almost always winning reelection over challengers. Hence, the current consensus is fully congruent with the reality of history. Observers and analysts have little incentive to take risk against the prevailing opinion. Most likely the consensus will in fact turn out to reflect the results of the November 6 election.

At the campaign's onset, I am constantly asked: “Is the conclusion foregone? Is the result inevitable?” I am tempted to respond: “Yes, the conclusion is certain, the result not in doubt.” However... every keen observer knows that any election can be lost and that Dame Fortune can be fickle. My instincts tell me that these are strange times, replete with unexpected outcomes, where the previous track record may not be a useful predictor of future events.

Is it possible to build a scenario in which a Republican victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat? It is possible to imagine the following: The Republican Party captures the U.S. Senate seat, wins the governorship, thins the Democratic majority in the state House of Representatives, and retains effective control of the state Senate. For such events to occur requires a number of elements:

- President Bush maintains his unprecedentedly high approval ratings;
- the national Democratic Party continues to be divided over race, ideology, and succession;

- international events continue to be volatile and uncertain, contributing to the continued unwillingness of the public to contemplate a change in the Republican national administration;
- a popular and well-liked incumbent president campaigns vigorously and frequently for the state GOP ticket, and particularly for his friend, John Engler;
- notwithstanding the impressive success of Governor Blanchard and his associates in raising significant amounts of money in Michigan, the state GOP is successful in raising large amounts of money from traditional allies, both locally and nationally, creating the opportunity for challengers to have fiscal parity with the Democratic officeholder;
- in the event that a national recession occurs in the next ten months, it does not erode the president's popularity in Michigan;
- if recession strikes Michigan hard, factories close, workers are laid off, and "making it" becomes tougher every day, Republicans are able to place much of the blame for the state's distress on the incumbent administration;
- with the high probability of limited resources and the escalation of fixed costs, the budget document proves to be a source of great disillusionment among powerful special interests vying for new programs and dollars, thus giving Republicans the ability to gain new support by advocating "new priorities";
- despite the electorate's ostensible distaste for negative campaigning, these tactics prove effective in the media style of the 1990s and are deployed effectively and aggressively by the Republican contenders;
- Michigan's extant social divisions of race, creed, class, gender, and geography are exploited in the heat of the campaign, affecting traditionally loyal Democratic constituencies that are becoming frightened by the prospect of a less generous future;
- Republicans continue to use polling and survey research data cleverly to identify weaknesses in the Democratic platform and the public perception of the candidates;
- the validity of public opinion measurement in our state continues to change as citizens grow more suspicious and cynical of government and less willing to speak honestly about their attitudes, thus creating the potential for unexpected political consequences at the polls;
- the image merchants succeed in constructing a more caring, humane persona for John Engler and a more thoughtful and intellectual persona for Bill Schutte, hence stanching their perceived weaknesses;
- sure-footed and astute Republican campaigns set the agenda and present plausible new ideas, programs, and solutions in such a fashion as to persuade the public that they are ready, willing, and able to govern;
- the Democrats, comforted by the prevailing wisdom, surrounded by a sea of sycophancy that is a hallmark of every incumbent administration, and overconfident and arrogant in their use of power and patronage, squander their political advantage.

Harry Truman, in one of the legendary campaigns of the twentieth century, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. Is it possible for Republicans to do the same? Indeed it is. But only if every single element described above works perfectly to the Republican Party's advantage. An improbable scenario? Yes; but in strange times, strange things occur.