

Bobby Jindal, the Republican Strategists and the Last Battle

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Posted: December 2, 2008 10:32 PM

In recent weeks, as part of an uncanny attempt to behave as generals fighting the last war, many in the Republican leadership have been floating Bobby Jindal, the governor of Louisiana, as the next Republican hope, or even the Republican Obama. The thinking behind this, while not particularly sophisticated, is, at least on the surface, easy to understand. Jindal like Obama is well educated, young and has an attractive family.

These are not, however, the main reasons Jindal is so appealing to many in the Republican leadership who are looking for their Obama. Jindal's personal story and ethnic background are the key to his appeal for Republican strategists. Like Obama, Jindal comes from an immigrant family and can trace his roots to somewhere other than northern or western Europe-in Jindal's case, South Asia. Jindal's personal story also shares the elements of hard work and modest origins, which helped make Obama appeal to many.

Jindal is a long way from being the Republican candidate for president, but his nomination would certainly be a major breakthrough for his party. While having two parties that seek to represent all Americans would be good for our democracy, nominating Jindal would only be a small step in this direction for the Republicans. From a strategic angle, Jindal may be a strong Republican candidate in 2012 or 2016, but if he is it will not be due primarily to his ethnic background.

Republican strategists should keep in mind that Obama's race was only a peripheral part of his general election success. Obama's connection with African American voters was essential in his efforts to win the Democratic nomination from a well-known front runner who was thought to have a strong base among African American voters. Had Obama not been able to do this, he probably would not have been able to win the nomination. However, in the general election, being African American had very little direct effect on Obama's victory. Had the race been closer, it is likely that the higher turnout among African American voters would have been decisive, but because the election was not particularly close, the only states where higher than normal turnout among African Americans seemed to make the difference for Obama were, Indiana, North Carolina and Virginia; and Obama would have won the election even without these states.

Clearly, in some critical respects, the Republican Party is misreading the election results if they think the main reason Obama won was because of race. Equally importantly, Jindal's background would play out very differently than Obama's if he were the Republican nominee. First, South Asians are still too few in number to make an impact at the voting booth comparable to African Americans or Latinos, so Jindal would have to appeal to other groups. It is not clear how Jindal would be able to substantially increase Republican numbers among those African American and Latino voters because of his background, although, in fairness, it would be hard to do worse than McCain with these voters.

For Jindal to help the Republican's chances, then, he would need to help them among white voters, a majority of whom already supports the Republican Party. Jindal would have some appeal among the Republican base, but his personal story would be no more compelling among the Republican base than that of Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin or a number of other possible socially conservative candidates.

Essentially, while Jindal will not be able to move a significant number of non-white voters into the Republican column, the Republican hope is that Jindal's presence on the ticket will send a message to swing voters who are largely, but not entirely, white that the Republican party is more diverse than it actually is and thus better attuned to today's America. There is a certain logic to this approach, the problem is that it does not address the more serious problems which the Republican Party, and it ignores the central finding of the 2008 election.

Obama's victory was not just historic because Obama will become our first African American president, but it was also historic because it was a once in a generation defeat of an incumbent party. In this respect, as many have pointed out, the 2008 election looked something like 1932 and 1980, elections which were followed by landslide victories four years later and which ushered in a period of dominance by the Democratic and Republican parties respectively.

The central problem which the Republican Party faces is not that they lack a young, dynamic nonwhite leader but that like the Democrats in 1980 and the Republicans in 1932, they are perceived as having failed and as being out of ideas. In this context, positioning Jindal to run in 2012, based on the notion that he could somehow become a Republican Obama, is more of a gimmick than a serious effort to move the party into the post-Bush era.