

Features



STEPHEN BOATRIGHT

Scenes from the Losing Party

Democrats take America, but not Hamilton County

by Cari Gervin
November 15, 2006

Tuesday, November 7, 2006, 8:48 p.m.

Had Chattanooga ever seen a more exciting Election Day? One of the city's own, Bob Corker, was running for senator and stood a good chance to win. He kept his headquarters in town, and national media swarmed The Chattanooga, location of the night's festivities and presumptive victory party.

The ballroom in the hotel was packed with college-age staffers and volunteers dancing up a storm, pretending not to notice that the live band was playing such chestnuts as "Achy Breaky Heart."

In the hallway, middle-aged women and men exuded an air of wealth as they mingled by the three cash bars and two food stations. Except for four preppy students from UTC, the only black people visibly in attendance were the servers.

This is what Harold Ford, Jr. was up against, at least in Chattanooga. Rich, white people throwing a swanky party with bad country music, and campaign staffers who could afford to walk away from \$10 drinks, leaving them untouched in the swirl of cigar smoke in the Foundry.

9:32 p.m.

Just two blocks away, the Hamilton County Democratic Party was throwing its own, well, party. But the scene at The Chattanooga Choo-Choo could not have been more different. It wasn't just the Christmas decorations already decking the halls, and it wasn't just the racially diverse crowd.

And it wasn't that the televisions were tuned to NBC, MSNBC and CNN, instead of the flat-panels broadcasting Fox and CNN at the Chattanooga.



STEPHEN BOATRIGHT

It wasn't the lack of media, either, the presence of just three reporters and one photographer.

It wasn't even the long, long, long wait at the bar, where two bartenders were trying to fill all the drink orders of over a hundred people crowded around the only place to get a drink, whether you wanted a Coke or a scotch.

It was, simply put, the nervous expressions on everyone's faces.

I imagine, as the night wore on at The Chattanooga, many of the GOP supporters' visages turned grim and a little bleak. I imagine that Thursday afternoon, when news of George Allen's concession in the Virginia senatorial race broke, the HCDP felt nothing but joy.

But on Election Night, near 10 p.m., even as HCDP Chairman Stuart James announced that Ford has gotten 46 percent of the vote in Corker's home base, an attentive observer could see the anxiety behind the cheers.

10:07 p.m.

The tension in the room hadn't bothered Jonia, 4, who wasn't quite sure what her last name was. Holding handfuls of candy, the young black girl with her hair in pigtails seemed to be having the time of her life. When asked, she admitted she had no idea what all the fuss was about.

"It's good!" she exclaimed, shrugging her shoulders.

10:20 p.m.

The crowd had already thinned out noticeably. No longer did one have to wait to get a drink at the bar. The two hundred or so people who remain watch the televisions intently.

While the black female Democratic state legislators Tommie Brown and JoAnne Favors had easily won re-election (and were both in attendance), the crowd was clearly focused on one race only.

Adam Kinsey, son of former Mayor Jon Kinsey, hoped for a Ford victory even though he had grown up with Corker as a family friend. The early returns had him worried, although he wouldn't admit it directly.

"I mean, I think (Ford) will win," Kinsey said. "But if he doesn't, he's in good position to run for governor in four years, I mean, if he stays within 3 percent of Corker."



GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR JAMES

10:35 p.m.

Former Chattanooga City Court Judge Walter Williams was an outspoken opponent of Corker during the campaign, and the fact that all the polling places had closed did nothing to stay his sharp tongue. Swirling a glass of white zinfandel in his hand, the well-dressed Williams made a few unprintable comments before going on the record.

Stephen Boatright

“(Corker is) arrogant, egotistical and not worth a damn, and you can quote me on that,” Williams said.

10:46 p.m.

Former KZ-106 disc jockey Lee Stewart came up to Tennessee to see the UT-LSU game with her son, and she decided to stay through the election, having voted early at her current abode in Florida.

“This is the best party in the city tonight,” Stewart said. “There’s no place else I’d rather be.”

Dressed in a red and black rugby shirt-dress with a skull necklace and black fingernails, Stewart seemed like an older punk rocker who would obviously vote Democratic. Yet she admitted that only the events of the past few years had pushed her votes more liberal.

“This was the first time I’ve ever voted for the party and not the person,” Stewart said.

10:55 p.m.

A loud cheer went up from the remaining 100-plus people still around as Stuart James announced that the Democratic Party had officially been projected to take control of the House of Representatives.

“The House!” one person exclaimed.

“We’ve got the House!” another yelled.

“I think we’ve got the House,” said a middle-aged black man to a friend, turning to him and giving a high-five.

Seconds later, Patrick Kellogg, a young black man wearing a navy blue sweater over a red collared shirt with a tie covered in American flags, started a loud chant.

“We want Ford! We want Ford,” he shouts.

11:04 p.m.

Even though Election Day feels kind of like a holiday and normally lasts late into the night, the fact remains that it is a Tuesday and most people do have to work the next day.

Heidi Bradway and Ansley Steinhich, however, had to go to school.

“I’m hoping that Harold Ford wins,” said Bradway, 12, a seventh-grader at the Center for Creative Arts, who with her pearls and blonde pigtails might be mistaken for a Republican were it not for the baggy Democratic t-shirt over her green ruffled skirt.

“I’m hoping that things change, that the stupid Republicans are gone,” announced CSAS eight-grader Steinhich, 13, who looked like a hipster with her smudged eyeliner and oversized striped sweater until she

smiled and showed off her braces with green rubber bands.

“I dragged my mom along,” Bradway said.

“We have the privilege to be here,” Steinhich stated with authority. “My parents used to be into (politics), but they’re past their prime now.”

Even past their prime, how late would their parents let them stay?

“Until we find out who wins,” Bradway said.

“Or until my mom drags me out kicking and screaming,” Steinhich admitted.

11:21 p.m.

The trickle of returns continued to look ill for Ford, so James announced it was time for a prayer, led by David Strong of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church downtown.

“If we pray by faith, faith can move mountains ... While we’re trying to figure it out, God is already working it out,” intoned Rev. Strong. “Oh God, give us the desires of our hearts tonight. We want a winner tonight!”

“Oh, yes!” chimed in one woman’s voice.

“Yes!” exclaimed another.

11:33 p.m.

Outside the Roosevelt Room, Ford campaign signs have pointed the way to the party all evening. By this point in the night, due to the off-and-on showers, the signs droop like wilted flowers.

12:09 a.m.

The two middle-schoolers, Bradway and Steinhich, scooted on stage when no one was looking and took the microphone.

“We still have faith,” Steinhich said, though no one seems to understand her.

12:17 a.m.

The bar had closed, and maybe 60 people remained, all crowded around one television or another, watching pundits make statements about the next two years in Congress, even though the sound is turned off and no one can hear what they are actually saying.

12:30 a.m.

A man finally reached over and turned the volume up on the television. The Channel 12 reporter and her videographer started packing up their equipment.

12:32 a.m.

James slowly walked on stage. Someone turned the television volume back down.

Visibly emotional, James announced that he received a phone call from Ford's campaign manager. Within the next half-hour, Ford would concede the race.

"It's over?" people began to mutter. "It's really over?"

With his eyes watering, James tried to continue.

"In all the elections I've been involved with, I've never cried," James said. "But the better man lost tonight, he really did."

The crowd applauded slightly. A few people started to cry along with James. Everyone else sat in silence, stunned.

"It's over," someone finally stated.

12:44 a.m.

Only around 30 people have stayed after James' announcement, hoping against hope that more returns will come in, that Ford will pull out a victory.

"He's going to concede? Nah, never!" said Kellogg, who started the cheers earlier. "You know what I think? Bullshit, that's what I think."

1:16 a.m.

Back at The Chattanooga, the antsy crowd jumped up and down, waving American flags and Corker signs, when the projection screens switched from "Wamp for Congress" to Ford's speech. He conceded with maturity and grace, although he refers to Corker simply as "my opponent" and not by name.

But the crowd here is anything but gracious. Just listening to its nasty comments would make one want to vote against Corker. (For the record, I couldn't vote for either candidate because I live in Georgia.)

In my notes, I wrote "dunno how Corker's speech can be better." And it wasn't.

Confetti and country music rained on the crowd after Corker hugged what seemed like every Republican in Tennessee.

1:44 a.m.

“There’s no yawning in politics,” I hear one staffer joke to another as I walked out of the ballroom.

2:43 a.m.

Sitting at the City Café, trying to stop working, I ended up in conversation with two Corker staffers from Knoxville. They introduce me to the second black Republican I’ve met all night. He is wearing a sharp suit, smoking a cigar, and reminds me a bit of Sammy Davis Jr. Oh, and he’s from Las Vegas. He’s friends with a slick, oily man who claims to have been friends with Corker since way back when.

Someone announces that despite Corker’s win, it looks like the Democrats will take the Senate.

“If the Democrats take the Senate, this country will be blown up in three years,” predicted the friend of Corker’s.

The man from Las Vegas leaned over to me.

“I don’t care which one you pick,” he said while gesturing to the two young staffers. “Just as long as I get to watch.”

I excused myself and fled, wondering if any Republicans were clueless enough to not really understand why they might have lost every state except Tennessee.

Thursday, November 9, 2006, 3:14 p.m.

Former Gov. George Allen has officially conceded his race for the Senate in Virginia. While a few House races are still too close to call, the results won’t matter — for the first time since the year of the “Contract With America,” 1994, the Democrats have control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

I called my mother (also a Georgia voter) to tell her the news.

“Poor Ford,” she said. “He was the only one that didn’t win. I feel really bad for him.”

Turn out the lights, this party’s over

Defeated candidates leave spotlight on hopeful note

Now that all the shouting has ended for this election season, attention turns to the winners. But what about those who put up a valiant fight and came up short in the attempt?

While Democrats made strides nationwide in taking control of both chambers of Congress, their Chattanooga-area counterparts mostly fell short of the mark.