

A rising star will counter Bush

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

When President Bush delivers his final State of the Union message next week, the Democratic response will be spoken by Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

Minus the dramatic setting of a packed congressional chamber, an opposing party's share of the evening's programming usually draws scant attention. I urge everyone to stick around for this one. Gov. Sebelius is one of the rising stars in the U.S. political firmament. Hers could well be a call to arms for Americans of all political coloration after a two-term presidency that's widely perceived a failure.

One would hardly look to "red" Kansas for such a summons. But Kathleen Sebelius defies everything we've been led to believe about the Sunflower State. The daughter of an Ohio Democrat with whom I served in Congress, she's married to U.S. Magistrate Judge Gary Sebelius, son of yet another congressman, the late Republican Keith Sebelius, who represented the wheat farmers of western Kansas.

I'm not sure their romance would have blossomed in more recent times, as the two parties have inched ever further apart. But there it is in the Kansas statehouse - a domestic union surely as noteworthy as Shakespeare's Capulets and Montagues. While rearing two sons, moreover, this "Juliet" lost no time climbing the elective ladder. She first won two terms in the Legislature. After that came two successful elections to state insurance commissioner - a post fraught with political peril. And now, despite the GOP's best efforts to take out a number of Democratic governors, Kathleen Sebelius is safely ensconced in her second term.

With her father, ex-Congressman and former Ohio Gov. John J. Gilligan, Kathleen Sebelius comprises America's first father-daughter team of governors. She's featured, with an elegant photo, in the February issue of *Vogue* magazine.

One would suppose that any Kansas governor had long since adjusted his or her ideological outlook to the prevailing views in a state whose Republican intensity ranks close to Utah's. But no - this governor constantly gives voters a hint of liberal blue. She recently vetoed a concealed weapons bill that had passed her Legislature overwhelmingly.

It was interesting to learn that the party's invitation to deliver the response to Bush conveyed no hints as to what she should say. Another good sign: John F. Kennedy's vaunted speech-writer, Ted Sorenson, called to offer help, if asked.

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Obituaries are a necessary adjunct in any newspaper. But they seldom make spritely reading. The essential dates are there, and lifetime achievements noted. But not often the surprise career twists that the deceased's friends may fondly remember.

Thus it was with Houston Fluornoy. A two-term Republican California state controller who came within a few votes of wresting the governorship from Jerry Brown in 1974, Fluornoy had served as controller after six years in the Legislature.

Understandably missing from the death notice was a reference to one of the most unusual advances anyone's political career has taken in all our history.

The year was 1966, and California was on the eve of its legal deadline for taking out nominating papers for a half-dozen statewide offices. Two-term Gov. Pat Brown headed the Democratic ticket, opposed by a well-liked actor, Ronald Reagan - a man without previous public office, and seemingly a doubtful pull for the rest of a Republican ticket. Notably, no one had yet filed to oppose the well-entrenched Democratic controller, Alan Cranston.

This upset many GOP legislators. A handful of the party's young Turks had gathered that night for a poker game at the old Senator Hotel, across the street from the Capitol. As the evening wore on, conversation returned again and again to the disgust all of them felt at the thought of allowing Cranston a free ride.

Either weary from his day's labors or perhaps because he had quaffed one too many (and it hardly matters which), Fluornoy drifted off to sleep on a hotel sofa. With that filing deadline inching closer by the hour, his poker pals continued haggling over finding an opponent for Cranston.

Then it happened. One of them pointed to the peacefully dormant Houston Fluornoy, asking: "What about him?"

A surprised Fluornoy awoke to find himself the choice of applauding colleagues to wage political war against the "unbeatable" Alan Cranston. Legislative staffers were sent scurrying next morning to obtain the needed Republican signatures to qualify him for the ballot. And the rest, as one often hears it said, is history. Ronald Reagan proved a far more potent draw than expected. His big win over Gov. Brown pulled Fluornoy to victory, installing the "sleeper" candidate for two successful terms as controller. And the guy came within 3 percentage points of snatching the governor's office in 1974.

Ah, memories that bless and burn.

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