

Dare we hope???

From *The American Spectator*:

Should Congress Have a Cao?

By Quin Hillyer
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Sit down and make yourself comfortable, because this is one of those stories you just won't want to miss. It's the kind of story for which this poor pen might not do justice. And it's the kind of story of which the world of politics needs more examples.

It's a story that effectively starts three days before the fall of Saigon in 1975, when eight-year-old Joseph Cao escaped South Vietnam with a brother and sister and eventually made his way to the United States, where he settled with an uncle. As the story continues today, Cao is the Republican nominee for Congress from Louisiana's Second Congressional District (mostly New Orleans), running against William "Cold Cash" Jefferson -- also known as "Dollar Bill" -- who for years has been fighting multiple-count bribery-related indictments after federal agents in 2005 caught nefarious activities on tape and then found \$90,000 from the taped transaction hidden in his refrigerator freezer.

Because the congressional primaries were delayed by Hurricane Gustav, the general election was pushed back to Saturday, December 6.

But before you read about the congressional campaign, you'll want to know about what happened between Saigon and today.

What happened first was that Cao's father, a South Vietnamese military officer, was sent to a Viet Cong "re-education camp" for six years. That's why his children had to escape Vietnam without him. As a certain recent presidential candidate could tell you, a Viet Cong camp is not a place where one is treated well.

Anyway, Cao settled in Indiana for four years, then resettled in Houston for high school, then earned a B.S. in physics in 1990 from Baylor University. Baylor is a Baptist university. But upon graduation, Cao joined the Jesuit order. For six years he remained a Jesuit -- novice, scholastic, regent -- while earning a graduate degree in philosophy from Fordham University, several times doing social (anti-poverty) work abroad (including in his native Vietnam) and then teaching philosophy at Loyola University of New Orleans.

But he was never ordained a priest. He had become interested in politics, and "religion and politics don't mix," he told me. Cao continued teaching philosophy at Loyola while attending Loyola's law school. (From physics to religion to philosophy to law -- quite the intellectual journey.) Along the line he married, and eventually fathered two children. He found that New Orleans East had a vibrant Vietnamese expatriate community boasting a nursery run by Vietnamese nuns and an active church. He set up a shingle as general-practice attorney. He was appointed in 2001 to the National Advisory Council for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

He became a board member of a charter school, and a board member for a community development corporation that runs a medical clinic, a retirement center, and an urban farm.

Meanwhile, he and his father, who was eventually released to the United States in 1991 and eventually wheelchair-bound, both greatly admired a U.S. senator named John McCain, whose service to both their native country and their adopted country had been so valiant – and so similar, in so many ways, to that of Cao's father. He supported McCain strongly in his race for president in 2000 -- and again in 2007-2008, when he was one of McCain's earliest Louisiana backers and eventually a national convention delegate pledged to the senator.

But along the way, there came two little hurricanes. Or maybe not so little. Katrina in 2005 left eight feet of water in Cao's house (in an area mostly home to commercial fishermen, a few miles east of where most of his fellow Vietnamese expats lived), and effectively wiped out the Vietnamese community. "We lost everything," he said, simply.

Local businessman Fenn French, a Republican stalwart whose family has been in New Orleans (and Mardi Gras "royalty") for generations, takes up the story. New Orleans East, he rightly notes, is one of the most unprotected parts of the whole metro area. It was utterly destroyed. "But," he says in enthusiastic admiration, "the Vietnamese community was the very first to stand up its neighborhood again, and they did it without government assistance."

Cao -- short, slight, soft-spoken, and described by French as "one of these good-hearted, salt-of-the-Earth guys" -- was a leader in that effort. After brief sojourns in Baton Rouge, in a nearby town called Westwego, and then in a rental home back in New Orleans East, Cao's own family rebuilt as well.

"It's peaceful out there [where he lives]," Cao told me. "The people are extremely nice, and it's a close-knit community."

IN 2007 CAO MUSTERED the gumption to run for a state legislative seat. He carried the New Orleans part of his legislative district, but he was swamped in the portions that crossed into neighboring St. Bernard Parish, and he thus missed getting into a runoff by a mere 250 votes.

Undaunted, Cao looked at the developing scandal around Rep. Jefferson, and his background in philosophy kicked in. Forget the 66% to 11% (23% "other") Democrat-to-Republican edge in the Second District. Forget the 62% black voter registration (Jefferson is black). "Clearly," said Cao campaign treasurer Murray Nelson, himself the loser last year of a state legislative race and recently the statewide executive director of McCain's Louisiana campaign, "this is a real David going up against a Goliath, but he's a guy who actually taught ethics going against a guy facing multiple indictments. I think he's just offended [by Jefferson's ethics], and he's doing this race for the right reasons, not for himself."

"I want to bring reform back to the Second District," Cao told me. Again, simple as that.

First, though, there was the little matter of meeting his hero McCain in mid-summer and telling his hero about his father's admiration for the senator, and then the Republican National Convention where he could cast his official vote for McCain's nomination. His plane ticket for Minnesota was all lined up -- and then Hurricane Gustav bore down on the Louisiana coast.

Cao had seen that movie before. So Cao forgot the plane ticket. He packed up his wife and two children -- they were not intending to go to the convention -- in the car and drove them all up to Minnesota. Good thing he did. Gustav swung a little south and west of New Orleans but, even so, low-lying New Orleans East got drenched again. From the convention, Cao spoke to a friend who told him Cao's house had a foot and a half of water in it. A foot and a half is a lot. It causes serious problems. He was the only member of the entire Louisiana delegation (or at least of the ones who actually made it to the convention rather than canceling at the last minute) who had major home damage in the storm.

When the convention ended, the Caos returned to find they needed temporary lodging with friends. But now the family is back in its own home, living on the second floor while doing major repair work on the first, still waiting for their flood insurance to come through.

If somebody can shrug over the phone, Cao shrugged. "It is just an inconvenience," he insisted.

The question is, though, whether Cao's campaign is just an inconvenience for Jefferson, or whether Cao actually has a chance.

NOBODY SEEMS TO THINK a win is likely, but local political pros insist that it *is* doable. There is, of course, the matter of Jefferson's indictments and the local embarrassment about them. There are also investigations and indictments involving non-profits to which Jefferson funneled grants. *And* several investigations of Jefferson's family members who have served in other local government offices.

On national Election Day, Jefferson won his own primary over a white Democratic opponent, Helena Moreno, by a margin of 92,080 to 70,159. The GOP and independent registration combined is 34 percent and, if Cao can pick off a significant portion of Moreno's Democratic votes -- this time in an election without the heavy pro-Obama turnout working in Jefferson's favor -- the arithmetic starts to look less daunting.

"He has an outstanding chance," insists former New Orleans City Councilman Brian Wagner, also a former Republican National Committeeman. "We have a very compelling candidate who is someone who can do an outstanding job in Congress. He has fought poverty [while with the Jesuits] all over the world, and he's probably the closest thing to a saint who I have ever known who has ever run for Congress &. He has two wonderful, intelligent children, and his wife graduated *cum laude* at the pharmacy school at Xavier [University in New Orleans] &. It's just a matter of combining that message with the right turnout."

For the last two and a half weeks of the campaign, Cao has about \$70,000 cash on hand, with Republican Party committees committed to pitching in (independently) the maximum allowed \$84,000. And that was before any late money came in from fundraisers thrown by pillars of the New Orleans community both Tuesday and Wednesday nights, along with a Dec. 4 major fundraiser featuring newly minted New Orleanian Mary Matalin, the famous Republican political consultant. It's enough money for a reasonable TV ad buy and lots of radio ads. And the campaign is hoping for some late endorsements, too.

If Cao wins, he would be the first Vietnamese-American ever elected to Congress – from, it should be noted, the neighboring district to the one that first sent to Congress a man of Indian descent, Bobby Jindal. And as long as the U.S. Congress should exist on this Earth, Cao might remain the only Congressman who is a Vietnamese refugee-turned physics major-turned Jesuit-turned philosophy professor, lawyer, and dual-hurricane survivor.

And yes, history sometimes does choose odd pathways, and unlikely heroes.