

Jindal's future, from *Politico* (12/25/08):

Jindal in 2012?

by Jonathan Martin

Bobby Jindal is seen by many in his party as the Next Big Thing, a political comer who at 37 offers competence, reform and a fresh face for a Republican Party in dire need of all three. But even as he basks in the media glow from his maiden foray to Iowa last month, Jindal is far from a sure thing in 2012.

Jindal, only elected governor last year, said flatly this month he is not interested in being president and is only focused on a 2011 reelection bid—perhaps not surprising at a time when few will admit to White House ambitions.

Still, there are indications, from Jindal and close advisers, that he truly is reserving judgment about taking on President-elect Barack Obama in four years.

If Obama is as formidable then as he appears now, it is unlikely that Jindal, who would be only 41, would risk an uphill race against the incumbent.

Tell me where Obama is sitting at the end of 2010, responded a senior adviser to Jindal when asked about a possible run. Timing is everything.

John Maginnis, a longtime watcher of Louisiana politics and publisher of the LaPolitics Weekly newsletter, put it more bluntly.

He doesn't want to run against Obama unless Obama is an unmitigated disaster, observed Maginnis. In 2016, it will be an open seat with no vice president running.

The comparisons to Obama are irresistible to some Republicans—those who see Jindal as their own version of the skinny kid with a funny name, as Obama once called himself during his own seemingly improbable White House bid.

One other similarity between the two: a charmed political existence so far. Jindal's first year in office brought historic ethics reforms, deep tax cuts and major funding for workforce training and highway projects. State tax coffers bulged with oil industry revenues from \$4-a-gallon gas.

So, along with his counterpart in Alaska, the Louisiana governor became the undisputed hot ticket for the GOP's circuit of Lincoln and Reagan Day party fundraisers, traditionally a testing ground for presidential aspirants. And unlike Sarah Palin, Jindal is also quickly becoming the toast of Republican elites, the class of elected officials, donors, and consultants who are much sought after well before the first primary votes are cast.

Now some political reality is setting in.

For one thing, Jindal is facing what nearly every one of his counterparts is in capitals across the country: a gaping budget deficit.

With the price of oil plummeting, energy-rich Louisiana has lost a significant chunk of anticipated revenue and is projected to have a \$2 billion deficit next year.

He's had a rocket ride," said Maginnis, the Louisiana political analyst. "Nobody has had a first year in office like his. But next year is going to be a lot rockier." There is also the very practical matter of two competing political calendars.

Jindal now enjoys high favorable ratings after his first year in office, but Louisiana Democrats vow to field a strong opponent against him in 2011. That means the governor would be spending the year trekking between Ruston and Lafayette, while primary opponents beat a path between Des Moines and Concord.

"You're running for governor in November with a January Iowa caucus?" asked Charlie Cook, the political analyst and a Bayou State native. "I don't know how you do that."

Those around Jindal are also aware of the political danger of seeming overly ambitious.

Having made the post-election Iowa trip, a much-buzzed-about trek where he spoke to a packed banquet of social conservatives, Jindal won't be going back anytime soon, according to those close to him.

As for those Reagan and Lincoln Day Dinner invites: "We're saying no to almost all of them," said an adviser.

Jindal has already visited Virginia, where there is a gubernatorial race next year, and will travel out of state next year to raise money for his reelection and to primarily help his fellow governors.

It also so happens that his hurricane-battered state is on the lookout for businesses to locate there, so Jindal will not just be raising his own profile when on the road.

He's the No. 1 evangelist for Louisiana's turnaround," said an adviser. "He'll look for big stages to do that."

And he'll still do national media interviews, but his advisers stress that he's turning down more than he's accepting.

Now, as the state prepares to grapple with the prospect of making unpopular cuts in health care and education, Jindal's national profile has begun to offer fodder to the political set in Baton Rouge.

One recent cartoon in the capital's newspaper, the Advocate, portrayed Jindal as saying he'd travel all over the country to convince people that he's not running for president.

We're hoping he'll stay here more and work on [the challenges facing the state], said Chris Whittington, chairman of the Louisiana Democratic Party, who predicted Jindal's popularity would dissipate when he has to make difficult decisions about how to close the budget gap. We have huge problems on the horizon.

Jindal and his team acknowledge that the state still has a ways to go. It has yet to fully recover from hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, which exposed and worsened the already gaping disparities between the haves and the have-nots and lives in fear of the next Big One. Only half-jokingly, Jindal said recently his Christmas wish this year was a hurricane-free 2009.

But even as he toils to bolster the middle class and improve Louisiana's ethics image, something local wags joke was helped considerably by the alleged corruption up I-55 by the governor of Illinois, Jindal will keep an eye cast on a bigger stage beyond the bayou.

The best thing you can do to leave the door open for national office is do well in job you're in, said an adviser.