

Editorial: Thanks, But No Thanks

February, 2002

When asked recently on cable news whether he would take another stab at presidential politics, Pat Buchanan replied, “No, I think the American people have been pretty clear about that.” When you receive, as Buchanan did, less than half the votes that Ralph Nadar got in his 2000 presidential bid, the assessment that the American people are tired of you as a candidate is on mark.

Apparently Bill Sizemore doesn’t feel the same way.

In ’98 Sizemore ran for governor in Oregon against the Democratic incumbent John Kitzhaber. When it was over, Sizemore received 31 percent of the vote in Oregon. It was the lowest vote total by a candidate from a major party in anyone’s memory. In the election, Sizemore carried about three-quarters of the Republican base and got no support from Independents and Democrats. Oregon voters sent Sizemore a clear message about his chances of being governor in ’98. Zilch. Usually when politicians get messages like that they take an election cycle or two off. Not Sizemore.

A January headline in The Oregonian read “Sizemore Pledges to oppose Roberts...” “If the state labor chief gets the GOP nod, the tax foe will run for governor as an independent.”

Bill Sizemore served this state well as an initiative leader in the 1990s when the state was run by a monopoly political establishment—Democrats controlled the state house, the congressional delegation, the vast majority of statewide offices, and the media. Yes, it’s true that Republicans during the 1990s controlled the legislature, but the margin was always slight. And without the media, the governor’s office, or any other kind of podium there was little Republicans could do to counter Oregon’s prevailing liberal orthodoxy, especially when the high-tech Gold Rush of the ’90s was able to almost pay for that orthodoxy. State government grew by more than ten percent a year during the decade.

Into that political vacuum stepped Sizemore with his initiatives that appealed to weary taxpayers. He scored more than once with budget-altering wins, Measure 8—PERS reform, Measure 47—Property Tax Cap, Measure 7—Property Rights/Compensation. The establishment angrily challenged most of these wins, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But most importantly, he provided taxpayers with an outlet.

As Sizemore’s stature grew, his behavior grew bolder...shakier. In ’98 he sacrificed his own Measure 59, a prohibition on automatic payroll deductions from union members for political (mostly Democratic Party) purposes, by making his questionable run for governor.

A cycle later, Sizemore turned the heat up...well...about seven notches, when he offered that number of ballot measures on the '00 ballot. This time, the political establishment in Oregon freaked out—and desperately worked to defeat the Sizemore Seven. On election night six went down, but one survived—Measure 7, the property rights measure, a measure which has since traveled a tortuous path through the Oregon courts (and liberal political backrooms).

Now in 2002 Sizemore says he will run as an independent for governor if Oregon's Labor Commissioner Jack Roberts is the nominee. Sizemore told The Oregonian that it was "treachery" that Roberts made campaign commercials against his initiatives. Those commercials are one of the reasons Sizemore seems ready to bolt the GOP.

The other reason is fantasy—pure fantasy—but it's Bill's fantasy. Sizemore believes that he can build on the 31 percent that he got in '98, and that in a three-way race he, like Jesse Ventura, can pull off a stunning upset and be Oregon's next governor. Sizemore doesn't think he's Pat Buchanan, he thinks he's Governor Jesse, and his claims of "treachery" against Robert are a convenient excuse to do what he really wants to do—run for governor. Only this time not with the Republican Party, but against it.

Times change and Bill's wrong.

Unlike the '90s when Oregon was a politically non-competitive state and initiatives were the best outlet to express taxpayer dissatisfaction, this year's election comes in a very, very different climate in Oregon than during Sizemore's heyday.

- 1) Oregon is now competitive statewide for Republicans: Bush lost to Gore by only 6,000 votes.
- 2) Oregon hasn't had a Republican governor for 20 years and voters and business leaders are hungry for change.
- 3) Oregon's unemployment rate is at 7.5 percent, the highest in the nation; the era of Katz, Clinton and Kitzhaber is over.
- 4) The United States is at war and voters want executive leadership and fewer initiatives.
- 5) The three candidates running for the Republican nomination, Kevin Mannix, Ron Saxton and Jack Roberts, are three of the strongest statewide candidates Republicans have fielded in years.

For Sizemore to argue that he needs to run as an independent because what may come out of the primary in May (Jack Roberts) is not representative of Oregon's GOP is wrong. Dead wrong. All three candidates represent the GOP—Kevin Mannix represents the conservative grassroots, Jack Roberts represents the GOP political establishment, and Ron Saxton the state's boardrooms. The winner of that three-way race will be a solid

representative for the GOP. What's more, if Sizemore runs as an independent he won't be a serious candidate (likely getting less than five percent), because there isn't a constituency in the state that wants him to run. He could, however, do serious damage to a party that hasn't slept in Mahonia Hall for 20 years. If Sizemore runs as an independent the best he can hope for is making the media coverage negative and "about Bill." Jeff Mapes and The Oregonian are only too happy to report that story.

For Sizemore to use the remnants of his fading political power to carry out a personal vendetta against Jack Roberts is also a scenario the Democrats would love. They know their own field for governor is weak; they know the Republican are hungry. The best way for the Democrats to keep Mahonia Hall is to run against Bill Sizemore—one more time. But Sizemore has been too important a public figure in the '90s to have his political epitaph read: "He was another Al Mobley who helped deliver the governor's office to the Democrats." Thanks, but no thanks.