

Tuesday, April 27, 2010

DEACE: Branstad barnstorms again

Steve Deace

The date was Jan. 5, 1998. As Terry Branstad was beginning the final year of what many had thought (hoped) would be his 16th and final year as governor of Iowa, respected former Des Moines Register columnist David Yepsen previewed the finale of the reign of the patron saint of Iowa's moderate Republican establishment with a piece provocatively titled "Branstad, the Liberal Governor."

Mr. Yepsen wrote on that day that Mr. Branstad had "been one of the best liberal governors this state has ever had." Unfortunately for Iowans staring down the barrel of the potential of an unprecedented fifth Branstad term - term limits be damned - the evidence overwhelmingly backs up Mr. Yepsen's contrarian assertion:

c The first bill Mr. Branstad ever signed into law as governor was an increase in the sales tax, which was the largest tax increase in the state's history at the time. In fact, that was the first of two sales tax increases for which Mr. Branstad was responsible.

c Mr. Branstad raised taxes and fees (a tax by another name) 30 times in his previous stint as governor.

c He increased spending every year he was in office, and the final budget he submitted as governor increased spending at twice the rate of inflation. The state budget was \$2 billion when he became governor and \$4.5 billion when he left.

c Mr. Branstad introduced state-sanctioned gambling to Iowa, a cynically regressive tax in which big government immorally decides to fund its schemes on the backs of its poorest and most vulnerable citizens. At best it's revenue-neutral when you consider the societal cost of dangling fool's gold in front of the desperate.

c According to current Republican State Auditor David Vaudt, state government in Iowa grew at twice the rate of the population under Mr. Branstad.

c Beating President Obama and Government Motors to the punch, Mr. Branstad built a state-owned phone company.

c Mr. Branstad funded programs that grew the education bureaucracy and got the state more involved in education and at an earlier age, which explains why he was endorsed by the liberal National Education Association's local Iowa affiliate. Today, government education supervised by and enriching liberal academia is nearly two-thirds of Iowa's state budget, with the past two Democrat governors just following in Mr. Branstad's footsteps.

c Former Republican State Auditor Richard C. Johnson twice cited Mr. Branstad for budgeting irregularities, such as keeping two sets of books, for example. Mr. Johnson, who was state auditor during the entire Branstad era, became so frustrated with Mr. Branstad's budgeting high-jinks that he endorsed former Rep. Fred Grandy when Mr. Grandy challenged Mr. Branstad in the 1994 Republican primary. Today Mr. Johnson is supporting conservative businessman Bob Vander Plaats, who is Mr. Branstad's chief rival in the Republican gubernatorial primary on June 8.

c Mr. Branstad went to Nebraska in 2000 to donate to, endorse and campaign for his "good friend" who was running for the U.S. Senate there - none other than Democrat Ben Nelson. That's the same Ben Nelson whom Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid essentially bribed with pork and Medicare exceptions to be one of the crucial votes for passing Obamacare. Taxpayers across the country can thank Mr. Branstad for doing his part to let Mr. Nelson deceive conservative Nebraskans into believing they were voting for some kind of moderate Democrat, thanks to Mr. Branstad's backing.

Now back on the campaign trail for another run for governor, Mr. Branstad likes to talk nostalgia, such as the fact that he left Iowa with a \$900 million surplus. I don't know about you, but in my world, "government surplus" is an oxymoron, sort of like gay marriage or moderate Arab nation. A \$900 million surplus in a state of 3 million people just means the state is hoarding too much of our money, if you ask me. Mr. Branstad in his benevolence did sign into law a 10 percent across-the-board tax cut once Republicans took over the General Assembly during his final term in office. You'll excuse me if I don't find that all that magnanimous, since it came after he raised the state sales tax 67 percent first.

Obviously there are good reasons the Cato Institute gave Mr. Branstad a D grade his final year as governor.

There also is a good reason why conservatives and Tea Party activists across the country who are concerned about the outrageous growth of government should be watching Iowa closely

between now and the primary.

Incumbent Chet "the budget molester" Culver is more vulnerable this fall than a buffet line when Homer Simpson shows up. Just about any Republican with a minimal criminal record and fully functioning motor skills is likely to topple him come November.

However, if a big-government Republican like Mr. Branstad wins the GOP primary and is governor during Iowa's first-in-the-nation 2012 caucuses, just imagine the message that would send to prospective Republican presidential candidates coming to Iowa next year. Remember when moderate Charlie Crist helped moderate John McCain in the crucial 2008 Florida primary that likely delivered the nomination to the "maverick?"

Do you want the moderate establishment that could help elect big-government Mr. Branstad to a fifth term as Iowa governor, giving the advantages of incumbency and organization to a similar presidential candidate in Iowa next year as Mr. Crist did for Mr. McCain?

Since the last Republican president and Republican Congress unfortunately proved you can't automatically trust Republicans to shrink government and cut spending when they are in power, the last thing we voters need to do is give them the incentive to prove it to us again by letting big-government, high-tax Republicans like Mr. Branstad back into power in the state that will kick off the next presidential election.

Now is the time to boldly take our country back, not just go left slower than the Democrats would take us.

Steve Deace hosts the afternoon drive program on WHO-AM in Des Moines, Iowa, where Ronald Reagan was the station's first sports director.

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