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Barbour's Comments on Kidneys, Klan Underscore Struggles in Mississippi

By Darrell Preston - Jan 10, 2011

Governor [Haley Barbour](#)'s boyhood memories of Mississippi's civil-rights strife are diverting attention from his stewardship of a state that might be the launchpad for a 2012 presidential run.

Supporters say Barbour, a 63-year-old Republican who has led Mississippi for seven years, has been the state's biggest booster, getting re-elected with a 58 percent majority even as he increased taxes and spending. The former lobbyist and [Republican National Committee](#) chairman led the recovery from [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005. He lured employers including [General Electric Co.](#) and [Northrop Grumman Corp.](#) to expand, though the state remains ranked last in per-capita income and education.

That record has been overshadowed in the past two weeks by criticism of his views on race, an inescapable issue in a state where segregationist violence disenfranchised blacks for generations.

The Dec. 27 issue of the Weekly Standard magazine [quoted](#) Barbour saying that as a teenager he found watching girls more important than hearing [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) speak. He said the whites-only Citizens Council kept the peace in his hometown. Two days later, he ordered the Jan. 7 release of two black sisters imprisoned since 1994 for stealing what their supporters say was \$11. His stipulation: One must give the other a kidney to spare the state the cost of dialysis.

"He's been the most powerful governor in my lifetime," said Malcolm White, [Mississippi Arts Commission](#) director. "When he comes out and gets caught on the national media with comments about the white Citizens Council, everybody sort of shakes their heads and says, 'Can't believe he's saying that.' "

Deadly Past

Blacks compose about 37 percent of the population of 2.97 million, the highest proportion of any state, according to census data. [Mississippi](#), a state of slaveholders before the Civil War, in the 1960s became a fortress of resistance to integration. Its image was defined by the murders of civil-rights workers including Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, and the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old accused of flirting with a white woman.

Benjamin Jealous, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said on Dec. 30 that Barbour's decision to release the women balanced justice and politics.

"That's a calculus that he has to make," he said in an interview on CNN.

Barbour and his spokesman didn't return three phone calls and one e-mail seeking comment.

Barbour has not made up his mind whether to run for president, he told the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, the state capital, in an interview [published](#) Dec. 16.

'Big, Big Decision'

"The idea that, 'Boy, anybody would want to be president' is said by people who don't know much about being president," Barbour told the newspaper, which endorsed his 2007 re-election. "It's a big, big decision. I'm not in any hurry to make the decision. I've got time. But I feel like I need to make a decision by this spring, and that's what I intend to do."

The last year of Barbour's second four-year term will determine whether he runs, said Marty Wiseman, director of the [John C. Stennis Institute of Government](#) at [Mississippi State University](#) in Starkville.

Governing Mississippi is a challenge. The state traditionally ranks last or near last in per-capita income and school test scores. In BMO Capital Market's Dec. 30 ranking of historical financial strength index, Mississippi was sixth among 11 Southeastern states and paid the third-highest premium for investors to purchase its debt.

Slow Revival

The state's economy, which began growing for the first time in two years in July, lags behind the rest of the country, said Justin Hoogendoorn, managing director with BMO in [Chicago](#), who did the report. It ranked 32nd out of 50 states and the [District of Columbia](#), he said.

"Mississippi is beginning to see employment and revenue growth," said Hoogendoorn. "They're coming out of the recession in the middle of the pack."

William F. Shughart II, an economics professor at the [University of Mississippi](#) in Oxford said, "We're as well off as could be, given the economic conditions for the nation as a whole."

Barbour's life has coincided with sweeping changes in his state's economy. Until World War II, Mississippi depended on cotton production. In the 1960s, manufacturing became the dominant

industry. Since the 1990s, casino gambling has helped make it a tourist destination.

Conjuring Jobs

Barbour “is clearly a very popular governor, maybe the most popular governor in my lifetime,” said Mayo Flynt, president of AT&T Mississippi, a unit of AT&T Inc. “Both sides of the political aisle respect his ability to be an advocate for the state and recruit businesses.”

During Barbour’s governorship, [PACCAR Inc.](#), Severstal, GE Aviation, Northrop Grumman and Nissan Motor Co. expanded production and jobs in the state; Northrop Grumman also has cut 350 jobs at its Pascagoula shipbuilding facility.

On Jan. 4, Barbour said that Stion Corp., a manufacturer of solar panels would locate a 100-megawatt solar panel production plant to Hattiesburg, a \$500 million expansion expected to create 1,000 jobs over six years. Mississippi is providing \$75 million of loan assistance, clean-energy tax incentives and job- training money.

Tax and Spend

The governor has been willing to [spend](#). Barbour presided over a 36 percent increase in general-fund spending between 2004 and 2010, according to an analysis of National Association of State Budget Officers data by the Washington-based [Cato Institute](#), which argues for lower taxes and spending. During that period, general-fund spending by the 50 states rose an average 17 percent. Barbour also approved tax increases on cigarettes and hospitals, according to Cato.

“He doesn’t strike me as a fiscal conservative,” said Chris Edwards, the institute’s director of tax-policy studies. “Spending has gone up quite a bit under him and he hasn’t cut taxes.”

The state’s per-capita income was \$30,399 in 2008, a 29.5 percent increase from \$23,466 in 2003, according to census data. In both years, that ranked 50th in the nation and was at 75 percent of the national average. In November, unemployment was 9.9 percent, down from a 2010 peak of 11.6 percent in March.

Barbour’s courting of business has failed to remake the state’s economic structure, Shughart said.

“He’s not tried to make any fundamental changes in the factors that cause Mississippi to be at the bottom of the economic development scorecard,” he said.

As Barbour has guided his state, he also has made himself a figure on the national stage.

Yazoo to Washington

A native of Yazoo City, a community of about 14,000, Barbour earned a law degree from the University of Mississippi in 1973. He spent most of his career as a lobbyist with the Washington-based Barbour, Griffith & Rogers Inc., according to the [National Governors Association](#). He also worked in President [Ronald Reagan](#)'s White House and was chairman of the [Republican National Committee](#) from 1993 to 1997.

As chairman of the [Republican Governors Association](#), Barbour guided his party to take governorships of 11 states from Democrats in November, prompting talk of a presidential candidacy.

"It's not every day a Mississippi politician tries to be in the national picture," said Wiseman of Mississippi State. "He was riding a tidal wave."

'Town Leaders'

In the last month of 2010, Barbour had to paddle hard after telling the Weekly Standard that he paid more attention to girls than King at a Yazoo City speech in 1962. He also brought up the local Citizens Council. The councils were composed of whites staunchly opposed to integration, and were seen as the respectable face of resistance.

"You heard of the Citizens Councils?" Barbour was quoted as saying. "Up north they think it was like the KKK. Where I come from, it was an organization of town leaders. In Yazoo City they passed a resolution that said anybody who started a chapter of the Klan would get their ass run out of town.' "

Two weeks later, Barbour [suspended](#) the prison sentences of Jamie and Gladys Scott, who were serving life for their 1994 convictions of armed robbery. The NAACP had [pushed for their release](#).

Staying Out

Jamie Scott, who required dialysis, created "a substantial cost to the state of Mississippi," Barbour said in a Dec. 29 statement about the releases.

The sisters left prison last week in a silver SUV, the [Associated Press](#) reported.

"We just totally blessed. We totally blessed," Gladys Scott told the news service. "It's been a long, hard road, but we made it."

The NAACP's Jealous said on CNN that the release was inevitable, but Barbour's Weekly Standard interview may have forced the issue.

“When we met behind closed doors, he said what he said, you know, to the public, which was that he was concerned about the cost and he was concerned about their health,” Jealous said. “But his staff also made it clear that we didn’t have to worry that if for some reason the kidney didn’t match that both sisters -- no one wanted to see them back in prison again.”

No matter the course of Barbour’s future career, Wiseman said, his time in office has been too short to boost the state’s prospects permanently.

“We’re so mired in the hole, one or two governor’s terms isn’t going to turn things around,” Wiseman said. “We’ve got some daunting tasks ahead of us.”

To contact the reporter on this story: Darrell Preston in [Dallas](#) at dpreston@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Mark Tannenbaum at mtannen@bloomberg.net

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