

KeyOpinion

Used Cars and Congress

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

*Where do the elephants go to die?
Is it a cloud bank in the sky?
Or do they dwell on Longboat Key –
A stronghold for the G.O.P.?*

The lovely island of Longboat Key has long been noted as a serene community of retirees, many of them rich, and some even “super-rich.”

This year the key has become famous as the home of two Republican stalwarts who openly plan to expend vast sums out of their personal fortunes to buy themselves seats in the Congress of the United States.

Previously cited in these and other columns is the beautiful, but spoiled rich girl, Katherine Harris, who has pledged to spend a \$10 million dollar inheritance from her late father's estate in pursuit of the Senate seat held by the Democrat, Bill Nelson.

Nearing completion of a nondescript second term in the lower house of Congress, Ms. Harris has unfortunately failed to garner the support of Republican officialdom, running the gamut all the way from the White House to Florida's outgoing Governor, Jeb Bush.

As a consequence, the prevailing political wisdom holds that she has as much chance of becoming the state's next junior senator as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez has of becoming Pope.

Seeking the 13th District seat being vacated by her, however, is the new-to-politics businessman Vern Buchanan, whose personal fortune is estimated to be in excess of \$50 million.

Buchanan has already expended \$2.1 million of his own funds in a bitterly divisive primary battle on September 5 against a field of lesser-financed Republican candidates.

In spite of the lavish amount spent on advertising, he was able to garner only 32 percent of the vote, but it was sufficient to secure the nomination. His two main oppo-

nents, longtime Republican office holders Nancy Detert and Tramm Hudson have refused to endorse him.

What is even more significant is the unusual defection of a number of estimable Republicans who have crossed Party lines to support the Democratic candidate, banker Christine Jennings.

These negative attitudes are not only quite peculiar, but somewhat unprecedented in the State of Florida. On the surface, Buchanan would appear to be an ideal candidate. He is a hard-headed, self-made businessman, who earned his millions by acquiring and running automobile dealerships throughout the Southeast.

His background and good looks make him an ideal model for a “would you buy a used car from this man?” advertisement. In addition, his political philosophy is directly out of the conservative Pat Robertson-Jerry Falwell brand of Republicanism. He believes in the line between church and state, as long as the state adheres to the church's line.

It appears, however, that many longtime Republicans place concern for their country ahead of party loyalty. Their distrust for the candidate is palpable, and it stems from several sources.

Throughout the primary campaign, there were whiffs of scandal in regard to sharp business practices on Buchanan's part and rumors concerning a controversial lawsuit brought by him against the developers of Sarasota's ultra-luxurious Ritz Carlton Hotel. The suit was instituted a half dozen years ago and settled in 2001, but the file was sealed from public view at Buchanan's insistence.

In spite of public pressure, the candidate refused to



permit disclosure until after the primary was over. It then became abundantly clear why early disclosure would have cost votes.

Buchanan had sought participation as a partner in the multi-million dollar project. The original developers — the Buford family — initially agreed to allow him on board, but

changed their minds when it appeared that his financial resources were considerably less than he had claimed.

The developers agreed to settle the lawsuit by paying \$1.35 million, but instead of taking cash, Buchanan “purchased” a penthouse suite from the Bufords for \$5 million, with an agreement that they would buy it back from him one year later for \$6.35 million. This scheme resulted in a tax rate of only 15% on an ostensible long term gain, instead of a 35% tax on regular earned income.

There is a fine line between tax avoidance, which is legal, and tax evasion, which is not. The Buchanan scheme seems to occupy the gray area in between, and although the IRS has not come calling, there is no denying the sleaze factor, or the fact that Uncle Sam received \$270,000 less than it would have otherwise collected.

The election is only one month away, and Buchanan has hired many of the workers who jumped ship from Katherine Harris' campaign. Although he does not exhibit the temperamental “diva” qualities that caused the workers to desert, the campaign has already shown signs of taking the low road, with fanciful, negative charges flung in the direction of the Democratic opponent.

Buchanan has claimed that Christine Jennings is a “liberal” who plans to reinstitute the marriage tax and repeal child tax credits.

Ms. Jennings has a distinguished career as a banker, and calling a banker a liberal is akin to calling a racehorse a mule. The charge that she hopes to repeal the taxes in question is a falsehood, and Buchanan knows

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Slick Haircuts, Shiny Shoes and IQ's of 65

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Contributing Columnist

Slick haircuts, shiny shoes and IQ's of 65 is how a now disillusioned long-time Republican describes the current administration and the Republican controlled Congress. That this far from flattering description comes from a Republican rather than Nancy Pelosi or Harry Reid is a bit startling. Now don't think for a moment this is some fair weather member of the GOP. The critic is a life-long Republican activist whose resume includes nine years as a Senate staff member, state director of three Republican campaigns and extensive experience representing economic development interests in Washington and the Midwest. No, this is not a person who settles for just sitting in the Republican Club and talking conservative.

He was more than willing to illuminate the sources of his dissatisfaction. The Mark Foley resignation was at the top of his list.

“I can't understand,” he said, “why the Republican leadership in the House didn't fully investigate Foley's conduct last year when they first became aware he was e-mailing underage pages. Or maybe I do understand,” he continued. “I think they tried to sweep the whole thing under the rug because they didn't want to lose a safe Congressional seat. Well, their decision to hide situation where a Congressman might be proven to be a pedophile will probably end up costing them control of both House and the Senate – and it damn well should if that is the case.”

I reminded my irate friend that some Democrats had the same problem. Rep. Gerry Studds, Democrat of Massachusetts, actually had sex with a 15-year-old male congressional page. He didn't even resign and won reelection twice before finally retiring. My outraged



friend replied that, “vote for us because the Democrats are just as bad is a damn poor campaign slogan.”

But the Foley case proved only to be the latest source of anger for my irate Republican friend but most certainly not the only one.

“Why would I continue to support Congressional Republicans,” he asked. “They have increased federal spending when they promised to reduce federal spending; they increased the size of government when they had promised to reduce the size of the federal government; they have raised the sleaze factor in Washington to a new high level when they promised to restore integrity in government.”

My infuriated Republican acquaintance was tough on what might be called the “Righteous Right.”

“I can't imagine,” he said, “what the Congress and Bush were thinking when they stuck their nose in the Terry Schiavo case. I don't think the Congress or the President has any business trying to upset a valid state court ruling. I think they wanted nothing more than to placate their pro-life base. I am tired of the tail wagging the dog.”

He was also critical of the Congressional hearings on the question of steroids in baseball. “We have so many problems; social security reform, tax simplification, the war on terror and health care. So what does the Congress do, they waste time on three or four days of hearings on steroids in baseball.”

I cautioned him on being too tough on the Republicans because the Democrats had also called for those hearings, but he said, “the Republicans control Congress and they did not have to convene those hearings. I didn't bother to ask him if they could pull a Flip Wilson and say, “the devil made them do it.”

My nostalgic Republican friend then reminded me that one of the most notable attributes of the Reagan administration was the quality of the various appointees. I had to agree because even though I had disagreed with many of the initiatives coming out of the Department of Agriculture during the Reagan years, I had admired the managerial style of the Reagan people. This according

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