

**GEORGIA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE CHANGES:
WALKER LEAVES, KAHN RETURNS AND SO DOES JOHN ROCKER.**

If you like your politics raw and partisan, you will be happy to know that Bobby Kahn is back in the saddle, locked and loaded. If you prefer civility in the political process, the fact that longtime state Rep. Larry Walker (D-Perry) is retiring after 32 years in the General Assembly — 16 as House majority leader — cannot be good news.

Kahn, former chief of staff to Gov. Roy Barnes, has been named interim chairman of the state Democratic Party. No doubt the skids have been greased for him to get the job permanently when the 250-member state committee meets later this month. When he does, watch out. Kahn recognizes only two groups of people: Democrats and The Rest of the World. Evidently, influential Democrats feel he is their go-to guy at a time when Republicans are showing greater strength in Georgia than ever before. This, in spite of the fact that Kahn presided over the losing end of one of the greatest upsets in the state's history when lightly regarded Republican Sonny Perdue defeated the incumbent Barnes in the 2002 gubernatorial race. Never before had an incumbent governor in Georgia lost a re-election bid — and with a \$20 million war chest, to boot. It was not Bobby Kahn's finest hour.

A number of political observers lay Roy Barnes' defeat at the feet of his chief of staff. Even close friends of Barnes had warned him that Kahn was making more enemies for the governor than he was making friends. Rank-and-file schoolteachers were incensed at what they considered to be a lack of respect from the Barnes administration's well-intended education reform. State flag proponents were shocked when the Confederate battle flag design was quietly shucked for a new blue banner. Many Georgians were outraged over a Democratic-driven redistricting plan that in its final form was too absurdly skewed to even be funny. Put all of these together with a heavy-handed administration, and you had a sure-fire recipe for defeat.

Kahn hasn't gotten his new seat warm yet and already has filed two ethics charges and slung a few dozen brickbats at Gov. Perdue. In typical Kahnesque fashion, he accused the governor recently of being "the John Rocker of state politics." You may remember that Rocker was a relief pitcher for the Atlanta Braves until his immaturity and his mouth got him in trouble with the tut-tut police. Kahn says Perdue has failed in business recruitment the way Rocker failed in relief. Maybe the governor should take that as a compliment. In John Rocker's three seasons in Atlanta, he appeared in 180 games, recording 223 strikeouts and 64 saves. Sounds pretty good to me. Then again, maybe a guy who had \$20 million to spend on an incumbent governor's re-election campaign and lost ought to be careful talking about failure.

When Sen. Zell Miller chastised the Democratic Party's lurch to the left in his bestseller, "A National Party No More," Kahn accused Miller of undoing much of what he had accomplished during his years as an influential and high-profile Democrat. Miller's response? "When I left the governor's office in January of 1999, the Democratic Party controlled both houses. The Democratic Party in Georgia had most all of the statewide elected officials," Miller said. "It's been dismantled on Bobby Kahn's watch."

Today, a Republican sits in the governor's office, the state Senate has a Republican majority and the GOP seems to welcome the return of their favorite lightning rod. When he heard the announcement of Kahn's appointment, Senate Majority Leader Bill Stephens (R-Canton) said, "The captain of the Exxon Valdez is back on deck."

In the midst of all the mudslinging, Larry Walker will quietly return to his hometown of Perry and resume his law practice. His fate was ordained when, at the urging of Gov. Perdue, he made an aborted attempt at the Speaker's job and lost to Terry Coleman (D-Eastman). He took a risk and failed, but Walker can leave with his head high. He is a good man who served the people of this state superbly for more than three decades. Georgia's political landscape will be poorer — and meaner — with his absence and Kahn's re-emergence.