

OPINION

# GOP's victories also exposed infighting

By CLARENCE PAGE  
Chicago Tribune

Democrats took it on the chin in this year's off-off-year gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey. Since those are two states that President Barack Obama won last year, vulnerable Democratic lawmakers in next year's elections are feeling as nervous as Glenn Beck at an ACORN convention.

But the Dems can find a silver lining in the high-profile Democratic victory in a traditionally Republican upstate New York district. The lesson in that contest: National Republican leaders are taking the title for infighting away from the traditionally fractious national Democrats.

That's one important lesson to come out of this year's contests. Here are two more:

1. The magical Obamamania that energized young voters, in particular, last year was historic but not easily loaned out to other Democrats.

2. Colorful extremists fire up a party's base and raise a lot of money, but moderate swing voters tend to decide who wins.

Obama's coattails were too short to give New Jersey Gov. John Corzine anything to grab onto as he struggled in vain to keep his seat. Exit polls show voters were fed up with high taxes

and corruption scandals. Repeated campaign visits by Obama, Mr. Change himself, could not save a governor who had come to represent a despised status quo.

Nevertheless, the even bigger loss suffered by Virginia's Creigh Deeds showed that it is better for a Democrat to have Obama by your side than out of sight. After failing to get anywhere by distancing himself from Obama, Deeds was delighted to have Obama campaign with him. But Deeds learned too late what Al Gore learned by spurning the help of Bill Clinton in 2000: Don't distance yourself from people whom your voting base still adores.

The possibility that the 2009 contests are a preview of bigger Democratic losses in next year's midterm elections puts a chill up the spine of vulnerable Democrats at a bad time. Party leaders need all the spine they can muster to pass a strong health care overhaul bill this year. With Deeds' demise in mind, Democrats would do well to remember what the late Texas-based columnist Molly Ivins used to say, "Dance with the one that brung you." The Democratic base expects to see a meaningful health care overhaul and they'll be even more turned off next year if they don't get it.

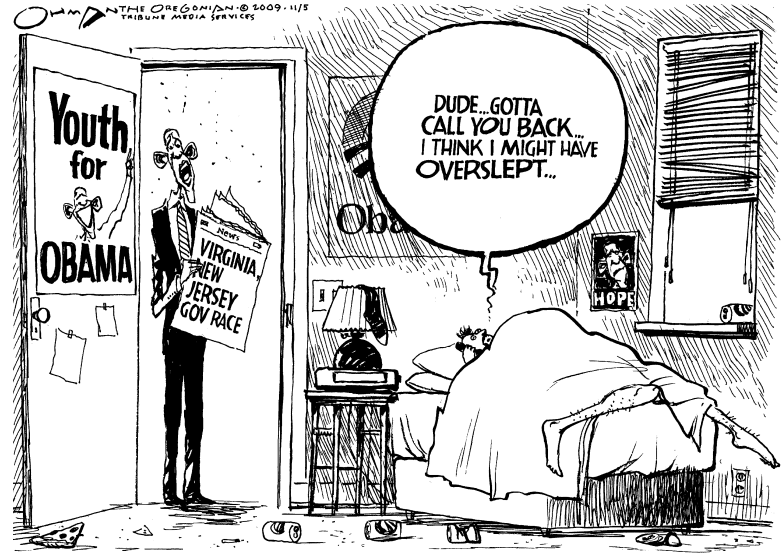
With that in mind, Democrats can find some hope in Republican disarray, as evidenced by

Democrat Bill Owens' victory in New York's 23rd district. Party leaders anointed State Assemblywoman Dede Scozzafava to fill Rep. John McHugh's seat after he was appointed secretary of the Army. But she wasn't conservative enough for purists like Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh, Bill Kristol, Sean Hannity and the Club for Growth. They backed Doug Hoffman, a self-described fan of anti-tax tea party protests and Fox News' excitable Beck.

When Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a 2012 GOP presidential hopeful, endorsed Hoffman, the race became a test of clout for the talk-show-driven, populist-conservative movement born out of this year's anti-tax, anti-Obama "Tea Party" movement and town hall protests.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich warned against dividing the party and handing current Speaker Nancy Pelosi another Democratic vote in the House. He was jeered by the Palin populists for that, but Newt turned out to be right. I don't know if Obama had such a fight in mind when he appointed McHugh, but if I were him I would claim I did. Thanks to the tea party populists, the move bore sweeter fruit than Democrats had any right to expect.

Undaunted, Palin declared on her Facebook page, "The race for New York's 23rd District is not



over, just postponed until 2010." Of course, in the meantime, a Democrat will be filling the seat and casting the votes. But the Palin populists seem to care less about winning campaigns at this point than winning arguments.

A better model for Republican success is provided by Virginia's Gov.-elect Bob McDonnell. He beat Deeds by moving to the center, soft-pedaling his background as a Pat Robertson-affiliated social conservative and addressing practical issues like taxes and transportation. McDonnell didn't have to reassure his conservative base, since Deeds' negative ads ironically did that job for him.

As a result, attacks from his left freed McDonnell to run as an Obama-style centrist, not a Palin-style barnstormer. That's a lesson for charisma-challenged Republican leaders as they try to get back into power in Washington. The GOP's angry tea-party conservatives can raise money and whip up excitement in the discontented Republican base. But when big problems like jobs and the economy are at stake, voters care less about who's right or who's left than with what's going to work.

Clarence Page is a Chicago Tribune columnist.

# Retirees help to bring pre-k to military families

By JAMES B. BAYLOR

Military families know that our longstanding tradition of service to our country doesn't end with formal retirement from the armed forces. Today's military retirees have longer periods of healthy and active retirement or "encore" careers than ever before, and many have chosen to use their experience and skills to help build a better world.

After having dedicated our lives to working for the defense and protection of our country, we are keenly aware that our nation's armed forces need individuals who are strong and ready — physically, mentally, emotionally — to face life's challenges. However, a recent report by the Department of Defense revealed troubling findings: 75 percent of the nation's 17- to 24-year-olds are unfit for military service because they did not complete high school, they fail to meet minimum health standards, or they have criminal records.

Experts agree that one of the most effective steps we can take to remedy these problems is to ensure that all children have the opportunity to attend high-quality pre-kindergarten programs. Research shows that children who attend high-quality pre-k are more likely to graduate from high school. They are less likely to engage in criminal activity as youths or as adults. And they are more likely to reach their potential in life — attend and graduate from college, earn more money, and become more-productive citizens.

In my own family, I have seen the positive effect that a good pre-k education can have on children. When he was 3, one of my grandsons struggled with language skills. But after spending two years in a pre-k program, he tested with the speech

capabilities that a 5-year-old should have. While in pre-k he learned to follow instructions and play well with other children, and developed other important socialization skills. He learned self-discipline and gained confidence. I was amazed at how far he came.

My grandson's experience inspired me to join other older adults throughout the country in Generations United's Seniors4Kids, an organization through which I could share his story and work to make sure other children have the same opportunities that he had. High-quality, voluntary pre-k for 3- and 4-year-olds should be part of our education system, so that all families who want their children to experience the benefits my grandson did would be able to do so.

As states look to expand pre-k by first targeting those with the greatest need,

policymakers should consider how the children of our nation's military personnel are affected when their parents serve our country. Children in military families, like their civilian peers, benefit from the social, emotional and academic skills pre-k fosters, and military families need consistent access to pre-k in all states to smooth the distinct and frequent transitions they face.

DOD has worked with each service branch to establish a highly regarded child-care system that is devoted to helping military personnel find and afford the care they need for their children. However, recent years have seen the largest call-up of National Guard and Reserve members since World War II. It is now more pressing than ever that we provide the children of these men and women with the stable support that is available to their peers who

live on or near military installations. The reality is that military children are in almost every community in America and, no matter where they live, they need and deserve access to high-quality, state-funded pre-k programs.

Military retirees and other older adults like me feel a responsibility to ensure that the next generation is equipped for the challenges ahead and that our children are well equipped to lead as adults. If we prepare them early, youths will rise to those challenges. Let's build for a strong and successful future by making high-quality pre-k programs available to all families, starting with those who serve our country.

Retired Maj. Gen. James B. Baylor served in the U.S. Army for 38 years. He and his wife live in Lexington, Ky., and have four children and six grandsons. For more information about Generations United's Seniors4Kids, visit [www.seniors4kids.org](http://www.seniors4kids.org).

## Prickly City

By SCOTT STANTIS

