



## **Rove, Gibbs discuss impact of Doe documents on Walker's national image**

6/28/2014

Two national political strategists on Friday agreed Gov. Scott Walker has a chance of winning the Republican 2016 presidential nomination despite negative publicity over a John Doe investigation.

Dem strategist Robert Gibbs, former press secretary to President Barack Obama, placed Walker in the top three or four candidates for the GOP nomination.

"Republicans are more likely to vote for someone who doesn't live in Washington, and I think Scott Walker is at the top of that list," Gibbs said. "There's about 10 that actually have a good shot at it. I tend to believe that they are likely to nominate someone like a Jeb Bush, someone like a Scott Walker, who can talk about what they've done in their own state. But (Walker) has a lot of legal issues that he has to explain a lot more. That scrutiny gets to be amazing. A whole lot of organizations with a whole lot of resources are going to be doing that and people are going to want answers."

GOP strategist Karl Rove -- who was a top adviser to President George W. Bush -- agreed that "Republicans have a predilection for nominating governors." But he said of Walker's chances, "I'd put it at a bit lower, at four or five, in a Republican field of about 13 people that the GOP is thinking about seriously." Rove and Gibbs headlined the final event of the State Bar of Wisconsin's annual conference at the Grand Geneva Resort in Lake Geneva. The point-counterpoint style presentation was moderated by former state Supreme Court Justice Janine Geske. Nearly 500 people attended the overall conference, with about 200 attending the Rove-Gibbs presentation. Attendees submitted questions in advance.

Records released last week from a John Doe probe included a 2011 email that Walker sent Rove, touting the efforts of veteran GOP operative R.J. Johnson, who has ties to the gov and the Wisconsin Club for Growth.

Rove declined to comment on the Doe probe, which has focused on allegations Walker and conservative groups were in collaboration during the recall elections, saying "Nobody's ever talked to me about it."

But Rove told WisPolitics.com that he didn't think the investigation would dampen Walker's chances for the GOP presidential nomination.

"Outside of this state, this is thought of in Republican circles as terribly unfair, and it will be even more thought so as a result of the prosecutor coming out and saying he's never been a target, and we've never come to any conclusion that he's been a target and he's not a target

today," Rove said.

Afterward, Gibbs repeated voters "will need a lot of explanation" from Walker.

Asked if Walker could lose the gubernatorial race to Dem Mary Burke, Gibbs replied that "Wisconsin is a great toss-up state, and if you've got a governor who's got the legal troubles that Walker looks like he could be in, absolutely."

Gibbs told WisPolitics Walker needs to make his positions clear on key issues, lest he meet the fate of U.S. Rep. Eric Cantor, who lost the Virginia GOP primary to a political newcomer. "People did not get a sense of where he stood on the issues," said Gibbs.

"Governors have to be for something, if they're running a state," he said. "Particularly when you're a governor, you don't have the ability to walk around and not embrace these issues and come down on one side of them. More than anything, what people want in politics is some level of authenticity."

Gibbs said it's become an even more difficult process for candidates to decide whether to run for president. A presidential campaign is two years of nonstop activity and the exhausted winner then begins the most difficult job in the world, said Gibbs, who added that it's still life-changing for non-winners.

"if you run and are spit out on the other side, you're never the same," he said. "I remember seeing (former Mississippi Gov.) Haley Barbour after he decided not to do it. With Obama, they had never been through a national campaign. I told him if everything goes like you want it to go, it will be a 10-year endeavor. It's a heady decision."

Rove said, "I think (Walker) is very smart that he has said he won't make a decision until later. I think that's wise. The Internet has sped up the process of fund-raising, so people like Walker, Rick Perry, Ted Cruz, etc., are able to wait until later."

### **Campaign spending debated**

The strategists were asked, during the debate, to comment on today's state of campaign spending in an era of super PACs and expensive ads run by outside groups.

Rove got a bit prickly when the topic was raised.

"I don't have the answer," said Rove, raising his voice. "All I know is, let's not approach this from a hypocritical perspective and say, 'Oh, this is all those big rich Republicans trying to do it,' because Democrats have been doing it for decades. Union spending on presidential and midterm elections -- this year, the unions will spend more than what will be spent by the center right and party organizations on the Republican side alone, and guess what? Virtually all that money is going to candidates on one party and it ain't Republicans."

People complain about the Koch brothers, Rove said, but added, "If you want to talk about big

money, let's talk about the \$400 million spent in the 2008 presidential election by the unions."

Gibbs warned that "We are headed to a wide open, wild, wild West, with no rules and no real limits on what can happen and how it's disclosed."

The most dire prediction in politics is that a few very wealthy individuals would control elections, he said.

Gibbs said the immense spending by super PACs forces campaigns to exceed spending limits.

"You used to bank your spending from election day out. Now, every year, it gets earlier and earlier," he said. "Nobody is going to abide by the spending limits in every single state. Because of these super PACs, you have more to respond to -- there's absolutely no way to abide by spending limits."

But Gibbs warned that excessive political advertising can backfire.

"You saw this happen in the last election in the Republican party," said Gibbs. "Each of the candidates got their own super PACs, but voters didn't break apart what a super PAC said and what a candidate said," instead, they associated all negative ads with the candidates.

"About two weeks before the 2012 election," Gibbs said, "I was sitting at home watching football, and even I couldn't watch, and I called the campaign and said, 'We're flushing money down the toilet!' They asked, 'What do you mean?' and I said, 'I can't imagine there is any reasonable person in the world who would suffer through the two minutes between one team fumbling and the other team taking possession of the ball by watching all this going on.'"

### **Admiration across the aisle**

Geske asked Rove and Gibbs to name politicians from the opposite party whom they admired.

Gibbs said, "I think it's going to be a fascinating presidential race in 2016 and one of the most fascinating Republicans is Jeb Bush."

Back when Obama was a senator, Gibbs said he watched Jeb Bush hold a press conference. "He then turned around and held the exact same press conference in fluent Spanish and didn't miss a beat," said Gibbs. "Wherever you think the 2016 presidential race is going, one thing you have to say for the GOP is they have a demographic problem."

Gibbs also said he admires U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma and U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee.

Rove named former U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut.

"Another guy, I didn't agree with him very much, but he had a huge work ethic, and that was (the late U.S. Sen.) Ted Kennedy," said Rove. "He was able to say to the teachers' unions, 'We

need to have accountability' and the unions went nuts on him and he said, 'I don't care.' I like (Chicago mayor) Rahm Emanuel. I admire a guy taking on a big tough city like that My favorite is a former lieutenant governor in Texas, Bob Bullock. He used to carry around loaded weapons and brandish them at meetings. That guy cared about Texas."

### **Speeding up justice nominations**

Wisconsin lawyers in the audience asked about the process of nominating and approving Supreme Court justices.

Gibbs said the process has become drawn-out and deadlocked by partisan politics.

"You go through a process to get a member of the cabinet confirmed, but that's nothing compared to a Supreme Court justice," said Gibbs. "Justice Scalia was unanimously approved, on a roll call vote by the U.S. Senate. You couldn't dream of that happening right now. People grind down."

Rove disagreed, saying, "Some things happen quickly and some happen slowly."

Still, Rove said, there is a general sense in the Senate that we have to handle Supreme Court and cabinet nominations in a timely fashion.

*-- By Kay Nolan  
For WisPolitics.com*