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July 15, 2005

COMMENTARY: The Warner Saga Ends with a Whimper

by **Eric St. James**

Huntington, WV (Special to HNN) - When the history of West Virginia politics is written—and it will be—there will be no more intriguing chapter than the one on the Warner Brothers. No, not Jack, Sam, Harry, and Albert of Hollywood fame. Those Warner Brothers apparently never got along too well, despite the success of their movie studio.

Rather, we're talking about three of the six Charleston, West Virginia Warner Brothers, namely Kris, Monty, and Kasey, whom the public believed got along all too well during their time in the sun.

Now that word is out that Kasey Warner may be leaving (or losing) his job as head of the Southern District U.S. Attorney's office, it is time to take a look at the meteoric rise and rapid fall of the family Warner in West Virginia politics.

Politics had been in the Warner family's blood for some time, after watching the patriarch of the family, George "Brud" Warner's involvement in Kanawha County politics during the boys' upbringing.

George, Jr., better known as "Buffy," made the next generation's first stab into statewide politics in the 1980s by being a top lieutenant to John Raese's 1984 Senate campaign. He followed up by conducting his own successful State Senate campaign in Monongalia County, the first Republican State Senator in several decades there. However, in a pattern to be followed by all the other politically-minded Warner brothers, he lasted just one term.

It was left to brother Kris to keep the family's toe in the political waters following Buffy's departure from state politics. Brothers Monty and Kasey, both West Point graduates, were in the military, and Kris was running the family's rental business in Morgantown, developing a reputation for being a tough landlord among WVU students and helping to put friendly city council members into office in the university city. Along the way, he kept active in the county and state GOP whenever possible.

Only in 1998 did Kris Warner really storm onto the scene, and it wasn't so much a storm as a fleeting gale. He was appointed by State GOP Chairman David Tyson to head up the party's efforts to elect more Republican legislators to the West Virginia legislature.

Warner's performances on talk shows, particularly "Under Fire," the public television current affairs program, left something to be desired. He lacked confidence, mumbled, and seemed at a loss when challenged even lightly by reporters or his trial lawyer opponent, State Democratic Party Chairman Pat Maroney. Maroney put him away during one episode of "Under Fire," a foreshadowing of things to come in the results that year, in which the State Senate lost nearly half of its Republican members.

However, not all of this can be laid at Kris Warner's feet, as he was working with a particularly selfish Republican Governor, Cecil Underwood, who would not even campaign for GOP challengers to Democratic incumbents.

Underwood's failure on many fronts towards the end of his administration show just how unreliable such deals with the Democratic legislative leadership usually are.

How Warner could have done better with an attitude like this towards Republicans brave enough to run against entrenched Democrats is an open question. He had tough sledding, that's for sure. However, despite whatever sympathy one could have for anyone placed in Warner's position as head of the ironically entitled "Victory '98" effort, he in no way earned the right to be the next Chairman of the WV GOP by his performance that year.

Tyson, however, was not a popular Chairman, and the public perception at the time was that he was little more than a yes-man to Governor Cecil Underwood. Tyson quite nearly had a serious challenge on his hands when he ran for re-election in the middle of Underwood's term, with saucy rumors flying about Tyson's personal life, rumors that would not sit well with the rank-and-file traditionalists in the party.

Tyson dodged that bullet but was always vulnerable after that and basically "hid out" during his remaining time as Chairman of the party.

The Warner Brothers then saw their golden opportunity: a weak Chairman (on many levels), a party in need of a morale boost, and a Presidential election year coming up fast. Monty and Kasey were ready to leave their military careers, and Kris was increasingly burrowing his way into the inner circles of leadership in the WV GOP. They just needed to get in. How?

That part of the story is a bit hazy, but many Republican activists have deduced that one of the brothers, perhaps one with friends in Washington's Republican circles, was able to get word to the Bush folks as they came into power. Pledging their eternal loyalty to the Bushies, the Warners were able to get Kris into position as Chairman of the WV GOP, not to mention getting Kasey in a position to make a good pitch for U.S. Attorney.

Only Monty would have to actually earn his prize the hard way—through an election. However, it must be said that Kasey had sterling credentials for the position he eventually obtained.

So when Tyson needed to vacate to make way for the Warner agenda, it wasn't that hard. With all that was being said about Tyson in GOP circles, along with a general perception growing of him being a "do-nothing," he was easy pickings for anyone who wanted him gone. And with support from party leaders, state and national, who was to stand in Kris Warner's way?

The rest, so they say, is history. Kris Warner presided over the WV GOP during the halcyon days of the George W.



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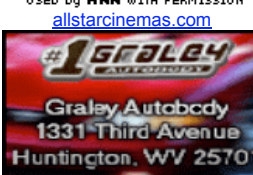
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Bush era, when anyone could have done a decent job. How could he NOT be successful with as many visits to West Virginia as Bush and his team made here. Warner's only genius move was in shoving the vulnerable Tyson aside and jumping on board Bush's coattails and riding them through two elections.

But Warner would still be Chairman today because of those Bush coattails were it not for his interference in the GOP primary process and the resulting bad plays in the general election with his brother Monty's campaign for Governor. At first, no one could believe that the Warner Brothers wouldn't do everything in their power to avoid the appearance of home cooking in the Republican Primary.

Yet stories swirled about mailing lists given by the GOP to Monty's campaign but not other gubernatorial candidates. And those stories began to hurt the Warner image. Was the GOP a mere plaything for them? Was everyone just getting used in order to support this one family's Napoleonic ambitions?

Then came the debt of the general campaign, as the Monty Warner effort and Kris Warner's GOP became nearly collapsed as one entity. The result? About \$200,000 in debt for a party that can ill afford it. Oh, and let's not forget those "Bush/Warner" signs, unauthorized by the Bush people and brazen enough to alienate even little old ladies who had served on the State GOP Executive Committee for years.

The Warners were even willing to hurt their own President's chances in West Virginia to advance their "war aims." That's when the remaining former Warner fans started getting off Kris's bus, and his own chairmanship-like the man he replaced-was teetering.

You know the rest of the story: Monty lost miserably in the race against Joe Manchin, having never raised the money to put on a real campaign. Kris eventually lost his job as Chairman of the State GOP, though he had to be dragged away kicking and screaming in the end. And Kasey?

And now poor Kasey may have lost his job as U.S. Attorney even though he did a competent job, perhaps due to an angry White House who resented the tail wagging the dog in West Virginia.

Do the Warner Brothers ever wonder if those "Bush/Warner" signs were worth it now?

Eric St. James is a contributing columnist from Huntington.

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