

Summary of Meeting with John P. Avlon

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, August 10, 2007

Guest speaker: John P. Avlon, deputy policy director and speechwriter, Rudy Giuliani presidential campaign

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Mooty, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting --Over the last two years, John Avlon, former columnist and associate editor for the *New York Sun* and author of the book *Independent Nation: How Centrists Can Change American Politics*, has been receiving weekly summaries of Civic Caucus meetings, along with some 500 others. He was invited today to discuss issues the Civic Caucus has been addressing in recent months, including election-related matters and media questions.

B. Welcome and introduction --Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Avlon. In introducing Avlon, Paul quoted Avlon from his book *Independent Nation*: "As a battle rages between freedom and fundamentalism at home and abroad, Americans need to hear the voice of the broad and vital center, restoring a sense of balance with backbone...Centrists choose to view America not in terms of group affiliation, but as a diverse collection of individuals working concert, restoring a sense of perspective and recognizing that what we share as Americans is far greater than what divides us."

Avlon is on the staff of Rudy Giuliani's presidential campaign. He was on Giuliani's staff when Giuliani was mayor of New York City and previously worked on Bill Clinton's re-election campaign.

C. Comments and questions --During Avlon's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Importance of a presidential candidate who can compete in all 50 states --Avlon said he'll take a different approach today, and not address certain election law changes that have been discussed in the Civic Caucus in the past – and focus on the Giuliani campaign. Avlon said that the greatest service to those who consider themselves independent-minded voters will occur if a candidate can compete in all 50 states. Such a candidate would naturally get the most buy-in from independent voters, he said. He contended that Giuliani can compete in all 50 states. As a precedent, he cited the appeal of Ronald Reagan, who carried 49 states in 1984.

2. Combating a feeling of disenfranchisement --A Civic Caucus member said many people in the middle feel disenfranchised because of the appeal of some candidates to people at either ends of the political spectrum. Avlon replied that America functions best when all voters are engaged in the process. Independent-minded voters want a candidate who is rooted in the American character of idealism tempered by realism. They want someone who can get things done.

3. Question of legislative candidates appealing to the middle --A committee member noted that gerrymandering tends to produce more safe districts for candidates,

whether left or right, thereby making it difficult for moderates to feel their votes make any difference. Avlon said he has written about redistricting of legislative districts. Much can be done to reduce polarization. Avlon noted that fiscal conservative values are one way to build common ground, as it's a virtue that has been missing from Washington in recent years. He mentioned Mayor Giuliani's record of working with a Democratic City Council to turn a \$2.3 billion dollar deficit to a multi-billion dollar surplus, while cutting taxes 23 times and balancing the budget for 8 years. That's an example of how change in leadership at the top can have an impact on legislative bodies. Finally, he also said it is important for people who feel disaffected to get out and vote.

4. Attractiveness of the Feb. 5 primaries --Asked about the possibility of moving to regional primaries, Avlon said the unprecedented February 5 primary could encourage candidates to broaden their campaign appeal to try to attract the broadest range of voters.

5. Question of decline in quality of public affairs coverage by media --Civic Caucus members raised questions with Avlon about the critical importance of assuring a good flow of public affairs information during a time of decline in the role of traditional media and the rise of the internet. Avlon said a major concern people have--irrespective of communication medium--is a bias in the media toward covering conflict among people of different political persuasions. He said there's a lot of quality journalism being provided, by sources such as the *Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal*, which consistently provide a good exchange of ideas, including those put forth by reputable public figures. He also said that we shouldn't concentrate so much on what is missing but where new value is being created, such as the internet. He expressed a hope that the internet will encourage a more active and informed citizenry.

6. What attracts a broad cross section of voters --A committee member summarized Avlon's main point today that the best approach for bringing independent-minded voters to the polls is through presidential candidates who can compete in 50 states, uniting the country to meet national challenges. The member recalled names of several candidates with broad appeal at the state level in years past. That approach is different from the way the Civic Caucus has been approaching voter participation so far. The Civic Caucus has been learning about redistricting, instant runoff voting, and the role of precinct caucuses, for example, with the expectation that changes in those areas will serve to increase the participation of all voters. Avlon stated that the Giuliani campaign had not been focused on specific election reform proposals to date – focusing instead on its 12 Commitments to the American people – but contended that such changes could come by a combination of an engaged citizenry and new, unifying, leadership at the top.

7. Thanks --On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne and Paul thanked Avlon for being with us today.

8. Minnesota's role in selection of nominees for President --After discussion with Avlon, members of the Civic Caucus noted that it is through Minnesota's precinct caucus system that this state plays a role in picking nominees for President. However, the precinct caucus system as presently structured seems to serve the interest of candidates with platforms that are more polarizing than unifying.