

JC Watts column
Stephens Media Group
03/07 – Deja Vu
Final draft

Yogi Berra may be the greatest philosopher in the modern age. He massacred the King's English, but came out with some simply profound thoughts.

"Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours."

"A nickel ain't worth a dime anymore."

And, perhaps my all-time favorite...

"No one goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

But Yogi once made a statement that applies to a couple of the institutions most that have been pretty important in my life – athletics and politics.

"It's déjà vu all over again."

If you read the sports pages, you'll see the same old names recycled again and again in management positions in the NBA, the NFL and Major League Baseball.

Before the current season, the Golden State Warriors made a big deal about bringing back one of the most successful coaches in the history of their franchise, Don Nelson. There was much ballyhoo about the glory days returning to Bay area basketball. As I write this, the Golden State Warriors are in last place in the NBA's Pacific Division, twenty games out of first place. Nelson has a winning record overall in his career, but has lost many more post season games than he has won, and his teams have failed to make the playoffs eleven times.

My beloved Dallas Cowboys made a major splash in their recent hiring process. They almost hired Norv Turner, who hasn't won anywhere he's coached, then went for Wade Phillips, who is a great defensive coach, but undistinguished in his head coaching career. Lucky for the San Diego Chargers, who fired their winning coach, and replaced him with...Norv Turner.

I don't understand why management thinks things will be different when they keep recycling the same old names, faces and playbooks.

Same thing in political campaigns.

If you wonder why most campaigns on the Republican and Democrat sides all look and sound alike, even feel alike, the answer is pretty simple.

If you peel the onion of any national campaign, you'll see that the top fifty campaign strategists, fundraisers, pollsters, spokespersons, policy wonks, and economic advisors are pretty much interchangeable. I'd estimate of the top 40-50 combined, ninety percent have dominated presidential campaigns since the Ronald Reagan era. I call it the Conventional Wisdom Sweepstakes. The same old names regurgitated again and again.

Like Yogi said, "it's déjà vu all over again."

So many consultants and operatives are still riding on the laurels of Reagan, thinking that they'll find and deliver the new Reagan. They're locked in an outmoded political model, where they rely on wood stove mentality in a microwave era.

This is hard for me to do, but I've got to give Howard Dean some credit. Four years ago, he brought in a guy who had been around the block in Democrat politics, but never at the head of the parade. Joe Trippi had worked on presidential campaigns for Ted Kennedy, Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, and Dick Gephardt, but he transformed politics when he took on Howard Dean.

Trippi acknowledged that technology had emerged in such a way to make campaigns more effective and efficient. The Internet was introduced in 2004 in a way we had never seen before, and in that regard, campaigns will never be the same again.

Still, the taste of campaigns is more often than not stale, because we're locked in the same old models of thinking. Ronald Reagan was timeless. His leadership transcended time, because he believed in people.

If you're a Republican, you have to talk about tax relief and national security and life. If you're a Democrat, you have a model that you've hewn to for the last forty years that says you have to attract unions, trial lawyers, environmentalists and minorities, with the same old message. But things are no better for them than they were forty years ago! Not a lot of change for Republicans the last fifteen years, either.

It's time for a new model.

What if Republicans delivered a message of real opportunity to the black community? What if we didn't tick off every Hispanic in the country with our position on immigration, but offered opportunity to immigrants and business that would produce a win for everyone?

What if Democrats looked beyond their fealty to unions and feminists, and offered real alternatives for business and evangelicals?

Sadly, campaign infrastructure won't allow a candidate to venture outside his or her box, because you may tick off this liberal or that conservative.

As long we keep jumping in the same box with the same old clique of consultants, contributors, and coalitions, how can we expect out of the box results?

Déjà vu, for sure.