



Former justice talks book, politics at HWS

By RICK KOLLINS

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GENEVA — Richard Rosenbaum, former chief of staff for Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and a state Supreme Court justice for 14 years, believes that the Republican Party has suffered under President George W. Bush.

In response to a question from the floor at last night's President's Forum talk at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Rosenbaum said he agrees that the GOP has been "tarnished" by the Bush administration and that extremists have taken over the party.

"Zealots work like the devil to get their points of view across — that's human nature — and the party has created a Frankenstein monster," he said.

Rosenbaum said that when he's asked why he doesn't leave the Republican Party he answers that he doesn't have to leave the party, because the party left him when it moved so far to the right.

"This is not the party I was involved in," he added.

Although Rosenbaum's forum appearance in the Geneva Room at the Warren Hunting Smith Library was billed as a presentation centering on his new book, "No Room for Democracy: The Triumph of Ego Over Common Sense," he addressed a number of current political issues in an informal and light-hearted manner.

"This is a better crowd than McCain got before Palin," he joked in his opening remarks to an overflow crowd of mostly students.

Later, he commented that John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate was not very well thought out, but it did knock Barack Obama off the front pages for a while.

"It's rare for this kind of phenomenon to continue. They're just buying time while [Palin] gets up to speed," he said.

Rosenbaum indicated he will vote for McCain, whom he referred to as a "longtime friend" and "straightforward," adding that although he is impressed by the "miracle" that Obama has pulled off, he is not comfortable with the Democratic candidate's lack of experience.

He compared Obama's meteoric rise to that of Jimmy Carter in 1976, but added that Carter turned out to be one of the worst presidents ever.

He was also very critical of the electoral system, claiming primaries and political conventions have become meaningless and the Electoral College is a "waste of time."

"Primaries were initiated to give people a say, but they only serve now to give coverage to the leaders," he said. "The political bosses get their organizations to vote and they represent 10 percent of the 15 percent who turn out to vote."

He called the conventions "cheerleading sessions" because the outcomes are known in advance and noted that the last time a roll call actually determined a Republican candidate was 1976 when Gerald Ford won the nomination over Ronald Reagan.

He said it's only a matter of time until the Electoral College disappears.

"I was a New York elector and was told who to vote for. The system should be reviewed with the view to make the popular vote the deciding factor," he said.

He also decried the naming of vice presidential nominees before the presidential nominees have been officially selected. He added that the vice president is merely "standby equipment," although he conceded that Dick Cheney has been an exception.

He said Cheney's office being right next to the president's represents a change in the role of the vice president, and despite the way he is portrayed in the media, Rosenbaum regards Cheney as a "tremendous guy and really warm."

In responding to questions about the current financial crisis, Rosenbaum suggested the possibility of the U.S. losing its place as the world's economic leader.

"We may not always be top banana, but we've had 200 and some odd years to set an example for the world," he said. "We may be able to hang on a lot longer, but we've got our work cut out for us."

He likened the situation to what happened to Eastman Kodak in recent years.

"Eastman Kodak lost a lot of its steam because they thought they would be on the top of the world forever," he said.

Rosenbaum, a Rochester native and 1952 graduate of Hobart — where he attended on a football, lacrosse and boxing scholarship — also told the story of lasting two rounds in a boxing match with Floyd Patterson, who went on to become the world heavyweight champion.

"I got knocked down in the first round and the referee, Jersey Joe Wolcott (a former world heavyweight champion), stopped the fight after two rounds," Rosenbaum recalled. "I gave myself the nickname Picasso because I was always on the canvas."

In reality, Rosenbaum was an intercollegiate heavyweight champion at Hobart.

He said his book provides a humorous look at politics, and promotional material describes it as a firsthand and behind-the-scenes account of events that Rosenbaum witnessed and affected over more than 50 years in politics.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a close friend, refers to Rosenbaum in the book's forward as a "keen analyst of the political process" and writes that "no one better understands the workings of government and the minds of those attached to it. . . 'No Room For Democracy' is a plum pudding of fascinating stories, financiers and high-fliers, spiced here and there with high jinks and chicanery."

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of the state Republican Committee, chairman of the state Unemployment Insurance Appeal Board, a member of the Republican National Committee for more than 20 years, and a candidate for New York governor in 1994. He has also served on the HWS board of trustees and continues as an honorary member.

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For more information, visit www.hws.edu/about/forum.aspx.

fltimes@fltimes.com

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