

UPCLOSE with Stan Barnes

Political consultant speaks frankly about what's ailing GOP

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Reporters often turn to Stan Barnes as someone who can talk about the infighting in the Republican Party, for two main reasons: Not only does he have a snappy way with words that makes for good quotes, but he's brutally honest about what he sees happening.

Barnes speaks from experience, having a long history in Republican politics. He was elected to the House of Representatives in the late 1980s, later moved to the Senate, then ran for Congress in 2000 when Matt Salmon retired. A vote from his very first year of public service came back to haunt him in that campaign, when Jeff Flake — the ultimate winner and current representative of Arizona's 6th Congressional District — pounded Barnes for voting for a tax increase to help solve deficit problems.

Despite the impact on his political career, Barnes said he wouldn't have changed his vote on the tax increase, and he says today's lawmakers who voted to send a sales tax increase to the ballot had the same choice he had all those years ago — which wasn't really a choice at all.

Barnes spoke with *Arizona Capitol Times* on Feb. 26 from the penthouse office of his lobbying and consulting firm Copper State Consulting about Republican politics, his vote on a tax increase and why he defends the work of the Legislature.

Let's start this off with an easy one: What do you think of the McCain/Hayworth race?

I think, for a guy like me who loves politics, it's one of the best things I've ever witnessed. I'm not paid by either camp, though I support McCain, for what it's worth. But just to detach yourself and look down on it, it's a great political science experiment. It is the incumbent with the money, the 100 percent name-ID, the long track record of service; and the relative upstart who wants to overthrow that and thinks there's a wave of anger he can point toward the incumbent. So, as an experiment, it's fun to watch.

For the Republican Party, it's another example of the civil war we are having. It's not good to have civil war. I don't know when it's going to end, and by the looks of this campaign, it's not going to end any time soon.

It's interesting to look at someone like JD Hayworth as a "relative upstart," since he served in Congress for 12 years.

Right. But compared to McCain, I guess he is. And the fact that he's been out of office.

Hayworth's strategy has been successful in other states. Doug Hoffman made a splash in New York, Marco Rubio is destroying Charlie Crist in Florida. Is Arizona's political landscape amenable to that, especially with someone like John McCain?

One of the beauties of politics is that it is, indeed, local. You cannot take a Florida situation and import it and lay it down on top of Arizona. McCain is not Charlie Crist. Hayworth is not Rubio. They are their own space, their own personalities, their own reputations. The issues are different. I don't think the national phenomenon that seems to pit the old versus the new, or the angry versus the incumbent is going to play itself out in the Hayworth/McCain campaign the way the Hayworth camp would like it.



PHOTO BY JOSH CODDINGTON

What has this civil war done to the Republican Party in Arizona?

It has done a number of things. One, it's tremendously hurt fundraising. And with less money comes less profile and less communication with voters and less of a return at the ballot box. I think it has impacted fundraising and issue development within the party.

That spills over to the broad electorate, as well as to what matters at the Legislature. The civil war is as bad as I've seen it in my 22 years of being a part of it, and it doesn't show any sign of relenting.

Is this something that can be resolved? At its essence, it's a fight over philosophical issues, so can it ever be resolved?

It's not unnatural — parties have factions, by nature, and they never go away. What's unnatural now is the level of animosity.

I came into politics at a strange time, in the late 1980s. It was the tail end of what people now call the good old days, where there was a lot of camaraderie. Somewhere down the line we left that behind and it became personalized, and we decided we did not need to be united about things, but that it was more important to live to individual philosophies, no matter how absurd or apart from the mainstream they are.

The real impact is that the party has become impotent. The party has become a lot less of a factor than it ever was. That has, I think, led to the movement toward more and more independent voters. When the Republican Party is at civil war, and it spills into the media, people understand that and they see that. Most average people are repelled by that, and they unplug.

My own prediction is it's leading to a trend of independent growth that is only in its infancy — that within the next two election cycles, there will be more independents than Democrats in Arizona. It's going to catch Republicans in the next decade. And the generation behind us is an independent-minded generation to begin with, and the idea of plugging into a party seems as silly as letting a network TV programmer tell you when you can watch a television program.

The party's going to rue the day it couldn't get along with itself.

Does that set the stage for a system with more than two major parties, like Europe? Or does it just turn into two parties with small bases and the majority of voters as independents?

The natural inclination is to say that birds of a feather will flock together, but the independent phenomenon, I think, will trump that. The independent movement is big. Those who figure that out are going to be winners in future elections.

I don't think we're going to splinter into other parties. I think we're going to have a Republican Party that is distilled down to a certain essence, and the same with Democrats, and in the middle is a pragmatic, centrist swath that says, "I want trains to run on time, I want things to work, and I don't care about high philosophy."

But if you narrow the pool of candidates down to those running from those extremely ideological bases, it seems like you're setting the stage for even more partisanship and government inaction.

You're on point. It feeds on itself. Pretty soon — I don't think this next election — but there will be an independent candidate that wins. Once that happens, it will be like the guy that broke the four-minute mile. Everybody will say, I guess you can win as an independent. When that happens, the dam will break.

I'm not saying I want this. I'm saying that, as a ruthlessly detached observer, this is what I think is happening.

How have you seen the Legislature change since the halcyon days of the late 1980s?

The good old days had their really bad parts, though we get to where we think everything is great in the rear-view mirror. It had its own real bad things. However, there was a lot more of you get something, I get something, and the constituencies we all represent win because we're making things happen. That seems to have gone away.

But it is unfair to compare then and now: 1990 was not 2010. It's a whole different world now. When I got to the House, they asked me as a freshman if I wanted a computer. I said, "Why would I use one?" so I declined. So, I'm always hesitant to compare then and now.

It's not like we're on a timeline, moving from there to here. It's more like every single election gives birth to a new flower. It's blossoming right in front of our eyes. Every one is different, they all have their own beauty and make-up and complexities. It just so happens that, today, the dominant thing is independence.

Everybody elected thinks they are a sole proprietor and not a part of a greater organism. The Republicans don't hang together the way they should. The Democrats do a better job of that because they're in the minority, but you could split them easily, and the minute they're in the majority they'll fracture like the Republicans do.

The tools that leadership used to have to make things happen are not there anymore. Throw in Clean Elections and term limits and all the other things, and suddenly you have a soup that is an entirely different soup than the one 20 years ago.

I'm not saying it's worse. The theoretical idea that a man or woman should get elected and vote their conscience is nice, and there's more of that happening than there ever has been. But the awakening about that is that it's not exactly the way governance should happen, because governance is compromise. It's finding common ground, making steps forward to cure what ails us. The independent thing and not betraying your conscience gets in the way of pragmatic compromise.

It is that attitude that's missing now? It's cliché, but politics is the art of the compromise.

Yeah, it's become a negative. People are afraid to compromise because they don't want to go home to their district and explain that they gave a little to get some. For some reason, they think they will be punished by that.

Part of that is the parties are dominated by activists, and those activists see the world through a prism that has only black and white, no rainbows. It's much easier to go back and say, "I voted my conscience, and it's black and white, and everything else is wrong."

That's lazy, and it's pandering, and it's hiding from responsibility. But yet it's more common now. I think we're the worse for it.

How would you have voted on the sales tax increase ballot referral?

Fortunately or unfortunately, there is proof of how I would have voted because in 1989, the first budget I got to work on as a 27-year-old freshman who

ran on a campaign of not raising taxes, I voted for a tax increase. It was a Republican-only tax increase, done to avoid a more expensive bipartisan tax increase.

And at the time, that was the largest tax increase in state history.

As my opponents in the future pointed out to everybody, that was the largest increase in state history at the time.

And it led directly to a Democratic Senate the following term, right?

In fact, it did. Republicans got eviscerated in the next election. But I think that's how I would have voted this time. It takes courage to say, "Here are the facts. They don't line up with politics because I'm going to pay a price for this, but they are the facts." When we saw the facts in 1989, we did what we had to do. The facts today are far worse.

Despite whatever shortcomings there may be in politics today, you really love the Legislature, don't you?

It's easy to throw stones at the Legislature. But I remain among the chief defenders of the Legislature wherever I go.

Those people down there are doing the best they can with what they're given. I defy any of the critics who are so hot about their criticism to go down there and try being a legislator in today's political environment. It takes great courage to step in the arena and make the tough decisions they have to make.

How do you see the race for the GOP gubernatorial nomination shaking out?

I think we'll learn a lot in May, with the election on the tax. If the voters reward Governor Brewer with the tax increase, then I think you've found your next governor. If they don't, I don't think the opposite is true, but I think it's more in doubt.

You don't think she's done for if that fails?

No, I don't. She is the incumbent, and she's highly likeable as a person. I think the public gives her deference for taking over in a difficult situation and thinks she's doing the best she can.

Luckily for Jan Brewer, it's starting to settle in with the general public that these are extraordinary times, and I think they give her credit for trying to do what's right. They may not support the tax, but she remains a popular person. Elections in Arizona always surprise. ☰

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Do you and Jeff Flake get along?

As a matter of fact, we do. After the election he asked me to go to lunch and we had a great conversation. Separate and apart from me daring to challenge him, we get along fine as human beings. By the time I left the lunch with him, I knew in my heart I was in the better spot than he, because I get all the politics I can stand, but I get to turn it off at night.



How often do you Google yourself?

I saw a bumper sticker once that said, "I Google myself once a day," and it made me laugh. It just sounds wrong.

I've actually only looked myself up twice in my entire life. There's a freedom that comes from not worrying about that sort of thing. I do know that there's an African-American gentleman who plays the saxophone in Illinois named Stan Barnes. So, if you do Google my name, you see yours truly and this musician from the Midwest.

What is one thing that you won't skimp on?

Boots. The boots I wear are too expensive, but I just can't bring myself to go less. I won't tell you how much they cost, because I'd be embarrassed if that number got out. But I feel that it's a tip of the hat to living the way I want. I own probably a dozen pairs — maybe more. And I'm not done. I'm only 48 years old. My foot's not growing, but the selection of boots is growing, so my collection has to grow.