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Times-Picayune

Mary Landrieu throws her support behind Jim Letten

April 27, 2009

Ending months of suspense and breaking with political custom, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, the de facto leader of the state's Democratic Party, announced Monday that she has joined her Republican colleague, U.S. Sen. David Vitter, in supporting the retention of Jim Letten as U.S. attorney for Louisiana's Eastern District. She also named Orleans Parish Civil District Court Judge Michael Bagneris as her choice to fill a federal judgeship and Genevieve "Genny" May for U.S. Marshal.

With both Louisiana senators now in agreement, Letten, the GOP's choice for the job eight years ago, appears to be a lock to win Senate approval and hold onto his spot as the Justice Department's top man in the New Orleans area. President Barack Obama, however, has the final say on whether Letten's name is submitted for a vote.

Cautioning that her recommendation is only a first step in the process, Landrieu expressed confidence that Obama will nominate Letten, a registered Republican appointed by President George W. Bush.

"I think Jim Letten has good support from a broad range of Democrats as well as Republicans," Landrieu said as the U.S. attorney stood at her side for a news conference on the steps of the state Supreme Court.

"And I think President Obama said as he ran for this office that he wanted to reach across the aisle and build bridges and find middle ground. And I don't think that he's going to find this recommendation unusual."

The recommendation from Landrieu is considered key because a president usually will heed the advice of his party's U.S. senator.

On Monday, Landrieu also recommended veteran Orleans Parish Civil District Judge Michael Bagneris to fill a federal judgeship and State Police Deputy Superintendent Genevieve "Genny" May as U.S. marshal. May, the highest-ranking woman in the State Police hierarchy, is in line to become the first woman to serve as U.S. marshal in Louisiana.

Speculation about which way Landrieu would go on the U.S. attorney recommendation has been a subject of intense debate in political circles since the day after her re-election in November when she said, "Jim Letten has my support today." But she quickly added the caveat that it would not be her decision alone, noting that "I am the senior senator, but I'm not the only Democratic leader."

Changing parties

Republicans and Democrats alike have said Letten has waged an effective battle against corruption and deserves to stay as the chief federal prosecutor in the New Orleans region.

But based on to-the-victor-goes-the-spoils political tradition, Obama's victory after eight years of Republican rule in Washington should have signaled that Letten would be replaced by a Democrat.

Some Democrats and African-American leaders urged Landrieu to get behind a qualified Democrat who, in their view, would be every bit as committed to prosecuting public corruption as Letten.

Landrieu kept everyone guessing for four months as she explored what she said Monday was "an incredible pool of candidates." Although she didn't name anyone, one of the contenders for her support was thought to be Brian Jackson, a former federal prosecutor now in private practice in New Orleans.

In the end, Landrieu said conversations with elected officials, civic leaders, crime fighters and representatives of nonprofit organizations produced a consensus that Letten was the best choice.

'A proven record'

"The New Orleans region is a safer place because of Jim Letten's determination, " she said, adding that her call was based on "effectiveness and experience and a proven record of accomplishments."

Landrieu said Letten "came highly recommended from a broad swath of this community, particularly from the sheriffs, the district attorneys and local law enforcement that work so closely with this office."

Describing his crime-fighting record as "very distinguished, " Landrieu said Letten's finest hour might have come in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that left the region's criminal justice system in shambles. "He was one of the pillars that held it together, " she said.

Letten expressed his gratitude to Landrieu for "an incredible vote of trust and confidence."

Offering kudos to his staff for their tireless work, Letten said, "There is nothing that we will not do within the law and the Constitution to continue to make a difference as this incredible city continues to struggle to rebuild itself."

Support by Normand

Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand, who attended the announcement, said while others might be qualified to fill Letten's shoes, there are "none that have his record and none that have the long-standing working relationships with local law enforcement and law enforcement at the state level that he does."

Normand said maintaining the status quo in the U.S. attorney's office will offer lasting benefits to the region.

"To retool that and kind of work through that curve would take a lengthy period of time, " he said, adding that "this may not be the right time to effect that kind of change as we rebuild in a post-Katrina world."

Vitter, who has clashed often with Landrieu, had pledged to fight the nomination of anyone but Letten. On Monday, he offered her rare words of praise for supporting the reappointment.

"I applaud Senator Landrieu for doing the right thing and look forward to the president's reappointment of Jim Letten, " Vitter said in a written statement. "And I certainly repeat my pledge -- if the president includes Jim in his first slate of Louisiana nominations, I'll return that good will through my role in the blue slip confirmation process for Louisiana nominees."

Praise from Scalise

U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, a Republican from Jefferson, also commended Landrieu and released a letter to Obama urging support for Letten.

"As Louisiana works hard to move forward with our recovery, rooting out public corruption is a vital part of this process, " Scalise wrote. "Jim Letten has proven to be a vigilant leader in the fight against public corruption, fraud and abuse in the New Orleans region. . . . It is critical that the public remain confident that our recovery dollars are spent properly and we break from the politics of the past."

Landrieu said she hoped to recommend appointments for the U.S. attorneys in Louisiana's two other districts in two to three weeks.

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