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Brian Schweitzer's vision for Montana

Governor Brian Schweitzer is not short on ideas for leading Montana

By Brian Schott/photo by Dave Reese

Like most ranchers, Brian Schweitzer is up before the sun.

Schweitzer, Montana's Democratic governor from Whitefish, gets up each day around 4 a.m. He reads several Montana newspapers, logs onto the Internet, scans some of the national news, looks at some of the blog sites, has a couple of cups of coffee, then starts making phone calls to his circle of friends.

Schweitzer runs several farming operations around Montana, but his base operation is 450 acres of sprawling fields on the outskirts of Whitefish, where he raises wheat and alfalfa. This is where he calls home. Standing knee-deep in the carpet of green alfalfa on a hot, sunny July afternoon, Schweitzer exclaims, "This is damn good alfalfa."

Since winning the gubernatorial election this past fall and becoming Montana's first Democratic governor in 16 years, Schweitzer's figurative ranch has increased in size: he now runs the entire state of Montana, and he runs it as a rancher would. Get up early. Hire good help. If it's broken, fix it. If it's working, run it.

Schweitzer is an idea man and he has big ideas for Montana. From tapping into Montana's natural resources like coal and natural gas, to affordable housing and transportation, Schweitzer is not short on ways to help build the state's economic situation and raise it from being near the bottom of the ladder nationwide.

Schweitzer is not afraid to speak out on issues he feels are important, even if it might rattle the powers that be. In June, he arrived on an Amtrak train in Whitefish to show support for the rail system that President Bush has targeted for elimination.

"The idea for the trip was to bring attention to how important passenger train service is to northern Montana," he says. "The Bush administration said we're going to zero this budget out. So I said we need to respond. So we put together this whistle stop tour and it seems to have already worked."

He rails the federal transportation secretary, Norma Mineta, for not knowing his figures when he talks about the number of riders that use the service and also for not having a plan to help the struggling train.

"I have three teenage kids and that's like them showing up at school and saying 'the dog ate my homework.' I think it's ill conceived and short sighted - going in the wrong direction to decrease rail passenger service.

"What you have is an administration with the largest budget deficit in the history of the country and they are looking for ways to cut it. This is what I would caution the Bush administration. The Empire Builder goes through North Dakota, Montana, and Idaho. I think they all voted for this president. Is he taking these states for granted? Is he saying 'We don't care about you anymore, we got your vote?'"

It is this candid criticism of Republican policies that have the Democratic Party talking about the possibilities for an even bigger future for this new politician, but whether Schweitzer is listening is anyone's guess.

"My number one job is to stand up for Montana, and I'm going to continue to do it."

Schweitzer mentions a recent spot in the national limelight on CNN where he criticized the snug relationship between politicians and lobbyists. He complained that he has to wash the stink off every time he leaves the nation's capital.

"I have a 72-hour rule in Washington. I try to get in and out," he reiterates. It's this straightforward rancher talk that is comforting and real - either perfectly rehearsed, or perfectly genuine.

At six-foot-three, Schweitzer is an imposing fellow with ruddy cheeks, a wide smile, a long-legged swagger, jeans, a pressed shirt, a bolo tie, cowboy boots and a loud voice. You can almost imagine him pushing open the doors of a saloon with a sheriff's badge and a catch phrase to tell the scoundrels to get out of town before midnight or else.

Full Steam Ahead

Schweitzer was born in Havre, Mont., in 1955, the fourth of six children and was raised on his parents' cattle ranch in the Judith Basin. His German and Irish grandparents immigrated to Montana near the turn of the century and homesteaded in Hill County. Montana is definitely in his blood.

He also has global work experience through a career of irrigation development that took him to Africa, Asia, Europe and South America. During seven years in Saudi Arabia, Schweitzer developed over 28,000 acres of irrigated cropland and said he learned a lot about this oil-rich country and its people.

Schweitzer's name has been tossed about as a potential democratic presidential candidate in 2008. Riding around a bumpy dirt road on his farm in a late-model Ford pickup with a cracked windshield, Schweitzer says running for president is not his top priority; building Montana is.

"I bring a lot of common sense background as a business man and as a farmer," he says. "I look at a problem; I dissect it, and figure out how to fix it. I look at a 50-acre field and I say, 'All right - we can cut so much this day, it's going to take so many days for it to dry, we're going to get this many bales, how are you going to pick it?' I run the state of Montana in the same way. I try to anticipate where there are going to be problems and I try to marshal the resources we're going to need to be positive and not be reactive. My background has forced me to be proactive and plan in advance."

Schweitzer makes no bones about criticism he has received for wearing jeans and bringing his border collie dog to work with him.

"Some people don't like my blue jeans, other people don't like my dog, but you know, my job is to work for Montanans and anyone who doesn't understand that business dress code in Montana is a jacket, a nice shirt, a tie and maybe boots, they don't understand Montana. When I was campaigning that's what I wore, so why would it surprise you that now that I've been elected that's what I wear? If you recall, both Kerry and Bush wore jeans while they were campaigning and the day after the campaign they're both back in Armani suits. All I'm doing is what I said I'd do. What you saw was what you're getting."

On his train tour, Schweitzer shook hands with many people who were surprised to have the governor of Montana walk up to them and say hello. But it is this kind of disarming and common-man attitude that just may have won him the election in the first place.

In Whitefish, the train pulls into the depot as a light rain spits from the sky. Schweitzer turns on the smile, shakes a lot of hands, and you can just tell he feels right at home. So at home in fact, that after the crowds start to disperse, the next stop is the local watering hole of the Great Northern Bar. Schweitzer's PR people may have cringed as he jumped behind the bar and had a shot with a few patrons, but it's real, unrehearsed, and definitely Montana.

You can understand why the Wall Street Journal called Schweitzer a "well-spoken, gun-owning, dog-loving, native-ritual-doing, shot-of-whiskey-drinking" governor.

Straight-Shooter

Schweitzer has a deep love for Montana, and it shows.

"We're independent people; we're proud of Montana and who we are," he says. "We're defined by a strong attachment to family. We're also defined by faith, but an interesting faith. We're not a place that historically told people what your faith needs to be. A lot of people in Montana still get their greatest inspiration from going fishing, hiking, being one with their maker in a way that folks on the east and west coast would never understand."

On the job, Schweitzer is focused on rooting out inefficiencies in government.

The biggest lesson he learned coming out of the most recent Montana legislative session is the importance of smiling. "When reporters would come to me and say 'Governor, Senator so-and-so says you are a low-down rascal, you're worse than a gopher, and your mother wears Army boots. What do you have to say about that, Governor?' And I say, 'Senator so-and-so said that about me?'"

In turn, he offers the reporter a compliment on the senator in question. His answer to conflict is to kill them with love.

"If you're looking for something negative from me, you're not going to get it," he says. "Consequently, you know what you read the next day? Nothing. The papers have to write about something else. If anything, I've brought the level of negative discourse down. I won't play."

Constituency groups are another side of politics that Schweitzer ignores. "I don't have groups that say 'We got you elected, you have to go to bat for us.' I didn't have one group that got me elected. I think I represent all the people of Montana who have been holding their noses for a number of years."

Having Republican John Bohlinger as his lieutenant governor has certainly helped the cooperative spirit he likes to push. The duo almost act like brothers, making fun of each other's ties (Bohlinger wears a bow tie) and ribbing each other about the Grizzly/Bobcat football rivalry- Bohlinger got a business degree from the University of Montana and Schweitzer got his degree in soil science from Montana State University.

"We don't represent either party - we represent the people of Montana," Bohlinger says. "Our ticket attempted to build this bridge to cover all Montanans. Good ideas can come from both sides of the aisle. We need to look for good ideas and be sensitive to all Montanans." Bohlinger's hopes for future generations of Montanans are broad. "If I could wish for one thing for Montana, it would be that there is more diversity to our state. I think one of the rich things in life is to share this experience with other cultures and ethnic groups. We are taking on as our principle assignment creating an environment that will provide jobs and opportunity. We want the most educated workforce and as we succeed we will see a great diversity of people coming here."

Presidential Possibilities?

After Schweitzer defeated Montana Secretary of State Bob Brown in last year's election, rumors of the possibility of Schweitzer being a strong presidential candidate began circulating.

"You know the lint that gathers in people's belly buttons when they get older?" Schweitzer asks. "Someone's been smoking that lint. It's nothing, no one's ever heard of me."

In mid-July, he told the Associated Press about the people who mention his name as a presidential contender: "These people are kooky," he replies.

Nonetheless, people have heard of him and the talk on Capitol Hill continues to push this far-fetched theory that a Montana governor could actually take the White House with his straight-talking, middle of the road, real-rancher kind of politics. He's also grabbing headlines in newspapers and magazines and has had three appearances on CNN. There's even a Web site dedicated to pushing Schweitzer to throw his name in the hat.

Schweitzer says he got into politics when "a horse kicked him and it wasn't a fatal blow." After running an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate in 2000 against Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.), Schweitzer said he still wanted to be involved with government.

"It was time to make a difference," he said. "I thought I could bring a different perspective to the kind of leadership we had in Montana."

Doing the impossible is where he sets his sights.

"Believe me, I have a lot of flaws, but one of my biggest flaws may be an asset," he says. "I have never in my whole life thought of something as undoable. I always look at something as 'I think we can do that.' If somebody says, 'No one's ever done that before, I don't think it can be done,' well that's reason enough for me to try it."

One of these ideas involves converting the millions of tons of coal reserves in Montana into energy products through coal-conversion technology and hopefully reducing our reliance on foreign oil.

Schweitzer touts something called the Fisher-Tropsch process: a way to turn carbon-based materials (coal beds) into liquid hydrocarbon fuels like diesel, ethanol, hydrogen and methanol.

First developed in 1923, the Fisher-Tropsch process becomes profitable when the cost of oil exceeds \$35 per barrel. Schweitzer talks excitedly about this process as he sits on the hood of an old rusty farm truck with a piece of grass in his mouth.

As Schweitzer inspects different corners of his ranch, he rattles off ideas on wind power, money for education, growth issues, affordable housing, the need for open space, Montana's \$100 million budget surplus, helping small businesses grow, the rising costs of health insurance, attracting high-tech businesses, and even a plan to help reduce the number of Indians in Montana prisons.

"We have a new kind of leadership in Montana," he says as he slides into his Ford. "We're going after it. If it happens, it should happen here first. Montana is on the move."

With an incredible workload on his shoulders and lots of good ideas, Schweitzer knows how to delegate. "That's why I have a lot of good people," he says. "Look, I can't do all this stuff. What I do is I get up early in the morning and I have ideas and I walk in and I say 'All right, let's look into this. Show me the numbers. How do we get from here to there?' And I have people who go hustle it up and figure it out and I go to the next step."

At the end of his work day, or even his career as governor, if people sum up what he accomplished, he hopes it will be this: "I did what I said I would do, and I didn't raise taxes."

Because people tend to vote with their heart, after spending time with him it is easy to see how he got where he is today. What his legacy will be remains to be seen. With news that Amtrak funding has been restored for the short-term, it's apparent that Schweitzer's voice may have been heard in Washington.

"I think we stuck it right in their ear," he says.

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