Johnston places stock in results over political rhetoric, crusades

Last in a series

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WASHINGTON — People frequently describe J. Bennett Johnston by what he does.

Talk to people in Louisiana and Washington — even to Johnston himself — and you come away with the image of a case-by-case, project-by-project, vote-by-vote politician, not a man identified with an issue, a moral crusade, an ideology.

Former U.S. Rep. Joe D. Waggonner of the Shreveport area, a volunteer to the Johnston campaign, has watched Johnston's political career.

As a state legislator in the late 1960s, Johnston was identified with the north-south highway and with building up local colleges and universities, Waggonner said.

But all brick-and-mortar, no crusades?

"I'm not aware that he's ever been associated with anything on that basis," Waggonner said.

But, Waggonner added, Johnston can pursue a federal dollar with a crusader's fervor.

void River Waterway is an example. Beating several presidents, their budget advisers and anti-Red River environmental groups, Johnston and U.S. Rep. Lindy Boggs, D-New Orleans, both Appropriations Committee members, repeatedly have secured congressional appropriations to keep digging a navigation channel toward Shreveport.

Johnston campaigns as a politician who has mastered Washington in order to recruit industry and deliver federal funds to his home state.

Johnston is "a moderate pragmatist," said former aide and now political analyst Charles Cook. "That isn't always a terribly sexy place to be politically."

In a recent look-back over his political career, Johnston most often talked about what he has accomplished, not who he is.

"The essence of my political career has been, from the time I was in the state Legislature up through right now, to produce results instead of rhetoric," Johnston said. "... Some people deal in rhetoric. They'd rather have the issue than the result. They'd rather make the speeches than really get things accomplished. I am exactly the opposite."

"... Louisiana is really not oriented that way. Louisiana, to a large extent, appreciates personality and pepper and humor and style more than substance and results — or at least some people in Louisiana appreciate that, and I'm not particularly good at bombastic speech."

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The appeal to practicality means Johnston must constantly tend his record at the eleventh hour, remind voters of what he's done.

But asked to define himself or put a name to his philosophy, Johnston answered:

"First of all, anyone who tries to summarize his philosophy in a word is probably neither wise nor deep nor very attuned to the needs of his state," Johnston said. "Of course I'm conservative, and everybody around here (Washington) knows that. But I don't try to campaign as an ideological or professional conservative, because if you did you would go counter to your state on some issues.

"For example, to get money for the wetlands, to get money for Red River, to get money for wildlife refuges — well, the whole appropriations process to get things for your state is not what a lot of people think is conservative. I happen to think it is. I mean, I think good infrastructure expenditures is conservative."

"...But, people who try to summarize their whole career in one word are not very serious legislators."

If there ever has been any emotionalism or sense of crusade surrounding Johnston, it probably was in 1971 and 1972, first in the governor's race — which Johnston lost to Edwin Edwards by fewer than 5,000 votes — and then in a challenge to the late U.S. Sen. Allen Ellender, D-La.

Johnston's first troops regarded those campaigns as progress versus the past, youth versus age, good government versus inefficiency, reform versus corruption.

Edwards said that in those days both he and Johnston were considered reform candidates.

"We were both young idealists, very aggressive, very reform-minded," Edwards said. "I initiated hundreds of reforms, long since forgotten, and had he gotten in, he would have done the same thing."

Edwards said Johnston's failure to win the 1971 governor's race was not a matter of issues or philosophy, but of bungled tactics.

"The mistake he made was that he left the north Louisiana area, particularly the Shreveport area, and spent too much time in north Louisiana in the last week of the campaign," said Edwards, who is from the south. "But he was not able to erode my base."

At the same time, Edwards said, Johnston's momentum slowed in his native north, which eventually did not match the voter turnout of south Louisiana.

"If he hadn't gone south those last few days, he would have won," Edwards said.

To others, Johnston's 1971 loss did have some connection to an issue. Johnston ran a "No Deal" campaign, and said he would not reward his campaign by not voting for appointments to state boards and commissions. That reportedly cost Johnston money and votes from some people in the horse racing and oil industries.

Today, some might find it odd that Johnston ever distance himself from special-interest money. Almost every study of federal campaigns, Johnston is among the leaders for receiving political action committee (PAC) donations, generally from PACs related to the energy industry. Johnston chairs the Senate Energy Committee.

Johnston also has routinely earned the legal maximum for paid speechmaking — again often to groups directly affected by Energy Committee decisions.

After losing to Edwards, Johnston ran in 1972 against the 81-year-old Ellender. When Ellender died in mid-campaign, Edwards appointed his wife, Elaine, as a temporary senator.

When Johnston won an election to the U.S. Senate, Edwards gave up his seat, Edwards appointed Johnston to what was left of the old Ellender term and Johnston was elected to four-year terms on other freshmen senator seats.

For some time, Johnston was beset by speculation that Edwards might try to take Johnston's U.S. Senate seat. The shadow of Edwards, and the constant jibe that Johnston had "lucked" into the Ellender seat, made for some sensitive early days in Washington.

Asked if he felt threatened by Edwards or insecure about his seat at first, Johnston replied, "Well, a Senate term is a long term, and the first couple of years I had to scramble and establish myself as a senator and that is hard work."

But, even in those early years, Johnston said polls showed him with a comfortable edge when Edwards was listed as a potential candidate.

In 1978, Johnston beat challenger state Rep. Louis "Woody" Jenkins, D-Baton Rouge, receiving 59 percent of the vote. In Washington terms, that's a landslide and probably only Louisiana would consider it less, said former Johnston aide and ex-state Sen. Tommy Hudson of Baton Rouge.

In the last 12 years, Johnston has amassed seniority and subcommittee chairmanships on budget and appropriations committees and succeeded to the energy chairmanship.

He also ran two unsuccessful races for Senate majority leader.

The first was only a skirmish against incumbent leader Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia. Then in 1988, with Byrd leaving the leadership job, Johnston ran and lost to George Mitchell, D-Maine.

This is a "clubby" contest, and Democratic senators vote in secret and rarely talk to outsiders about the campaign. Yet, Johnston seemed to run much of his leadership campaign through the media, trying to create a perception that he had the momentum and a nearly insurmountable vote lead.

But, on the eve of voting, key "swing" senators declared their allegiance to Mitchell and the all-important momentum went to the Maine Democrat.

Johnston's vote never grew much beyond veteran southerners and some other conservative Democrats. Mitchell actually raised Johnston's region, winning the votes of freshmen Democrats from the South.

Johnston said Mitchell won because he had recently chaired the Democrats' Senate campaign committee and greater freshmen voted for him.

While Johnston won only the most conservative votes in the majority leader's race, Louisiana Republicans have charged that Johnston temporarily swerved left, pandering to Democratic senators from other regions in an effort to win their leadership votes.

The most often cited example is Johnston's vote against Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, who was opposed by civil rights, labor and feminist organizations.

Johnston acknowledges that the anti-Bork vote is the only one of recent years that has produced any serious political heat.

"Nine thousand votes out there, and I vote more like Bob Dole than Ted Kennedy," Johnston said. "But, they (opponents) can point to the Bork vote, which was not close at all, and say, 'You see.'"

When he declared against Bork, Johnston told reporters that he'd read extensively from Bork's writings, and he had decided the nominee was intolerable and unpredictable.

Johnston said many Louisiana who think they are pro-Bork would not be "if they knew what we know about him.""

Only a few years earlier, Johnston was the lead senator opposing civil rights groups on the issue of school busing for desegregation.

In 1981, he sponsored an amendment that would have stripped federal courts of the power to impose any busing that carried children certain distances away from their neighborhoods.

To some Louisiana blacks, the anti-busing amendment recalled Johnston's work in the 1960s as a lawyer for numerous Louisiana school boards fighting court-ordered desegregation plans.

That legal work "was not standing in the schoolhouse door" nor was it a pure defense of segregation, Johnston said. It was much more complex, he said, and involved negotiating many aspects of court orders, such as school district boundary lines and teacher assignments.

The Senate anti-busing amendment "is ancient history," Johnston said. "(It) was at a very critical time when busing was being overused, and I thought it was an appropriate limitation on the length of those busing orders. A lot of those busing orders were for 20-mile round trips, and that's a heckuva long ride."

Johnston said his relationship with the black community is "good," and he anticipates black voter support this year, partly because challenger David Duke had ties to the Ku Klux Klan.