



CHAPTER 22

THE POLITICAL ABERRATION

*If you elect me the first Jewish Justice of the Peace,
I'll reduce the speed limit to 54.95.*

-- Kinky Friedman

Somewhere in the mists of 1986, between the declining focus on music and the new emphasis on writing novels, an anomaly occurred in Kinky Friedman's career. A few staunch Hill Country Republicans in Kerrville approached this celebrity-in-flux to induce him to run for Justice of the Peace.

They felt that Kinky's notoriety might actually work for him politically. Of course, they wanted to be certain that all that crazy stuff happened a long time ago. Right? Uh-huh.

The most obvious question anyone could ask - and never get a straight answer - was *why* Friedman *wanted* the elected post? It turns out that the answer wasn't so mysterious.

Friedman was several years into straightening himself and his career out and was already pursuing a more literary image. It was hoped that mainstream folks might take the Kinkster a bit more seriously than they did in his previous incarnations. Justice of the Peace in Kerr County, Texas seemed in line with his new approach to life and career. Kinky shared some thoughts on the subject in an interview at Echo Hill.

"I think initially I wanted to have a little fun," Friedman said, "and then as the campaign rolled along I got more serious about it, and really wanted to do something with it. I envisioned myself like a Judge Roy Bean on a local level. Maybe they'd end up calling me a hanging judge. Hanging Judge Friedman.

"I wanted to marry people," Kinky continued. "Bury people. Working at all levels in the community. But by that time, because of my other controversial career events, people thought my campaign was some sort of prank. I had a lot of trouble overcoming that. Just about then, the Abbie Hoffman story resurfaced. A lot of other things happened, too. Ted Mann and Earl Buckelew weren't the best choices for campaign managers. And it didn't help that my Press Liaison went to Mexico in the middle of the campaign to help a friend establish a gold mine. Oh well, the political arena's loss was the Kinkster's gain."

Roger Friedman shared his thoughts on Kinky's transition:

"Kinky, as an adult, started appreciating the physicality of the ranch and the hill country. One of the signs, to me, was when Kinky started living out at Echo Hill. We always spent the summers there. But he started spending the winters there, too. That meant he was more involved in the place and the community and his extended family that lived around there."

"I got this image," Kinky said in a 2002 interview, "of me riding into town in ol' Dusty, and making legal rulings with a shoot-from-the-hip style."

Friedman also realized that being a Justice of the Peace with a small jurisdiction wouldn't seriously hamper his growing career as a published author. In fact, he also figured the position might even help his newly forming image of a hip, crime-solving author of mystery novels. The connection was obvious for him.

A campaign that started as a diversion when he wasn't writing or selling books, took on a more serious glow. The Elephantine-faithful of the area started pushing buttons, printing signs, and ringing bells. Kinky was instructed to put together a campaign team. Never having received that instruction before, Kinky did the only thing he knew how to do. He turned to his family and friends, picked up his phone, and immersed himself into what would be his one and only political experience. It was time to reshape his image for the local electorate.



Figure 102: Kinky's official calling card when he ran for Justice of the Peace in Kerrville. (Friedman archives)

When Kinky announced his candidacy, his friends immediately had two questions.

First, of course, was why Kinky was seeking an elected post in the first place – a job which might actually “require his presence”. Kinky rarely stays anywhere very long and he is prone to boredom with almost any kind of process - political or otherwise.

The second matter of confusion for everyone who knew Kinky was that he ran as a Republican. This party choice came from a guy who'd made a career of quartering and serving up sacred Republican cows in public forums, and who referred to the bodily function that children call “number two” as “taking a Nixon”.

There was also that messy business involving Abbie Hoffman, not to mention a background of drug use. Not a typical Republican candidate's profile in the 1980s.

In spite of those liabilities, Kinky started pulling a makeshift political team together. What resulted from initial organizing meetings was one of the most incredibly lame election teams ever formed under the Republican banner.

Perhaps the first clue to the impending fiasco in the making was the election team's first brilliant campaign slogan:

“If you elect me your first Jewish Justice of the Peace,
I'll reduce the speed limit to 54.95.”

Slogans like that didn't help at the polls. And, as Kinky mentioned, one tactical error on his part involved choosing me, his future biographer, as his Press Liaison. Like the novice helping the master, my humble credentials in dealing with the media were limited. I'd had a paper route as a child, I knew local newspaper people, I was able to *read* a newspaper, and as a crisis counselor in the schools, I could possibly deliver some teacher votes. Kinky couldn't afford to rely all that much on his slick New York or L. A. friends for help in a small town like Kerrville, Texas. The local voters wouldn't trust outsiders being overly involved. In spite of that difficulty, some of his city friends did join our team, or weren't far away.



Figure 103: Kinky in a good mood with Steve Rambam, old friend, consultant, real-life Detective, and one of the Village Irregulars of Kinky's novels. *Luncheon With Laura and Barney*, 2002. (Friedman archives)

Steve Rambam was in charge of security, and of course, influencing the local Jewish vote – of which there was absolutely n-o-n-e in Kerr County, Texas. Steve consulted on all of Kinky's novels, was an old friend and had even lived in Texas, but in Kinky's political environment there weren't a lot of issues involving Rambam's political specialties: security or Jewish voters. Rambam, an Investigator, certainly wasn't needed for "opposition research", either. One competing candidate

was as pure as the driven snow, and the other had reportedly chopped the family collie to death with an ax. Really.

Consequently, Rambam's position, like mine, more or less vaporized due to the absence of need.

One of Friedman's campaign managers was Steve Monroe's wife at the time, Robin. It's not clear why Kinky picked her, either. She was like a bulldog with a new bone, but had no experience. It was hoped the family connections in the Kerrville area would positively link to Christian voters.

Kinky also asked ever-present Earl Buckelew to pitch in, hoping he could cinch up the cowboy vote. After all, Earl was the last real cowboy in the Great State of Texas.

Kinky winged most of his "speeches", as he has rarely needed more than a few notes scribbled in his little blue notepad. He did, however, pick a campaign creative consultant. Ted Mann, shortly before taking on a writing gig for "NYPD Blue", came on board the election team with his charming wife, Bly. As far as I could gather, Ted was responsible for coming up with slogans, other creative ideas and attending meetings for comic relief. Also, he didn't have a serious job at the time, nor anything better to do. There were several strategy sessions in our roving war room, and every one was very funny, filled with one-liners, and always bizarre.

Consider the image of Kinky Friedman, as a minstrel turned author, now politician, in a war room mixed with individuals from the oil fields of Texas, the streets of Detroit, the apartment buildings of New York and the ranches of the Hill Country. We decided that we were like a family, in the sense that we wouldn't normally be caught dead hanging out with each other. But we tried to take our roles seriously and worked together like convicts planning a jailbreak.

There were others who supported our deranged efforts to get Kinky elected. Certainly, the Republican forces in the community piled into the phone booth, and before long, Kinky and his team were making the political campaign scene in the Texas Hill Country. He spoke at fund-raisers and posh dinner parties at high-profile addresses. Bizarre images abounded. During one event there might be a blind cellist playing softly by the pool. One might see a midget juggling in the background. Kinky would be wearing his traditional black cowboy hat, a little black western tie and sporting his traditional cigar. He even kissed a few babies.

Kinky would open with some gracious remarks to the crowd, paying attention to mention certain names that were important to that particular group. Then he'd stall while messing with his cigar, just prior to delivering a punch line.

The crowd usually responded with chuckles and some blue-haired old lady with too much to drink would snort champagne through her nose. In the course of any good political speech, it's important to make one's campaign promises. Kinky was perfectly capable of making promises, though the campaign carrots involved in a Justice of the Peace job are not as complex as those for higher elected offices.

Kinky could have promised that he'd show up for work, because some opponents suggested that - if elected - he was going to phone it in. He could've promised that he'd be fair in his judgments. He could've promised anything remotely related to the job he was seeking. Some of the people might've actually

taken his campaign seriously had he made any kind of promise related to his desire for the job.

Instead, Friedman promised to “keep Kerrville out of a war with Fredericksburg”, a rival little German-Texas town about 22 miles down Highway 16 to the Northeast. That line was used often during the campaign. As a political sound bite, it grew wings and became another decaying albatross around the neck of the Kinkster’s campaign.

In spite of our unique obstacles and obvious blunders, the Friedman team continued to feel they had a reasonable chance to win. Kinky was running against Pat Knox, a smallish, rather bold woman, who was country smart and setting her sights on politics for the first time. She wasn’t a celebrity, nor was she gifted with the dynamic personality of her Republican counterpart. But she was a squeaky-clean local and well known in the grass roots, and in Ma and Pa Kettle circles, which comprised approximately 90% of the voting public.

The other candidate was a local good ol’ boy rancher type who, it had been rumored, had a sinister dark side regarding animals. And so it was. Ma Kettle, Bad Boy Dog Guy, and Richard Friedman squared off for the Republican post.

I had two jobs on the election team. I was the Campaign Press Liaison and Buffer Security Agent. At functions, when Kinky was waltzing around the room pressing flesh, I would trail him. I was an associate chief of security – Rambam was Chief of Security - and my fellow security operative was a guy named Goat.

I had one tangible responsibility. I was entrusted with safe guarding the “Five Minute Rule” at all public functions.

The “Five Minute Rule” was basically this: we all felt Kinky was charming for possibly four, but absolutely no more than five minutes. If people were exposed to our boy for more than that, the crack election committee had determined that the risk of irritation and lost votes grew exponentially with every additional minute.

So, as Kinky began to share smiles and inane chitchat with the next group of potential supporters, I would start the clock. People would laugh and people would smile. Kinky’s novels would inevitably come up in discussion. Or they’d mention one of his songs. More smiles, more laughs, tick tock, tick tock. It was the Kinkster at his best, joking with the crowd like Will Rogers, but without the lasso. Most of the time, he’d find a way to move on to the next table or the next group in waiting within the critical five-minute time frame.

But if he didn’t, or couldn’t get away, at precisely four and one-half minutes, I’d approach the table or group in a hurried fashion. With a politically serious expression, I’d make my apologies for a sudden Friedman removal action.

“Folks, I’m so sorry to interrupt,” I’d say. “But Kinky’s needed on the phone. It’s the governor. Please excuse us.”

The next table might be interrupted by a call from the Pope.

Kinky would tip his hat, smile, and step off into the crowd with me. Though I never took that job very seriously, there are folks around Kerr County - to this day - that remember hearing that message at their table. Ironically, as silly as the job was, the strategy behind it was frightfully well conceived.

Of course, the ploy worked, and we felt that the maneuver had a certain dramatic flare and created a hue of importance that might translate into votes.

In the middle of the campaign, just as Kinky and his novice political team was barnstorming the county voters, I got an offer to leave town. I was asked to serve as a Spanish interpreter for a friend, Trey “T-Bird” Williams, who was going to the southern coast of Mexico, in Michoacan. The idea was to help T-Bird reestablish a gold mine operation which he had started a couple of years before.

With Kinky, I was a political soldier with no well-defined targets. I was forced into a choice between staying with something I wasn’t really doing - or taking a trip to Mexico with old friends, all expenses paid, as an interpreter.

Vamos amigos! It was an adventure I couldn’t pass up. I left, spent weeks in Michoacan and Guerrero establishing relationships and speaking more Spanish than I ever had in my life. I returned, well tanned and wearing a hammock slung over my shoulder, just in time to attend Kinky’s election-night party.

Unfortunately, the election party turned into a loser’s ball early on. I seem to remember that we beat the bad hoodoo animal guy, which tickled Kinky to no end. But we lost to diminutive Pat Knox, the hard working squeaky-clean and genuinely qualified grass roots lady - who kept pressing hands right to the end.

The outcome was, of course, preordained. Pat has never harbored federal fugitives or promised to keep us out of war with Fredericksburg.

Kinky called Pat to congratulate her, as is customary, and they became good friends. She even became a character in one of Kinky’s later novels.

The fact that Kinky lost the election was a disappointment for him, though he was told at the time it was a silver bullet dodged. He wasn’t able to see that point for a while, but eventually came to realize it was true.



Figure 104: A filtered photo of Kinky, in 2001, when he served as the Grand Marshall of a city parade in Center Point, Texas. It was his second term as G.M. In this particular parade, the organizers provided Kinky and five friends a pickup in which to ride and a bullhorn to address the good folks who lined the roadside. A taste of what might have been, had Kinky’s campaign succeeded. (M. Swafford)