

Brown's positive contribution needs to be recognized

Though profoundly shocked and saddened by Jim Brown's conviction last week, I come to praise — not to pile on — the fallen insurance commissioner.

The FBI and the American justice system remain responsible, if inevitably flawed, to me.

Brown has made a positive contribution to Louisiana that ought to be acknowledged.

The wonkish political scholar often blinded by his detailed vision of the state once was characterized as a leader who

would "be a completely new kind of governor — an intellectual" by Louisiana journalist Iris Kelso.

That struck me as true. Brown was an English major at Cambridge University before the law degree. He was a member of the U.S. track team in 1962-63.

Brown is a rare reader (Charles Dickens is his favorite author) among the functional illiterates often found in Louisiana politics.

That intellectual core gave him another dimension. He was Al Gore, ahead of his time, sparking with new ideas, more substance than sizzle, talking too much and hated for it.

When Jim Montgomery, then with *The Times*, wrote

about Tennessee Williams, Brown responded with a long letter about the great Southern writer so articulate and erudite it could have served as an article in Harper's. That letter alone won me over.

As a young state senator from Ferriday, Brown gave journalists and the Louisiana public the landmark open meetings law.

The lanky, loose-limbed Brown went on to become the best secretary of state in Louisiana history. Still, he frequently would tell me the often ceremonial job bored him. Of course, he wanted to be governor, was as overqualified for that job as Gore. But that wasn't to be.

So Brown got elected insurance commissioner after two

terms as secretary of state. I told him it was a step down into a post mired in scandal.

Brown loved the job. Its Byzantine makeup was fodder for his acutely analytical mind and surprisingly sufficient for his huge ego. Brown could change Louisiana a little in that office.

The Louisiana insurance industry and many people affected knew Brown was doing a superb job. He was re-elected, after indictment, for God's sake.

I don't know former Gov. Edwin W. Edwards, convicted in another trial and found innocent in the latest trial. I've had several one-on-one interviews with the Louisiana Napoleon, but I don't know him.

But I know Brown. I know

the good things he has done, how gifted he is in a political state where mediocrity remains a goal.

Maybe it's best not to know the politicians we cover. But if you don't, how can you get at the significant details of their personas that may define them best for readers?

I'm not a judgmental person. Judge not, lest you be judged, the Bible says. That was the reason I usually steered clear of investigative reporting. I don't want to be judged.

So I won't judge Brown. Or Edwards. But that is the job of juries and judges, and those verdicts I have to accept.

The 60-year-old Brown is appealing his case, in my opinion, with reason. Brown seems undaunted. "This is

only the eighth round of a 15-round heavyweight bout," he says.

But unlike Edwards, I know Brown. And whatever the outcome, I know there has been a death in the Brown family with all the agony implied. That's how such a verdict feels.

For Brown, in the words of his favorite author, these are the "worst of times."

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