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Political Horizons for Oct. 19, 2008

Jindal plans — but for what?

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Gov. Bobby Jindal is going to Iowa in November and the trip is certain to touch off a flurry of speculation about his political ambitions.

Iowa, of course, is the setting for a presidential caucus pivotal in the race for the White House.

Jindal will make his first trip to the Hawkeye State a few days before Thanksgiving. By that time, the nation will have a new president-elect.

Jindal's host in Iowa makes the trip doubly interesting.

The governor is featured guest at the Iowa Family Policy Center's "Celebrating the Family Banquet" Nov. 22 in West Des Moines.

A flier about the banquet includes quotes about the 37-year-old Jindal, including that he is "the next Ronald Reagan" and "the future of the GOP."

Nearly a year ago, a cash-strapped Mike Huckabee tapped into the center's evangelical network when he campaigned in Iowa for the presidency. Huckabee won the Iowa caucuses, brushing aside Mitt Romney in the Republican battle.

Jindal laughed when asked about his trip to the traditionnal stomping grounds of presidential wannabes.

He said he is going because he was invited to give a talk.

"I'm focused on leading Louisiana &hellip This is the best job in the world," he said. In the past few weeks, Jindal also seems to have been focusing on his national profile.

He flew to Missouri to help U.S. Rep. Kenny Hulshof raise money for a gubernatorial campaign. Then he headed to Mississippi to assist U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker in his quest to hold onto Trent Lott's seat.

The day the LSU Tigers faced the Florida Gators, Jindal was on the Gainesville, Fla., campus at a tailgating get-together for Republican presidential candidate John McCain. Earlier the same day, Jindal raised money for his own campaign.

Shortly after his trip to Florida, Jindal was in Houston to help Pete Olson's congressional campaign. The governor also raised money for himself while in Texas.

Jindal was touted earlier this year as a possible running mate for McCain. Ultimately, the Arizona senator chose Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.

The choice of Palin could be to Jindal's advantage if McCain loses to Barack Obama on Nov. 4.

Political pundits say a McCain loss could cause Jindal's political star to rise even higher. They are looking to 2012 and assuming that Obama will be a one-term president because of the time that will be involved in straightening out the economic mess.

There is even a "Bobby Jindal for Prez 2012" Facebook page.

All that is abundantly clear from talking to Jindal and watching his movements is that he is busily following whatever career path he has laid out for himself. It's unclear whether that path stops at the Governor's Mansion or whether it leads to the White House.

Jindal is giving his support to ultraconservative Republicans on the national scene and back home, he is quietly paying calls to Protestant churches in north Louisiana.

Jindal made similar visits after he lost to Kathleen Blanco in 2003. Jindal is Roman Catholic.

Since February, Jindal has been slipping into north Louisiana to attend church services. He sometimes goes three Sundays out of a month.

To get to towns like Blanchard, Minden, Oak Grove, Winnfield and Bastrop, Jindal hitches a ride on State Police helicopters at taxpayers' expense. A pastor at one of the churches made it clear that Jindal's visit was calculated.

The Rev. Jerold McBride said a Jindal staffer called him and broached the possibility of the governor speaking at First Baptist Church in Winnfield.

It sounds a lot like the evangelical campaign Jindal launched to make inroads into north Louisiana before the governor's race last year.

And maybe that is all Jindal is doing — running for re-election extra early like an overachiever. Maybe the fact that Florida and Iowa are pivotal states in the presidential race is just a coincidence.

Or maybe he is thinking ahead to 2012.

"Two-term governor" has a nice ring to it, especially for a candidate on a presidential ticket. Just don't expect Jindal to tell you what he's doing until he is certain that the path is clear.

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