

The New York Times

The Caucus

The Politics and Government Blog of The Times

January 6, 2012, 7:36 pm

Obama Has Lunch With Contest Winners — From Swing States



By *JACKIE CALMES*

Doug Mills/The New York Times President Obama had lunch with four contest winners in Washington on Friday. It was the second round of winners in the quarterly “Dinner With Barack” contest.

WASHINGTON — President Obama dined for the second time with four winners of the quarterly “Dinner With Barack” contest, and for the second time, all four winners were from states that the Obama campaign considers battlegrounds that could help determine whether Mr. Obama is re-elected.

A campaign official identified the four diners, who met the president at a midpriced restaurant not far from the White House, as Kathie Toigo, a teacher of special-needs students from Yerington, Nev.; Bill Blackwelder, an Afghanistan war veteran from Fayetteville, N.C.; Val Grossmann, a postal worker from Westminster, Colo.; and Scott Zoebisch, a firefighter from Atlanta.

In October, Mr. Obama took the first four contest winners to dinner at a cafe in suburban Virginia. Then, too, one of his companions, a retired Latina teacher, was from Colorado. That state, with its growing Hispanic population, is a prime target for the campaign to win again in

2012, though advisers acknowledge that it will be harder. The other three people in that first group were from Indiana, Minnesota and Arizona.

While Mr. Obama did not win Arizona or Georgia in 2008, advisers say both are in play this year if he can mobilize enough of Arizona's growing Hispanic electorate, Georgia's black voters and each state's suburban independents and college students to vote in large numbers.

According to the Obama campaign Web site, which advertises the rules for the "Dinner with Barack" sweepstakes, entrants do not have to contribute to the campaign to enter. Fifty names are picked in a random drawing, and the campaign "in its sole discretion" selects four winners "to provide for an appropriate range of views, backgrounds and interests." Winners' expenses for travel, overnight stay — and, of course, their meal — are covered by the campaign.

On Friday at the Scion, a restaurant described as having an eclectic menu of Asian-influenced fare, including crab cakes and lobster Reuben sandwiches, Mr. Obama and his foursome seemed to have the entire place to themselves — except for a film crew capturing the event for the campaign's Obama for America grass-roots network.

Mr. Obama, coatless and his shirt sleeves rolled up, made small talk with the guests about their families and their towns for the short time that reporters were allowed in.

With Mr. Obama facing a challenging re-election bid, given continued high unemployment and conservatives' zeal to defeat him, the potential mobilization benefits of gambits like "Dinner with Barack" were illustrated by Ms. Toigo, 64. She told the campaign that she would volunteer again this year to get out the Obama vote in her conservative northwest Nevada county, and said the news of her date with the president "might be just the spark" to encourage others.

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