

## Illinois Republicans Get Ready for a Whopping

Written by Rich Miller

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It's probably not a good sign that at least two prominent speakers at the state fair's Republican Day event last week felt it was necessary to insist that the Illinois Republican Party is not dead. Other speakers worked hard to reinforce the not-dead theme by helpfully pointing out several possible signs of life.

But the thin crowds and the mostly subdued audience responses didn't offer much empirical support for the numerous theories that renewal is just around the corner. The party leaders and many party members know – barring a miracle or an unspeakable tragedy – they're in for a beating come November. They just don't know yet how severe it will be. The president's polling has never been great here, the search for a new U.S. Senate candidate sapped strength, unity and time, and that new Senate candidate is now on a collision course with almost certain electoral disaster. The Repubs seemed to be steeling each other for the eventual whopping, and sowing seeds of hope that they'll find something positive to build on once this bizarre nightmare finally ends.

Blind optimism was therefore the order of the day. Senate Republican Leader Frank Watson claimed, with a straight face, that he wants Alan Keyes to campaign with Senate GOP candidates in tough races. "Good," said one House Republican official upon hearing the news. "That'll keep him away from our targets."

Other Republicans predicted that when they paint Barack Obama as a left-wing extremist in the coming weeks, moderate voters will choose the conservative extremist Keyes. Maybe, but Obama doesn't act like an extremist. If you look up "extremist" in the dictionary, you could very well find a photo of Alan Keyes.

It's very true, as former Governor Jim Edgar and others pointed out, that lots of people believed the Illinois Democrats were washed up after the 1994 landslide. The Democrats clawed their way back and they now control all three branches of government and every statewide constitutional office except one.

So, yeah, things could change. Change is the one constant in American politics. Hope is never

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futile. How the Republicans deal with the election's aftermath will probably determine whether the GOP can find its way back to legitimacy any time soon. If the almost complete paralysis caused by the bitter intra-party divisiveness continues unabated, they could be doomed for a long time to come, even though the Democrats swerved perilously close to a complete meltdown of their own this year. The Dems managed to pull themselves back together last week during their annual state-fair celebration. Party leaders, who just weeks ago were locked in a political death match over the state budget, appeared to go out of their way to say nice things about each other. Apparently, *schadenfreude* can be a unifying emotion.

At least Keyes didn't do himself any significant damage during the state-fair festivities, although it's difficult to fathom how much lower he can possibly sink. His support last week for slavery reparations won't help with those conservative white folks he's hoping to woo. Claiming that raped women who have abortions lack "integrity" probably didn't move any numbers upward, either. Flip-flopping on abolishing the Department of Agriculture made him look like a run-of-the-mill political opportunist, coming, as it did, on the eve of his trip to the state fair – but, hey, at least he flipped toward the politically acceptable position this time. But "I'm obviously not an extremist because extremists don't pander" isn't much of a campaign slogan.

After Keyes' state-fair speech, several Republicans flocked to the conservative African American to offer their support and their encouragement. Others just stared at him with adoring gazes. Unfortunately, it was the wrong black guy. Conservative Springfield radio-talk-show host Abdul-Hakim Shabazz wasn't quite sure how to react when the reverential Repubs expressed their undying support for his candidacy and his beliefs. "I'm not Alan Keyes," he repeated, under his breath, after each of them had walked away. Now that's a winning campaign slogan.

Meanwhile, Obama has yet to get a good handle on this Keyes thing. Mr. Inevitable was knocked way off his game by the fight over how many debates they'd have. Then Obama lost his famously unflappable cool when he and Keyes spoke to each other at a Chicago event. The confab started out all smiles, but ended with both men shouting at each other and pointing fingers. The "rock star" needs to get his act together.

*Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).*