

Chicago Democrat Could Sink Madigan's Attorney-General Candidacy

Written by Rich Miller

Tuesday, 13 August 2002 18:00

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A budding political dynasty is in deep trouble on Chicago's Southwest Side. No, I'm not talking about the attorney-general candidacy of House Speaker Michael Madigan's daughter, Lisa. And I'm not referring to former Senate President Tom Hynes' son, Dan, whose re-election as state comptroller is all but assured. I'm not even talking about big-time Chicago political insider Bill Dart's son, Tom, whose candidacy for state treasurer seems to be sputtering.

There's a fourth Democratic wannabe dynasty on the Southwest Side.

Bob Rita has been in or around politics most of his life. His father, John, was mayor of the industrial suburb of Blue Island for years. John Rita is also the powerful Democratic committeeman of vote-rich Calumet Township. Bob's mother, Rose, is a Blue Island alderman.

Bob himself is in his second term as Calumet Township trustee and is a board member of the prestigious Township Officials of Illinois.

The new legislative-district map gave the younger Rita an opportunity to move up the political ladder. An open House seat was his for the taking. With his father's political clout, the prominent family name, and his own hard work, he could secure himself a nice little gig.

There were problems, though. The open district is 61 percent African-American and Rita is white. Plus, a well-known African-American attorney, Arvin Boddie, had the support of Chicago Alderman Carrie Austin and just about every black minister in the district.

Boddie's friends are convinced that Rita put a second African-American candidate on the ballot in order to split the black vote – a tried-and-true white political trick. Rita squeaked past Boddie by the barest of margins. The campaign left bitter feelings all around, but the district is so heavily Democratic that Rita had little to worry about.

Until last month, that is. Rita allegedly entered his ex-girlfriend's home while she was out walking her dog. The cops say that when she got back, Rita grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the floor, then put her in a headlock and banged her head against the wall, kicked her, and left. Rita was arrested and charged with domestic battery and criminal trespass. He is

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scheduled to appear in court later this month. "An unfortunate incident occurred last week between two longtime friends," Rita said in a statement he issued to the media recently. "I am sure that this issue will be resolved amicably."

Then, last week, the *Daily Southtown* newspaper discovered that Rita had been busted for trying to bribe some Nevada cops 10 years ago to get out of a DUI arrest. The paper eventually ran an editorial demanding that Rita quit the race.

African-American leaders have used the allegations to call for Rita to step aside so that their "cheated" candidate from the primary, Boddie, can take his place.

The black leaders have also requested a meeting with House Speaker Michael Madigan to demand he intercede.

Madigan is in a tight spot here.

If Madigan's daughter Lisa wins her attorney-general race this fall, it might not be by much. Madigan can't afford to alienate any of his core constituency. So, if he sides with Rita, as he is doing right now, black voters in the district might be encouraged to skip over his daughter's name on the ballot. In a close race, that could be enough to tank Lisa's candidacy.

But if Madigan makes Rita's powerful parents angry by interceding, the Calumet Township Dems might take a pass on the daughter, which could also cause serious trouble.

The most important reason Lisa Madigan lags behind some of the other statewide Democrats in recent polling is the highly unfavorable opinion that so many independent voters have of her powerful father. So, the Republicans could conceivably use the Rita issue to muddy up Madigan and, by extension, his kid.

With help, people can change, but the way Rita downplayed his alleged brutality and predicted a happy outcome was creepy – even bringing to mind a suggestion that he could buy her off, like he tried to do with those Nevada cops.

And before he makes any final decision to stay on the ballot, Rita should remember that the stigma of this incident will follow him to Springfield, not to mention what will happen to him if Lisa Madigan loses because of a lack of black votes in the 28th House District.

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