

Despite Attacks from Illinois GOP, Senator Fitzgerald Sitting Pretty

Written by Rich Miller

Tuesday, 10 December 2002 18:00

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Some top Illinois Republicans are making a lot of noise lately about finding a candidate to run against Senator Peter Fitzgerald, a fellow member of the GOP, in two years. But is their publicity barrage against the incumbent freshman a warning that he faces defeat, or is it just a shot across his bow to remind him that he needs to start being more cooperative in Washington, or, at least, be a little more quiet? Whatever. None of those brilliant ideas is gonna work.

Congressman Ray LaHood of Peoria has been in full attack-dog mode these days, openly admitting that he's trying to find a suitable Republican to run against Fitzgerald in 2004.

LaHood says he's motivated partly by Fitzgerald's lack of respect for, and public attacks on, U.S. House Speaker Denny Hastert. Fitzgerald and Hastert have fought repeatedly since Fitz arrived in Washington four years ago. They bickered over who had the right to recommend new U.S. attorneys. Fitzgerald won that one. Fitzgerald then blasted Hastert's efforts to bring money home for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, claiming the project was pork-laden and corrupt. And the two are currently bickering over expansion of O'Hare airport.

Hastert has been flexing his political muscle in Illinois lately, helping elect state Representative Tom Cross as the new Illinois House Republican leader. Hastert also installed state Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka as the new Illinois Republican Party chairperson the other day.

But LaHood, Hastert, and others risk inflating Fitzgerald's importance and personal stature by slamming him for his uncooperative and confrontational style.

This ain't too difficult to figure out. Fitzgerald has made a name for himself in Illinois as the only real reformer in the state. And like almost all politicians who spend most of their time positioning themselves as reformers, Fitz eschews the political pork end of his Senate job. So, he is slammed for not doing anything concrete for Illinois. In fact, he's done his best to prevent new concrete from being poured at O'Hare.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't an incumbent's opposition to allegedly "wasteful" government projects and ferocious criticism of political corruption probably be good things in a

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Republican primary race? Not to mention that Fitz has millions of dollars to spend to further bolster his righteous public image.

Fitzgerald was tainted by scandal recently when his top political operative was busted for not paying taxes on income he earned from an allegedly corrupt business. But the news media is enamored with identifying campaign “themes” and then sticking with them, no matter what the facts might be. Fitzgerald’s given theme is “corruption-fighting renegade independent.” So, the press buried the stuff about his campaign advisor. (Imagine, for a moment, how the media would have reacted if just about anyone else’s top political advisor admitted to not paying taxes on money from a company associated with indicted George Ryan friend Roger Stanley.)

So, attacking Fitzgerald for not playing ball with the big boys only reinforces Fitz’s positive, “independent” theme in the media and with the voting public, and makes it a lot more difficult to talk about his years-long relationships with people such as political mail-house owner Roger Stanley, who is accused of bribing public officials (sometimes with prostitutes) in exchange for sweetheart government contracts.

As I see it, Fitzgerald is realistically vulnerable in two ways.

First, he disappeared from Illinois immediately after winning his Senate seat – which is exactly what he criticized incumbent Senator Carol Moseley-Braun for during their 1998 matchup. And, second, his personal political ideology is far to the right of most Illinoisans. (This might be impolite, but the medical problem of his occasional facial-muscle paralysis might also make some voters feel a little ooky.)

The reformer stuff has allowed Fitzgerald to appear actively engaged in Illinois politics and has completely overshadowed his ultra-conservatism. By playing to his strengths and attacking him for the very thing that makes Fitzgerald popular, Hastert and the other Republicans are making a big mistake.

Hastert might just be yanking Fitzgerald’s chain a bit to remind him who’s boss. (Whether Hastert is reminding himself or Fitz is another question.) But jerking the leashes of anything besides poodles and lap dogs can be a dangerous proposition – particularly when there’s a wealthy rabid wolf on the other end.

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