

## Is the U.S. Senate Calling Former Illinois Governor?

Written by Rich Miller  
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Republicans have waited a long time for some good news in this state, and it finally arrived last week. U.S. Senator Peter Fitzgerald announced he wouldn't run for re-election, and former Governor Jim Edgar hinted that he just might enter the race.

Whether you loved Fitzgerald, hated him, or were indifferent, if you follow politics at all, you pretty much had to admit that Peter Fitzgerald was the weakest Republican incumbent U.S. Senator in the nation. He was even widely considered an almost sure loser if he stayed in the contest.

After trashing his 1998 opponent, Carol Moseley-Braun, for rarely showing up in Illinois after she was elected to the Senate, Fitzgerald all but disappeared from the state after he won the office from her.

Over the years, Fitzgerald alienated just about every wing of the Republican party except for the recently marginalized anti-O'Hare Airport faction. His frequent public spats with party leaders all but guaranteed that they would probably sit out the '04 campaign. Pro-choice moderates despised his solidly pro-life positions. Even the right-wingers didn't care for some of his Washington voting behavior and were upset that he seemed to ignore them.

Fitzgerald was also known to be reluctant to spend his own money next time around, but it is almost impossible to convince people to contribute anything to a millionaire who spent a fortune on his last race.

The freshman senator had even upset the White House with his public slip of the tongue about how the president wanted to assassinate Saddam Hussein. His Republican colleagues in the Senate thought him a bit of an odd duck.

Not to mention that Illinois is trending far more Democratic in recent years. The Dems all but swept last year's elections, two years after Al Gore trounced George W. Bush in the state.

Plus, Fitzgerald would almost undoubtedly face a much tougher Democratic opponent next

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year than Carol Moseley-Braun, whom he barely defeated in 1998.

Sure, he had his positive points. He was fiercely independent of most of the political establishment, he spoke his mind without hesitation, and he was much more moderate than his reputation. But he never really connected with Illinoisans. He wasn't approachable. He chose to hover above everyone.

The people who know Jim Edgar well think he can be convinced to get into this race. Right now, they say, the former governor is completely on the fence. Edgar entertained offers two years ago to run for governor and turned everyone down, but he never took any of that seriously. This time, he's listening carefully and weighing his options. And he admitted last week that it would be difficult to refuse a direct request from the president, if the call is ever made.

If Edgar runs, he would be the immediate and far-and-away frontrunner. He is beloved by the media and remains popular with the public. The Democrats simply don't have anyone of Edgar's stature or popularity.

So, will he do it? For all the upside, there are plenty of reasons why Edgar might not get into this race.

Edgar still has a genetic heart problem, and the stress of another all-out campaign could literally kill him. Mrs. Edgar would likely oppose a run for that reason alone.

He has a nice life, including a sweet part-time teaching gig at the University of Illinois to supplement his pension, plus some income from his affiliation with a Chicago-based PR firm. He's done his bit, and has no real need to prove himself.

Then there's the MSI scandal, which many believe forced Edgar out of the 1998 U.S. Senate race. The gist of the MSI scandal was that Edgar's top campaign contributor received an illegal state contract worth millions of dollars not long after the 1994 election. The MSI mess would undoubtedly be dredged back up. When Edgar decided to retire, he was able to dodge the really tough questions about his affiliation with that corrupt company. He now has some explaining to do.

Some believe Edgar has been out of public life long enough that he might have forgotten about many of the not-so-pleasant aspects of the political world and could be itching to get back into the game.

If nothing else, while Edgar tries to figure out what to do, his electoral muscle will prevent a whole lot of potential Republican candidates from filing for the office. I figure it's about even odds at the moment.

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