

Jeff Terronez: Just Sorry He Got Caught

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 03 May 2011 11:53

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Following Jeff Terronez's resignation as Rock Island County state's attorney and his guilty plea last week, I was waiting for the Quad Cities' daily newspapers to forcefully and directly raise a simple question: Why didn't he resign sooner?

More relevant at this point: Why didn't the county's Democratic leaders strongly encourage his resignation long before he agreed to a plea deal?

Alas, the closest the newspapers got was the *Quad-City Times*' [April 27 editorial](#) : "Terronez ... has decimated the credibility of his office, his former colleagues, and every Democrat who stood by silently as this crime was covered up for at least six months. That's how long Terronez dodged specific questions from us and others about this crime. ... If, as Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan claimed, police found only enough to charge him with providing the alcohol [to a minor], Terronez could have cleared that up with an honest answer in October."

But the "honest answer" the *Times* said Terronez should have provided is far different from his resignation. And both the *Times* and *Rock Island Argus/Moline Dispatch* seem more concerned with getting full details of the Illinois State Police investigation.

"Rumors abound about the secret circumstances of Terronez's crime," the *Times* wrote. "That's why we're still pushing for full investigation disclosure."

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“On Tuesday [April 26], she [Madigan] provided sketchy details about what the extensive probe revealed,” the *Argus/Dispatch* wrote in its editorial. “But they were far too few to satisfy the many questions that remain. Rumors continue to fly and, without proof, we will not repeat them here. Instead, we will focus on the unanswered questions.

“Chief among them is whether Mr. Terronez provided alcohol more than once to the young woman who had been a witness in a case he prosecuted. What was the nature of the inappropriate relationship investigators say he had with the victim, and is there evidence of additional wrongdoing?”

The *Argus/Dispatch* then listed other questions, but the most telling was a simple “What else don’t we know?” The newspapers don’t like that they’ve been given incomplete information, and that the available details are far less damning than the rumors they’ve heard.

The *Times* said this episode taints prosecutions under Terronez’s watch, while the *Argus/Dispatch* wondered whether the state’s attorney received “special treatment at the hands of the tight-lipped state police who investigated the incident for at least eight months, or from the attorney general’s office.”

But both lines of questioning miss the most obvious issue, namely that Terronez’s resignation shouldn’t have waited for imminent prosecution. And if he was unwilling to step down, Rock Island County Democrats should have forced his hand. On April 20, the *Times* did say that “Terronez should step aside until this investigation is complete,” but the revelations since that editorial suggest he should have resigned, period.

Terronez reportedly purchased alcohol for a minor on August 15, and the incident was reported to East Moline police four days later. In October, WQAD reported that the state’s attorney was under investigation.

Here we get to the crucial issue. Terronez pleaded guilty, and he [told reporters on April 25](#) that “I delivered alcohol to a minor; it’s that simple.” He also said resigning was “the right thing to

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do.”

So he doesn't deny the charge, and the law isn't vague on providing booze to people under legal drinking age. By his own admission, resignation was the appropriate action. And yet ... it took him eight months to do it. (At least he had the decency to face the media for his public shaming.)

In other words, this cannot be a matter of waiting until the justice system had run its course. There's no gray area in the law, and no protestation of innocence.

The subtext here is therefore that Terronez believed resigning was “the right thing to do” only when it was apparent that he was nailed. The key isn't that he didn't provide an “honest answer” to media inquiries in October; it's that his actions say he believed that what he did only merited resignation once he couldn't escape punishment.

I see four possible explanations for Terronez's behavior, and none of them is flattering to the former prosecutor or the people who supported and elected him in 2004 and 2008.

First, perhaps he didn't understand the law that he was elected to enforce. In this scenario, the Illinois attorney general needed to explain to him that what he did was a crime.

Second, maybe he thought the law didn't apply to him.

Third, it's possible he clung to office to stash away money. (“I'll be an unemployed lawyer for a while,” he reportedly said. And if his license to practice law is suspended by the Illinois Attorney Registration & Disciplinary Commission, he'll just be unemployed.)

Fourth, perhaps he thought his stature in the Rock Island Democratic organization would protect him from prosecution.

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Madigan's direct involvement in the plea deal and a press conference last week seemed designed to send a message to Democratic officials in the county. Terronez was, after all, a relatively small-fish target – a Rock Island County elected official – and his crime merited only two years' probation and a \$2,500 fine. Yet the state attorney general personally made an example of Terronez, implying that the Democratic stranglehold on Rock Island County politics doesn't mean public officials can operate with impunity.

County Board Chair Jim Bohnsack should feel especially chastened. He likely didn't do anything illegal in the Terronez affair, but he certainly didn't do much right, either. And he continues to idiotically defend himself.

On April 26, he issued a press release emphasizing that "I had no personal knowledge of, nor did I play any role in, the investigation or subsequent charges that Mr. Terronez pled guilty to this morning."

An [April 29 Quad-CityTimes article](#) said that "Bohnsack said he doesn't recall ever asking for Terronez's resignation, but he noted that the state's attorney is an elected official, which limited his and the county board's control over the situation. He rejected the idea that he could have done more to remove Terronez from office earlier."

The article continued: "When Terronez first told Bohnsack [on October 22 that] he had made a mistake, he didn't share details, and the chairman didn't ask." Surely the state's attorney coming to him admitting a "mistake" deserves a few follow-up questions – however uncomfortable – to determine how that "mistake" might affect county business. Bohnsack could have started here: "Was it a personal mistake, or a professional mistake?" Given that it was both, the county-board chair should have then probed a little deeper.

But Bohnsack said his don't-ask-don't-tell attitude wasn't just willful ignorance – an opportunity to tell the media six months later that he had no clue about the nature of the investigation. No, it was also a function of powerlessness. As the April 29 article stated: "Even if he had [questioned the state's attorney], Bohnsack argues he wouldn't have been able to force Terronez to resign."

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True enough technically speaking, but he can't expect us to believe that the Rock Island Democratic party is so weak that it couldn't have successfully pressured Terronez to resign. Bohnsack was simply unwilling to confront and deal with an obvious problem.

He wasn't alone. Rock Island Democratic leaders could have avoided significant embarrassment by pushing Terronez out last year, with the added bonus of appearing aggressive in ensuring that county officials behave ethically. Instead, they look blind and ineffectual at best.

Terronez could have admitted his mistake and resigned in October (or earlier) and come off as genuinely remorseful for a human lapse in judgment. Instead, last week he sounded calculating, only sorry that he got busted.