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Why didn't Ecker use his pulpit in judges race?

Comment

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WE WOULD be remiss to move beyond the judicial race without wondering aloud: Where was Chuck?

Howard County Executive Charles I. Ecker's reasoned voice was conspicuously absent from the cacophony of rhetorical excesses in the race. Mr. Ecker remained on the sidelines at a time when the county desperately needed his leadership.

The county executive understates his influence by suggesting that he could not have lessened the acrimony in the race for two Circuit Court seats. More to the point, he did not believe he had anything to gain from trying to calm the waters.

"I don't think I could have made a difference," says Mr. Ecker, who is considering running for governor in 1998. "As I view it, this was a no-win situation for me. I think {my involvement} would have escalated it."

Playing it weak

The county executive may have thought he was playing it safe, but he was playing it weak. His consensus-building approach would have been the perfect formula for defusing the hostility that bedeviled Howard for a year, bringing latent racial and gender issues to the surface.

He is wrong to say he could not have made a difference. Remember, this is the man who defeated a popular incumbent to win election as county executive in 1990 without running a negative campaign. Voters were drawn to his warmth.

Instead of taking his rightful place as the county's preeminent leader, Mr. Ecker ceded authority to other politicians who have only a fraction of his power and influence but hope to have his job in two years.

Both sides asked Mr. Ecker to step into the race. The campaign of the challengers, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, sought his support. But clearly, there were better reasons to answer the call from the campaign of sitting Circuit Judges Donna Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure.

This was a perfect opportunity to assert his authority. Instead, he allowed the GOP to split between County Councilman Dennis R. Schrader and Del. Robert L. Flanagan, who championed opposite sides in the judicial race.

In a confidential March 28 memo, pollster Brad Coker, a key political adviser, urged him to take the lead. The memo asked, rhetorically, who was the GOP's titular boss.

"In theory, it should be the county executive," the memo said, "but lately it seems that Clerk of the Court Margy Rappaport has anointed herself as the local party boss. I am sure this is due to the fact that she still thinks her husband {Paul Rappaport, the running mate of Ellen R. Sauerbrey in the 1994 gubernatorial election} is the rightful lieutenant governor, and therefore outranks you. Furthermore, I am certain that the long arm of Ellen Sauerbrey is pulling some of the strings on this one in order to wage her guerrilla war against {Gov. Parris N.} Glendening."

Among supporters of Ms. Sauerbrey stepping into the political vacuum was Mr. Flanagan, a Republican who false-started a primary campaign for attorney general and is now a county executive hopeful.

Mr. Flanagan, a partisan Republican, strongly supported the Gelfman-Smith campaign, even though Judge Gelfman is a stalwart

Democrat. He helped engineer a partial victory -- Judge Gelfman finished ahead of Judge Hill Staton for one of the two seats.

In the process, Mr. Flanagan gained influence that Mr. Ecker ceded. He has gone from hunger to hubris, daring to offer a job to the county executive in a "Sauerbrey administration" after the 1998 election if Mr. Ecker agreed to stay out of the gubernatorial race. Even more insulting, the job does not exist: secretary of education.

"To put it bluntly," Mr. Coker's March memo urged, "we need to test your raw political clout -- something we have never had to do, but must if we are going to launch a statewide candidacy."

Mr. Coker told the executive that endorsing the sitting judges would gain him votes from minorities -- Judge Hill Staton is black -- and, more importantly, from women. Moreover, he said the move would enable him to preside over party unity.

"You are essentially the Ronald Reagan of Howard County, particularly in the Republican Party," Mr. Coker said. "An endorsement of the sitting judges at this time, or some time in the near future, will reinforce your image as a healer and a strong leader who puts the best interests of the entire community first."

Mr. Ecker stayed on the sidelines. Yet unlike his look-alike, former San Francisco 49ers football coach Bill Walsh, he refused to call the shots in this playoff. He contends his work comes now, after the sniping.

"I just felt that if the judges race did heat up and become a bitter struggle, that I can heal some wounds after it was over," he said last week.

Perhaps that can be his role, but if he has any notions of going beyond his present position in politics, he will have to check his power supply and find out whether he has any juice left.

Norris West is The Sun's editorial writer in Howard County.

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