

Kondner Fights Personal Tragedy and Odds — Again — in 7th Dist. Bid

BY RIYAD MATHEW
Capital News Service

Kenneth Kondner said his brother's murder in August and his own surgery in April gave him first-hand experience with two issues — crime and health care — that are his "main weapons" in his bid for Congress from Maryland's 7th District.

But the Republican also says that those weapons will likely doom his campaign to unseat Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., to the same failure as his previous five bids for the 7th District seat.

"My heart to campaign was totally destroyed with the brutal murder of my brother," he said of the Aug. 8 murder of Richard Kondner in Baltimore City.

"This is just one instance of the alarming crime rate in the city.

"Why should I get out and beat my brains out (campaigning) there?" Kondner asked. "My heart doesn't let me."

He pulls his jeans up to his knees, revealing the blood clots that had clustered on his swollen leg, which make it almost impossible for him to campaign.

"I don't have the physical or mental strength to campaign. This is a lost cause," Kondner said.

Fight on

But in the same breath, Kondner vows to fight to make prescription drugs more affordable and to ease penalties on early withdrawals from individual retirement accounts, which he had to do to pay for his medications, if he gets elected to Congress.

Political analysts say Kondner is not likely to get that chance.

"With the Democrats outnumbering the Republicans by roughly 9 to 1, the 7th District will once again witness a one-sided race," said James Gimpel, an associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland College Park.

"Like it has done over the past, the Democrats are just going to walk away with the numbers. There is little the Republican Party can do," Gimpel said.

The seat is so safe that Cummings, the incumbent, feels he can afford to divert time and money from his own re-election bid to campaign for other Democrats around the country.

Cummings was instrumental in organizing an eight-state bus tour by the Congressional Black Caucus to build support among African-American voters for Democratic Vice President Al Gore's presidential bid. Cummings himself is expected to board the bus when it heads to Kentucky and Florida.

He is actively campaigning to be elected vice-chairman of the caucus, running against Democratic Reps. Eddie Bernice Johnson of Texas and Bennie G. Thomp-

son of Mississippi.

Cummings, who reported to the Federal Election Commission that he had more than \$165,000 on hand for his campaign as of Sept. 30, said he also plans to transfer \$60,000 of that amount to other Democratic campaigns. Kondner, by contrast, has raised less than the \$5,000 that requires a candidate to file with the FEC.

But Cummings insists he is not taking Kondner lightly, even though he has beaten the Republican twice already. In their last face-off, in 1998, Cummings received 86 percent of the vote to Kondner's 14 percent.

"My support from the people does give me a leeway but I am not taking anything for granted," said Cummings. "I know it's hard to believe that. But I always think of how Steve Forbes lost by 34 votes in New York when he and everyone else thought that he's going to win. I think about that everyday. I am going to campaign intensively."

Nothing for granted

The 49-year-old lawyer from West Baltimore has the advantage of being a black Democrat in a district that is predominantly African-American and overwhelmingly Democratic. It includes much of the center of Baltimore and the western suburbs of Woodlawn, Catonsville and Randallstown in Baltimore County.

Cummings, a former member of the Maryland House of Delegates, won the seat in a 1996 special election to replace Kweisi Mfume, who left to head the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Cummings faced his only real challenge in the Democratic primary for that election, and has not looked back since.

"Elijah Cummings has been a great Democrat and we will continue to back him," said Ann Beegle, communications director for the Maryland Democratic Party. "It is fair to say that the 7th District is a safe bet for us. We are firmly behind Cummings."

Cummings' voting record in Congress has been consistently liberal. He voted to increase the minimum wage; to allow illegal immigrants to attend public schools; and to increase aid to the homeless.

His voting record has received perfect ratings from the League of Conservation Voters, the Consumer Federation of America and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Groups like the National Federation of Independent Business, the Chamber of Commerce and the American Conservative Union, by comparison, gave him scores ranging from zero to the low 30s.

In Congress, Cummings serves on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee as well as the Government Reform

INCUMBENT

NAME: Elijah E. Cummings

PARTY: Democrat

AGE: 49

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in political science, Howard University, 1973; law degree, 1976, University of Maryland School of Law.

EXPERIENCE: Practicing attorney, 1976-96; elected to the Maryland House of Delegates, 1982; served as vice chairman of the Constitutional and Administrative Law Committee and the Economic Matters Committee; speaker pro-tem, 1995-96; elected to Congress in 1996; member of the Government Reform and Oversight Committee, the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

ISSUES: Described as a liberal, Cummings supports strict gun control, a higher minimum wage and increased aid to the homeless.

FAMILY: Separated. He lives in Baltimore and has two children.



CUMMINGS: SHOO-IN

CHALLENGER

NAME: Ken Kondner

PARTY: Republican

AGE: 59

EDUCATION: Took dental technician classes at Catonsville Community College.

EXPERIENCE: Owns and operates Precision Orthodontic Laboratory; member of the Baltimore County Republican Central Committee.

ISSUES: Kondner considers himself a middle-of-the-road Republican; he supports a strong defense, stiffer drug and crime penalties, and protecting Social Security.

FAMILY: Never married. He lives in Woodlawn.

Committee, where he is the ranking member on the Civil Service and Criminal Justice, Drug Policy & Human Resources subcommittees.

He was one of the first congressmen to call for special hearings into disputed allegations of a CIA role in the rising use of crack cocaine, and he said he has dedicated himself to fight drugs.

"Drugs are the cause for the crimes in the city," Cummings said, in response to Kondner's crime focus. "Seventy-five to 80 percent of the ... crime rate in the area is drug related.

"I live on Madison Avenue in Baltimore City. I know the problem. It is drugs and we have chalked out a program to counter this," he said.

Three steps

Cummings proposed a three-step program, should he be re-elected, to increase the number of police in Baltimore City, create more jobs for the unemployed and open up more drug-treatment centers in the district. He said \$2.5 million is being raised to help finance the program.

He concedes that problems continue, even after he has been in office for four years.

"It's hard to counter this problem as it

is deep-rooted," Cummings said. "When you work and get 20 people out of it, there are 20 who will replace them immediately. But countering this will be my major priority."

Kondner argues that Cummings has not been aggressive enough about the "alarming crime rate in the city."

"We have to have a more severe anti-crime plan," he said. "We have to be strict.

"If elected I'll work for the implementation of 'Project Exile,'" he said, citing a program that takes prior criminals who are caught with a gun and automatically puts them into the federal system for prosecution.

"That is the only system that is going to work here," he said.

But Kondner is, once again, fighting the fight largely on his own. The Maryland Republican Party has offered little assistance to the 58-year-old dental technician in a district that it sees as all but unwinnable for the GOP.

"We aren't concentrating on the 7th, we don't expect to win there," said Paul Ellington, executive director of the state GOP. "We are instead diverting our resources into Maryland's 5th District where we think we have a chance to win."