

A solution to the Roland Burris mess

Written by George E Curry, NNPA Columnist
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Roland Burris should borrow a page from Republican Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, President Obama's short-lived pick to become Commerce Secretary, and agree to resign his Senate seat immediately on the condition that he be replaced by another African-American.

The embattled Illinois senator has been in office shortly more than a month, but is facing increasing calls for his resignation in the wake of disclosures that he has been less than forthcoming about his attempts to raise campaign contributions for impeached Gov. Rod Blagojevich in exchange for being appointed to the U.S. Senate.

Burris was selected to fill the remaining term of President Barack Obama, which is set to expire in two years. The Senate Ethics Committee has been asked to investigate Burris and perjury charges have been referred to Illinois prosecutors for possible action.

It's time to pull the plug on this soap opera and the quickest way to turn the lights out is by getting Burris to do something many have already accused him of doing – cut a deal.

I know there are some who will say that Burris should resign with no strings attached. I agree in principle, but doubt that he'll leave voluntarily without some preconditions. Hence, my proposal that he leave, be replaced by another African-American, and in 2010, let the voters of Illinois decide who should succeed the man who succeeded Barack Obama.

Invariably, conservatives will call my proposal to end the standoff racist because it seeks to keep at least one African-American seated in the otherwise all-White Senate. In the larger scheme of things, this is no different than Senator Gregg agreeing to give up his Senate seat with the stipulation that a Republican replace him to avoid giving Democrats a critical 60-vote edge. Of course, the circumstances are different but in the end, it's about the same thing -- retaining political power.

New Hampshire Gov. John Lynch, a Democrat, agreed to play the game, naming Bonnie Newman, Gregg's former chief of staff, to replace him. But Gregg had second thoughts and decided to stay in the Senate.

I'm glad Gregg decided to stay put rather than head a department he once voted to abolish. With the 2010 census fast approaching, he is not one who could be trusted to oversee the official enumeration of Americans. With a record of supporting NAACP-backed positions only 24 percent of the time – earning him a grade of F – in the 110th Congress (2007-2008), Gregg's appointment raises question about Obama's judgment.

The same three Republicans who backed the administration's stimulus program – Olympia J. Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania – were the only members of the GOP to receive a passing grade on the NAACP Report Card. The two Maine senators earned Bs and Specter received a C. Every other Republican in the Senate earned a D or F. Instead of picking a moderate Republican, Obama went for someone who votes against African-American interests more than 75 percent of the time.

The issue with Burris is not his voting record, but his veracity.

The Black community rallied around Burris because they believed that he was untainted and

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had steered clear of any pay-to-play deals with Blagojevich before the governor was booted from office. We were obviously misled. Burris keeps changing his story and each time he does, he sinks deeper and deeper into a hole.

In a Jan. 5 affidavit, Burris declared “there was not any contact between myself or any of my representatives with Gov. Blagojevich or any of his representatives regarding my appointment.” He was pressed on this point several days later by the Illinois House impeachment committee. Rep. Jim Durkin asked Burris about six people close to the governor and whether he had any contact with them. After consulting with his lawyer, Burris replied, “I talked to some friends about my desire to be appointed, yes.”

The only “friend” he identified was Lon Monk, the governor’s chief of staff. Following up, Rep. Jill Tracy asked: “So you don’t recall that there was anybody else besides Lon Monk that you expressed an interest to at that point?”

Burris: “No, I can’t recall...”

In an amended affidavit that some contend was submitted after Burris learned that some of his conversations may have been taped by federal prosecutors investigating the governor, Burris acknowledged that he had been in contact with six Blagojevich associates, including his brother, Rob, who asked Burris on three different occasions to raise money for the governor.

Speaking to reporters On Feb. 16, Burris acknowledged that he attempted to raise money for Blagojevich, but the people he approached were not interested in giving.

This embarrassing saga has gone on much too long. Enough is too much. Burris needs to resign and if it takes appointing an African-American successor to make him go away sooner, let’s make a deal.

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