

Bernard Schoenburg: Callahan hits a hot button at bad time in campaign

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National security is a big issue this year, but who thought a couple of pronouncements on military might would provide so much discussion in the race for a U.S. House seat in an area right in the middle of the country — the 18th Congressional District?

Democratic candidate COLLEEN CALLAHAN of Kickapoo brought herself to center stage last week when, at a forum in Peoria, she suggested she could support resumption of the military draft. She wasn't even asked about the issue specifically, but she and her opponents were challenged by a journalist to name a tough, "even unpopular" issue they could champion. Callahan responded that the draft would be "the fairest way for us to begin to rebuild our military."

"I know my campaign staff isn't going to like me saying this," she said, according to the Peoria Journal Star.

I'll bet she was right.

This recalls the time last fall, early in the primary season, when the Republican candidate for the seat, state Rep. AARON SCHOCK of Peoria, made some international waves. In his announcement speech, Schock said that if China didn't help the U.S. convince Iran to tamp down its nuclear ambitions, the U.S. should sell nuclear missiles to Taiwan.

"Non-proliferation will either be enforced universally or not at all — it is their choice," Schock said at the time. "The Chinese will come around, I have no doubt."

Sounds like he didn't know how tough their gymnasts are.

Anyway, Schock later said he had gone too far in suggesting the nuclear weapons sales. In January, he told the editorial board of the Peoria newspaper that his initial proposal was "more in jest," though his campaign manager, STEVEN SHEARER, had been quoted earlier as saying the proposal was "not just something that he pulled out of his pocket ... It's a deeply thought-out policy."

Callahan said she thought the question she got last week was to name an unpopular issue she might support. She said she doesn't intend to propose a draft, but would consider it if brought up.

Still, politically, the issue is now hers.

KENT REDFIELD, political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said the draft is worth a serious discussion, but the idea has become "a third-rail kind of issue. ... It's one of those hot-button things that people normally don't get involved with."

Redfield also said that talk about a draft would clearly be subject to much more scrutiny if a candidate for president did the talking. A member of Congress, of course, has only one vote toward enacting a program.

Still, Redfield said it can be political "poison" for a candidate to talk about reinstating the draft.

After some strident foreign policy pronouncements in his announcement speech, Schock has more recently avoided great pitfalls, and his campaign has demonstrated discipline, energy and great fundraising ability.

After the forum last week, he said he would not support a draft because military leaders don't want it. He thinks the volunteer military is working.

Callahan argued that even if you disagree with her statement on the draft, she presented it in response to a hypothetical, and she tried to meet the challenge of the question by actually talking about something unpopular.

She also said she thinks Schock's earlier comments about Taiwan and his later attempt to pass them off as a joke portrayed a "reckless approach."

Redfield said Schock's comments about Taiwan showed "his inexperience and lack of knowledge."

"Fortunately for him," Redfield added, "he made that gaffe early in the campaign, so his timing was much better than hers. ... I think where he was going could potentially cause us more problems internationally than what she was talking about. But politically, that's old news."

Now, Redfield said, with just weeks to Election Day, the public is focusing more on candidates and issues.

"From a campaign standpoint," Redfield said, "it's critical to avoid hot-button issues," and for Callahan, "this is clearly a self-inflicted wound."

Also in the race for the 18th is Green Party candidate SHELDON SCHAFER of Peoria.

Poe's foe speaks up

Republican State Rep. RAYMOND POE's Democratic challenger (yes, he has one) in the 99th House District, is faulting the incumbent for not doing more to protect tourist sites in the capital city.

"District residents continue to tell me of their outrage over the (upcoming) closing of the Dana-Thomas House and other historical sites," said KENT DeLAY in a news release. "Our ability to compete for any convention and tourism business has just been set back, probably for years to come. ... When people show up to find 'closed' signs on our doors, it leaves a bad impression."

DeLay, 43, of Springfield, who does lobbying and health-care advocacy, said he speaks from experience about tourism. He was general manager of the Super 8 Motel in Springfield from 1984 to 1991. That property ran so well that he also had time to be a marketing director for Super 8 in the Midwest, he said, and got the opportunity to open about 14 new properties as part of his job.

DeLay also faults Poe for checking on the condition of the Illinois State Fairgrounds only after the fairgrounds' electrical grid broke down early this year. "I can assure you that as your state representative, I will know the condition of the ... fairgrounds and fight to keep it maintained and operating to benefit not only the 99th District residents and business owners, but also to benefit the state of Illinois," DeLay said.

In response, Poe noted closing the Dana-Thomas House and other sites is being done by an administration run by Democrats — DeLay's party. Poe said he voted last week to provide money to keep those sites open and avoid layoffs, and it is now up to the Senate, also led by Democrats, to pass the same measures.

Poe said he has worked "across party lines" in seeking to reverse cuts and he has tried to keep federal funds flowing to facilities in the district that qualify.

Poe also said the state lacked a comprehensive maintenance schedule when the electrical problem developed at the fairgrounds,

"I don't know how anyone could have forecast it — you know, an act of God, something blowing up. I mean, that's not in my ability yet," Poe said.

The electrical grid was replaced in plenty of time for this summer's state fair, though many nonfair events on the grounds had to be canceled until the new wiring was in place.

Enrietto back in radio

A former spokeswoman for then-Gov. JIM EDGAR and a longtime radio reporter based at the Statehouse is lending her expertise to WQNA-FM, the radio station that is a service of the Capital Area Career Center in Springfield.

BECKY ENRIETTO, 50, an Auburn native who now lives in Springfield, is volunteering as community news director at WQNA. She's doing a public affairs show that airs on the station from 7 to 8 p.m. on Thursdays.

Enrietto worked at the Statehouse for the old Illinois News Network from 1982-94 and in Edgar's office in 1994-95. She resigned earlier this year from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and has finished a master's in public administration at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

WQNA is known for its eclectic music and programming, put on by area high school and Lincoln Land Community College students and volunteers.

"I'm thrilled to be back in radio," Enrietto said, "and it's a pleasure to renew my acquaintances in the news business and in politics and government."

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