

LOCAL COMMENT: The GOP spins on impeachment

BY ROBERT WEINER

September 21, 2006

With the midterm congressional elections fast approaching, Republicans fearful of losing control of the House are trying to create hysteria about the likelihood of Democrats impeaching President George W. Bush if they take control of the U.S. House. U.S. Rep. John Conyers of Detroit, a 20-term incumbent assured of re-election, figures prominently in such talk, because he would rise under Democratic control to chairman of the Judiciary Committee, which has jurisdiction over impeachment.



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This scenario is giving the GOP nightmares. The Republican National Committee Web site put up a huge fear-mongering headline: "THE REAL DEM AGENDA: IMPEACHMENT."

Republican Congressional Committee Chair Tom Reynolds, R-N.Y., has claimed that Democrats offer "nothing ... aside from subpoenas, surrender and impeachment."

Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., chair of the Republican Senate Campaign Committee, sent out a mailing citing Democrats' possible "impeachment of President Bush."

Yet as Conyers has said publicly, and has told me directly: "I'm not going to conduct an impeachment. That would take all of our time. I would not want to bring an impeachment investigation because that would drain time and energy from the work that needs to be done, and it would take away the country's attention from issues that need to be addressed.

"We need to investigate and conduct oversight of issues like how we got to the war, the mislabeled WMDs, civil liberties violations including under the Patriot Act, the Medicare drug bill, the energy policy."

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Cal., the would-be speaker, agrees. Pelosi said in a statement, "Democrats are not about impeachment. Democrats are about bringing the country together. ... Investigation does not equate to impeachment. Investigation is the requirement of Congress. It's about checks and balances."

If impeachment is not on the agenda, Republicans may still be worried about what Conyers might uncover.

Jack Anderson, the renowned muckraking Washington columnist who died last December, described Conyers in a 1994 column as a "junkyard dog investigator" who was no less aggressive when he chaired the Government Operations Committee with fellow Democrat Bill Clinton in the White House as he had been under the Republican administration of the first President George Bush.

"If the Clinton Administration was hoping for a more cooperative Conyers than the one who gave fits to the Bush administration, those hopes went up in flames," Anderson wrote.

Anderson said Conyers is "watching out for the taxpayers' wallet by rooting out fraud, waste and abuse in every corner of the bureaucracy," and, "His only special interest appears to be his constituents in downtrodden Detroit, where one-third of the population lives below the poverty line."

The morning of the Judiciary Committee's vote on the articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton, I was with Conyers as he solemnly listened to jazz in his darkened office.

He was pensive and deeply disturbed by what he knew would be the committee's partisan vote. Conyers led the opposition to impeachment and was ultimately vindicated by the Senate's refusal to vote for it.

But impeachment is not on Conyers' current agenda. It is only a red herring on the Republican agenda.

ROBERT WEINER was press secretary for U.S. Rep. John Conyers and the Government Operations Committee chaired by Conyers. He was a public affairs director in the Clinton White House and now heads a Washington public affairs company. Write him at weinerpublic@Comcast.net.

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