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How Conyers Pulled Off Another Landslide



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By Robert Weiner

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I was privileged to be invited by Congressman Conyers to witness his final two days of his primary push and saw first-hand how he pulled off another landslide: by stating his mission clearly -- "Full employment is the first priority" - and by a dedicated team of hundreds of volunteers. The 74-26 victory was no accident.

When Conyers Campaign Manager Sen. Bert Johnson and his field team had 6PM and 7PM Monday training sessions for poll workers the night before Tuesday's election, and Bert and field director Zack Stede told everyone, "You need to be ready for 13 hours, 7AM-8PM" (when the polls were open), I was waiting for any "Yikes" in the energetic crowd of 200 between the two meetings, but not one person complained. John Conyers engenders loyalty because of his amazing history--his bills Congress enacted to create the Martin Luther King Holiday, the Voting Rights Act protecting minorities, to his being the first congressional endorsement of Obama, his national health care push (he corralled swaying members and was instrumental in the three-vote margin), to his current drive for a Full Employment Act as well as joining the protests against water shutoffs and working to delay the cutoffs.

He is a living legend, still effective, and anyone around him knows it. At President Obama's White House news conference August 1 as Congress recessed--I was in the White House press room for it--the President paid attention to Conyers' arguments he's been writing and saying on jobs. Conyers has said that whenever he sees the President he presses full employment. So when the President opened and closed his news conference making the Conyers case on jobs, I ran back to the congressman's office to tell him. Conyers has the juice and the mission to keep making a difference like this--and the respect of the White House and the Congress as the Dean of the Congressional Black Caucus and now the incoming Dean of the whole next Congress, as well as Democratic leader of the influential House Judiciary Committee, Chair of the Out-of-Afghanistan caucus, and Chair of the Full Employment Caucus. Incidentally, he created the last two.

When he walked into Mildred Gaddis' WCHB 4PM radio show election day in Cutter's Bar and Grill, the 60 people crowding the dining room during the broadcast applauded a dozen Conyers statements. He praised the African summit and trade with that continent's nations. He again called for full employment legislation. After pointing to the "mean spirited" congressional opposition who block anything of Obama's including jobs, he pointed out, "Obama doesn't lose his cool." Gaddis asked Conyers, "What do you say you those who argue that the primary is not that important?" Conyers shot back, "It's the most important! If you don't make the primary, you won't be in the general." No Cantor-defeat in the making for Conyers! (House Republican Leader Eric Cantor, R-VA, lost his primary.) Afterward, walking through the bar, he knew something about each person who warmly came up to him, whether the 70 year-old grandmother or the 9 year-old boy. He knew each family.

On election night, the returns moved early in the counting (8: 25 PM) from the 50's for Conyers to the 60's, back to the 50's (which gave two seconds of scare) and then inexorably higher, as Conyers' vast number of powerful precincts rolled in, to 69% (9PM), 70% (9:15) and when finally a landslide 74% when the district-wide total was complete (early AM). Around 9PM, when AP called the election for Conyers, the television reporters asked him, "Wasn't this a contentious election?" Conyers responded, "Not for me. I campaigned on what I've accomplished and was working on. I campaigned on my proven positions. No one else had that." They also asked, "What will this term be about?" and "What do you want to accomplish?" He responded, "The struggle goes on. Unless we take the unemployed in Detroit, and put them to work, we are engaged in self-defeating activity. It's the number one domestic agenda item. How can a man and woman raise children without a job?"



For campaign workers and volunteers, the Congressman dutifully signed dozens of posters with an amazingly perceptive, pensive, serious face shot by campaign photographer Dale Rich. The signed posters will be a historic treasure. He signed one for me too!

Then Conyers gave an emotional victory speech to the hundreds of supporters still at headquarters on the need to correct the growing "income disparity" in America, told them he won "because of you," and said he will "continue the struggle especially for full employment." The room was filled with repeated cheers of "Fifty Years Strong!"

There is additional work to be done. Long-time Conyers staffer and now volunteer JoAnn Warwick, an attorney, drove me through streets that have houses with gorgeous architecture that have fallen into disrepair and are now inhabited by squatters, or uninhabited. Conyers agreed they should be fixed and get federal HUD money. Those are the ones the media invariably focuses on to unfairly denigrate Detroit as having "blight" --so we should repair them. Some just need fresh paint, others need more. Likewise, JoAnn drove me by the huge, highly visible, half-built, stalled prison that symbolized County Executive Bob Ficano's problems which helped cause his primary defeat. Having known Ficano for years from his County Sheriff terms and having worked with him and Congressman Conyers in their efforts to gain Detroit ongoing funds for enforcement as "a high-intensity drug trafficking area" when I was spokesman for the White House Drug Policy Office, I've seen a positive side and feel some sadness. But the jail stares at the city and needs action, one way or the other, from those who carry on.

Weiner was a Clinton White House spokesman for six years and senior staff for Congressmen Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, Ed Koch, and Senator Ted Kennedy. He regularly writes for the Chronicle and wrote the epilogue to Bankole Thompson's groundbreaking book, "Obama and Christian Loyalty."



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Robert Weiner, NATIONAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND ISSUES STRATEGIST Bob Weiner, a national issues and public affairs strategist, has been spokesman for and directed the public affairs offices of White House Drug Czar and Four Star General Barry ([more...](#))