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Guest column: We are missing Rep. Conyers already

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U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. has been named the new Democratic Leader ("Ranking Member") of the House Judiciary Committee. It was the powerful post held by Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, who was pressured to resign from the position and then retire from Congress last month due to allegations of sexual harassment and disclosure of a settlement.

On Nov. 14, his last major public appearance before the allegations broke and the 88-year-old was hospitalized with stress-related issues, Conyers led the Democratic questioning of U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions at his committee's day-long oversight hearing. The event was the center of the media universe for the day because of Session's history of inconsistent answers about the administration's potential cooperation with Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections and the White House attempts to change the conversation.

In his lead-off questioning, he asked Sessions, "In a functioning democracy, is it common for the leader of the country to order the criminal justice system to retaliate against his political opponents?"

Sessions answered in general terms: "Mr. Conyers, I would say the Justice Department can never be used to retaliate politically against opponents. That would be wrong."

Conyers, with his usual persistence, repeated the question, "I'll interpret that as a no. Here's another. Should the President of the United States make public comments that might influence a pending criminal investigation?" This time, Sessions answered directly, "He should take great care in those issues I would say it's improper. A president cannot influence an investigation."

That was Conyers at his finest, pushing witnesses to give direct answers to the key questions.

Now, consider the next hearing, about a month later, with Conyers gone. The witness this time is Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga., asked a question

similar to what Conyers had asked Sessions, Rosenstein's boss, a month earlier. "Do you think it's appropriate for the President to call for the investigation of specific individuals?"

But the question was more generic and Rosenstein got away with responding: "I'm certainly not going to comment on that Congressman, other than to tell you that it's my responsibility, along with the Attorney General to make sure that those decisions are made independently by the department based on the facts and the law."

Conyers, known for precision, likely would have asked something like, "Attorney General Sessions said last week that it is improper for a president to ask DOJ to investigate his political opponent. Do you agree?" He would likely have forced the issue for an answer.

Even if we recognize that some of his accomplishments are decades ago, including the creation of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, voting rights legislation and laws against hate crimes for civil rights, Conyers during this and the last session of Congress led on a host of issues: He obtained a majority of Democrats for the first time to sponsor his single payer, "Medicare for All" legislation. He also sponsored legislation banning bulk data collection by U.S. intelligence agencies of Americans' phone conversations without warrants, a position supported by the Supreme Court. With relevance today, he was the only member of the Judiciary Committee who served and voted on Richard Nixon's impeachment and had that relevant knowledge.

We already are missing the leadership of John Conyers. Nadler is a strong progressive with a brilliant and insightful understanding of the Constitution. He has large shoes to fill.

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