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Missing Conyers Already

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After Conyers grilled AG Sessions, Judiciary Questioning of Deputy AG Rosenstein Shows Democrats Have Large Shoes to Fill

Article originally published in the Detroit Free Press

By Robert Weiner and Ben Lasky

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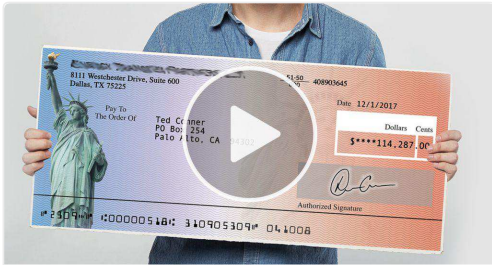
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U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) has been named the new Democratic Leader ("Ranking Member") of the House Judiciary Committee. It was the powerful post held by Rep. John Conyers' (D-Detroit), who was pressured to resign from the position and

then retire from Congress last month due to allegations of sexual harassment and disclosure of a state-no-guilt settlement.

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The national discourse is missing Conyers already. On November 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 US 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 Sessions' history of inconsistent answers about the administration's potential cooperation with Russian interference in the 2016 US elections and the White House recently trying to switch the conversation.

We spent more than six hours with Conyers at the event. 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."

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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, on December 13, with Conyers gone, and the

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witness this time Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Cong. Hank Johnson (D-Ga.) used a similar question 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, would have used the hearing's punch and asked something like, "Attorney General Sessions said last month 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 creating Martin Luther King 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 led a pending lawsuit against the President's violating the Constitution by receiving emoluments (profits) from his properties including the Trump Hotel in Washington, DC. He sponsored passage of a resolution saying no wars in Iran or North Korea without congressional approval. He also sponsored legislation banning bulk data collection by US intelligence agencies of Americans' phone calls without warrants by US intelligence agencies, 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 from John Conyers.

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