

Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1967

If there's anything more disgusting than a person who has no guts, it's a person who has half-guts.

For example, Rep. John Conyers, Jr. For the past several weeks I've been writing about the wonderful job he was doing in fighting passage of that horrible "flag-burning" bill.

I suggested to producers of the Lou Gordon TV show on Channel 50 that this would be an excellent topic for a debate. They agreed. Rep. Conyers agreed to appear at first, but when his opposition was going to be Richard Durant, the highly articulate ex-Birchite and present chairman of the 14th District GOP, Conyers welched.

Conyer's phony excuse was that he could only debate someone of equal rank with him—another congressman or equivalent. I suggested that if Conyers is afraid to speak out for his convictions, a suitable alternative would be Horace Sheffield, a possible rival of Conyers in next year's Democratic primary for Congress in the First District.

Sheffield accepted, of course, and did very well on the show. I've often disagreed with Sheffield, but one thing that can be said to his credit—once he has taken a controversial position, he will not flinch from his intellectual responsibility to defend that point of view.

The same thing cannot be said for Conyers. I believe that he voted against the "flag-burning" bill (whatever his own convictions were) to please some of his major backers here in Detroit who have supported him both financially and politically since he made his first successful run for Congress in 1964. He knows that these backers read the papers very carefully to make sure that he votes in the old radical tradition on very controversial issues. (Conyers was one out of 16 House members voting against the "flag-burning" bill; he was one out of four to vote against appropriations for the War in Vietnam).

But these votes of extreme dissent are of no moment to the power structure of the House of Representatives. Obviously, the votes are not decisive and House leaders can just shrug them off as one of those little things that a congressman must do to please the folks back home.

Still, Conyers doesn't want to over-publicize his occasional radical voting record. He may want to run for mayor of Detroit some day. So, he deftly sneaked out of his moral obligation to explain his controversial vote and avoided neatly the possibility of informing the broader non-radical audience of Lou Gordon's show of a position that he should have been proud to present.

As I indicated in this column several months ago, Conyers has received a lot of criticism for getting himself involved in that special investigating committee that recommended censure, etc. of Adam Clayton Powell. Conyers' strategy seems to have been to subtly eliminate Powell from the national scene so that he himself could become the No. 1 Negro spokesman in Congress. He seems to have been successful, as many newspapers in the last few weeks have given him this label, e.g. *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Washington Post*, *New York Post*—plus the stalwart liberal magazine *The Nation*.

Conyers is a young man on the go. He will shift steps faster than a Cha-Cha dancer and, if you dare oppose him, he and his backers will call you a reactionary and anti-Negro.

The young congressman—for whom so many of us once had great hopes—makes nasty alliances with no thought for good scruples or conscience. He has been seeking, with some success, to bring the Negro community and some of his “liberal” white lackeys solidly into the Cavanagh camp.

When this writer wrote a mild (by *Fifth Estate* standards) anti-Cavanagh piece in the Wayne Collegian, he actually received threats of physical violence from some of Conyers’ supporters.

Several weeks ago, when I informed Lou Gordon that Conyers was actively supporting the campaign to recall Councilman Mary Beck (in an infantile retaliatory move to counter her move to recall Cavanagh), he actually lied to Gordon in denying his association.

Conyers’ people say that they have to support Cavanagh all the way (despite his obvious incompetence) because he is a useful ally against the U.A.W. (Would this be something like the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 which found Germany and the Soviet Union in a temporary alliance?)

Well, as mischievous as the U.A.W. has been in meddling in the affairs of Detroit’s citizens, at least they are accountable to their union members, and must produce something of value in order to stay in power. I’d favor the U.A.W. over helping a young egomaniacal mayor who came into power on a wave of creative protest but is now drowning in the cesspool of his own ambitions.

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