POINTS OF VIEW

U.S. Senate race should be first-class

PHILIP POWER

So it's going to be Debbie Stabenow vs. Spencer Abraham for the U.S. Senate in November 2000.

That's fine. If the public purpose of an election contest is to pit the two best possible candidates against each other, a Stabenow-Abraham race fits the bill perfectly.

Some early polls have shown Stabenow with a slight (45-39 percent) lead over Abraham. They won't mean much once the campaigning get serious. But they do give substance to the widely held theory that Stabenow has a real chance and that Abraham is unusually vulnerable for an incumbent senator.

Don't be fooled. Abraham has lots going for him. As an incumbent with statewide reach, he'll work the Washington sound-bite culture to get on the 11 p.m. news. And he's hard at work on Republican fund-raising circuit, with a stated $9 million goal.

Most of all, Abraham has in his corner the Republican machine built and fine-tuned by Gov. John Engler. Just how solidly in his corner is another question, given Abraham's decision to endorse his old boss, former Vice President Dan Quayle, for president rather than Engler's choice, Texas Gov. George W. Bush. GOP insiders are cluck-clucking over this slip in Abraham's usually cautious political maneuvering.

And Abraham has hardly set the Senate on fire. Other than an easy-to-attack vote for impeachment and a sensible but easy-to-forget bill easing immigration restrictions, Abraham hasn't constructed much of a legislative record. And a lot of people who have repeatedly tried and failed to get schedule commitments through Abraham's office are very critical of his staff performance and Abraham's evident preference for appearing at very controlled and scripted events.

As for Stabenow, the only question was whether she'd run for Senate next year or governor in three years. Michigan likely will lose a congressional seat after the 2000 census results are in. Stabenow's district, uneasily poised between liberal and urban Lansing and conservative and exurban Livingston County, is ripe for elimination when the redistricting deals are finally cut.

So for Stabenow, necessity – in this case, running for the Senate – is the mother of invention. With former Gov. Jim Blanchard out of the race, Stabenow is about the only Democratic leader left with an established political track record and relatively high name ID statewide.

Stabenow served in the state Senate, where she precipitated events that wound up with Proposal A to reform school finance. That cost her organized labor's endorsement when she ran for governor in 1994 and lost in the Democratic primary. She went to Congress in 1996 after a bitter race against incumbent Dick Chrysler. Last year, she strolled to easy victory in the face of a Republican landslide.

Forget what the Abraham spin doctors are saying that Stabenow is only a second stringer, now that Blanchard is out of the race. I've watched her on the campaign trail, and I can confirm that she's one terrific campaigner.

A longtime Livingston County political observer calls her "one of the most formidable campaigners I've ever seen. When she works a room, it's a work of art."

Politically, she's a moderate who has won a reputation in Congress for solid reasonableness and good staff work. In fact, Stabenow has a somewhat unusual reputation for being both a good campaigner and a good legislator.

Who knows whether Democrat Stabenow will be able to knock off an incumbent Republican U.S. senator, especially in a state where the institutional Democratic Party has essentially vanished. I'd guess the issue will turn on whether Stabenow can stay close to Abraham in the money-raising contest and whether organized labor still bears a grudge for Proposal A.

And there's always wild-card Geoffrey Fieger, who has threatened to run as an Independent if he loses a Democratic primary and could well siphon votes away from Stabenow.

However it turns out, it should be a first-class race. Stay tuned.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at: ppower@oconline.com

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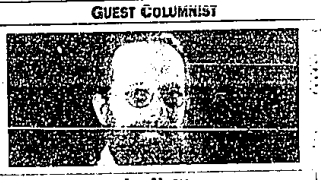

JIM NASH

I was relieved when the U.S. Senate acquitted President Bill Clinton with a majority of senators voting against removal. There is no room for gloating in the outcome of this impeachment and trial because a moral lapse and a public lie were at its root. But I must question the roles played by the Office of Independent Counsel, the House majority and my congressman, Joe Knollenberg, R-Bloomfield.

Recent reports of contacts between the OIC and the attorneys for Paula Jones only further bring into question Starr's already controversial conduct. Remember, Starr's ethics adviser quit in protest because Starr's congressional testimony crossed from mandated independent investigation to active advocacy. Starr's report left out clearly exculpatory evidence, relegating it to the raw transcripts. And Starr finally admitted, after months of delay, that there was no credible evidence of wrongdoing concerning "File-gate" and "Travel-gate." Why the wait?

Republican leaders rushed Starr's report to the public without allowing Clinton to offer a response, and over the objections of Democrats on the Judiciary Committee. This destroyed precedents set by Watergate of partisanship and secrecy and the Iran-Contra report, that allowed former Presidents George Bush and Ronald Reagan a month to offer a rebuttal before publication. This was done to embarrass the president with salacious details, and weaken his public support.

The Judiciary Committee Republicans and the House GOP majority ignored testimony from mostly Republican prosecutors who plainly stated the average American would never be pursued on such weak evidence of wrongdoing and questionable materiality. They also ignored the testimony of constitutional scholars and historians (and a petition signed by 400 other prominent historians) who said that even if he was guilty as charged these crimes did not rise to the level of impeachment as intended by the founding fathers. They even ignored objections from Bush, former President Gerald Ford and former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole.

Finally, the Republican leadership called impeachment a vote of conscience yet used their power to prevent the House from even considering censure. Not allowing an alternative to impeachment limited any member's conscience to only the leadership's choices. Four Republicans who voted for impeachment even sent a letter to the Senate suggesting the case should be dropped.

In the end, the House managers were forced to argue Monica Lewinsky's testimony must be believed to convict for perjury, but her testimony must be disbelieved to convict for obstruction of justice. One witness' testimony gauged purely by its benefit to the prosecution.

Before the House vote, I called Knollenberg's office to tell him I strongly opposed impeachment. The letter he sent me in response struck me as wrong in many respects, and showed a disturbing arrogance.

I agree with him that the impeachment vote was one of the "gravest days" in our history, but the danger I see here is the institutionalization of personal scandal as a political tool.

His "overwhelming evidence" of perjury and obstruction wasn't enough to convince a significant number of Republican senators, who bucked great pressure from their own party to vote for acquittal. They are already being attacked from within the GOP as gutless slaves to the polls.

He went so far as to say, "recent events have brought into question the president's ability to lead" and that "President Clinton does not possess the character" to hold his office. What events? How is his leadership questioned? Impeachment is more than some character test that Knollenberg and his Republican friends hold the only key to.

At the recently held Wye peace accord unveiling, Jordan's King Hussein said Clinton worked harder and accomplished more for peace in the Middle East than any American president in his experience. That is leadership.

I find Knollenberg's positions on impeachment, like many other views he has expressed over the years, based in weak logic and baseless rhetoric. I find arrogance in that because he is able to make almost any statement by virtue of representing a "safe" district.

The congressman has never debated a Democratic rival during a general election. He makes public appearances and speaks to groups, but he has never allowed an opponent to put his positions to the test. This district deserves to hear both sides.

Last election cycle, he collected $180,000 in campaign funds, while his Democratic opponent could only collect $13,000. National interests and big-money contributors pour money into his campaign, and he makes general purpose GOP ads to help other Republicans. The Democrats, who spend about two-thirds what the GOP spends nationally, must save their money for "competitive" districts.

We as voters must hold our representatives accountable for their words and actions. If this issue brings at least some pressure on Knollenberg to allow his opposition some voice during elections, then that is good. If we allow him to again escape debate, then we will never know if his positions hold up to serious challenge.

James Nash is a Farmington Hills resident.

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