

Sightings 9/21/06

Allah's Trailblazer
-- R. Jonathan Moore

Minnesota's fifth congressional district is about to make some history.

This past week, Keith Ellison defeated three challengers to receive the Democrat-Farmer-Labor Party's nomination for the U.S. House of Representatives. Given the district's Democratic leanings, Ellison is virtually assured a spot in the 110th Congress.

Ellison will become the first African American to represent Minnesota in Washington. That might be enough history for one district, which includes Minneapolis and some suburbs, and is around 70 percent white. But in Ellison, Fifth District voters will also be sending to Congress the nation's very first Muslim representative.

During the primary campaign, the 43-year-old Ellison, a college convert to Islam, had to respond to charges of associating with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. While in law school, writing as "Keith Hakim," Ellison contributed school newspaper columns defending Farrakhan against charges of anti-Semitism and criticizing affirmative action as a "sneaky" substitute for reparations. And in the mid-1990s, Ellison helped organize Minnesota's delegation to Farrakhan's Million Man March.

However, Ellison has denied ever belonging to the Nation of Islam, and he has directly renounced anti-Semitism in public and in letters to Jewish community organizations. Though some Jewish leaders remain unconvinced, a Minneapolis Jewish newspaper endorsed him in the primary, and several high-profile Jewish Democrats have supported him publicly and financially.

So far, for most Democrats, what matters has not been Ellison's religion but his political similarity to former senator Paul Wellstone (who died in 2002). Ellison has marked himself as a passionate progressive by calling for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, for strong support of labor, and for universal health care. The charismatic candidate even adopted Wellstone's familiar green for his campaign posters.

In winning the backing of longtime Wellstone advocates Sam and Sylvia Kaplan, the particularities of his faith mattered less than the commonality of their politics. "What came through to us," said Sylvia, "was he believes in social justice and the common good, which is a Jewish tradition."

At a recent campaign stop, Ellison again addressed the religion issue. "I'm a Muslim. I'm proud to be a Muslim," he said. "But I'm not running as a Muslim candidate." Although he has not hesitated to greet the burgeoning Somali population in Minnesota with a heartfelt "Salaam Alaikum," he would rather talk about Iraq and health care than about religion.

Not surprisingly, Ellison's opponents don't plan to forgive his partial flirtation with black separatism. Republican Alan Fine has signaled that he'll be painting his competitor with a broad

brush in coming weeks. "The voters of the Fifth District have a clear choice," he said recently. They can vote Republican, or "they can choose to elect an extremist candidate who has associated himself with the likes of Louis Farrakhan, Khalid Abdul Muhammed [who once called Jews "the bloodsuckers of the black nation"], Kwame Ture [Black Panther leader Stokely Carmichael], Sharif Willis [former Vice Lords gang leader] and others."

The chairman of the state Republican Party, Ron Carey, has made a similar argument: "By supporting Louis Farrakhan ... Ellison has become a national embarrassment for his radical views." And when terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in Iraq, one blogger recommended that "condolences should be sent to Ellison HQ."

In spite of -- or perhaps because of -- his opponents' guilt-by-association strategy, Ellison will soon belong to the congressional class of 2006. So it's worth asking, what difference might a Muslim representative make?

Ellison may serve as much more than a role model for American Muslims. A spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations has said that Ellison's election would "be a tremendous assertion of the fact that we're Americans and we're just as interested in public service as anyone else, and here's the proof -- we have somebody in Congress." In other words, Ellison may not only show American Muslims who they can become; he might also show suspicious fellow citizens who their Muslim neighbors already are.

Ellison has tried to downplay the political significance of his faith. "The focus on my religion doesn't bother me, but I feel that it's a distraction from what we need to be talking about," he says. "My faith informs me. My faith helps me to remember to be gentle, kind, considerate, fair, respectful. But I don't make my faith something that other people have to deal with."

Other people, however, have made and will continue to make his faith something that he must deal with. News of Ellison's primary victory was picked up by media outlets from as far away as Somalia and Qatar, and his American profile will only grow as November nears. *E Pluribus Unum?* Another test awaits.

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