

DFL Convention Begins With Franken Fending Off Criticism

BYLINE: PATRICIA LOPEZ, KEVIN DIAZ and KEVIN DUCHSCHERE, Star Tribune

DATE: June 6, 2008

Just as DFL activists begin streaming into Rochester for a state convention that starts today, their top U.S. Senate candidate, Al Franken, is fending off still more slings on his troubled road to the nomination.

On Thursday, an e-mail surfaced from one of the state's leading abortion-rights groups, Planned Parenthood, denouncing an article he wrote for Playboy in 2000, calling the piece misogynistic and degrading to women.

And U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar broke a week-long silence to urge Franken to acknowledge that the piece was "entirely inappropriate."

On Thursday evening, Franken's campaign issued a statement in which the candidate said, in part, "I'm proud of my career as a satirist, which doesn't mean every joke I've ever told was funny, or, indeed, appropriate. I understand and regret that people have been legitimately offended by some of the things I've written."

Pressure on Franken about his writings has been building since late May, when the 2000 Playboy article was resurrected by Republicans.

In an e-mail Tuesday that went out to most DFL legislators, Connie Perpich, Planned Parenthood senior legislative director, said the group's political arm could find it "very difficult" to endorse Franken, saying the comments had gone "beyond the boundaries" for anyone seeking elective office.

Klobuchar was clearly dismayed by the controversy, saying Thursday that "this is a guy who has been married for 30 years. He loves his family and he cares about the issues. People need to know that. But they also need to hear him address his past inappropriate writings head on."

In his e-mail Thursday evening, Franken noted his marriage, adding that "I respect women, in both my personal and professional life. And I will work incredibly hard to represent them in the Senate -- something [U.S. Sen.] Norm Coleman hasn't been doing for the last six years."

Coleman saw it differently.

"While Al Franken was joking about raping women and a host of other degrading and humiliating jokes throughout his career, I was in the Minnesota attorney general's office working to throw rapists behind bars," Coleman said in a statement released late Thursday night. "I was in the mayor's office working with advocates for battered women."

Further criticism

Meanwhile, Republicans heaped another log on the fire Thursday by unearthing a 1995 New York magazine article that mentioned Franken discussing a possible "Saturday Night Live" skit involving "60 Minutes."

The skit idea centered on a sedative pill bottle found in essayist Andy Rooney's desk. According to the article, during a brainstorming session, Franken, adopting a Rooney-like voice, suggested several possible lines for the Rooney character:

"And 'I give the pills to Lesley Stahl. Then when Lesley's passed out, I take her to the closet and rape her.' Or 'That's why you never see Lesley until February.' Or, 'When she passes out I put her in various positions and take pictures of her.'"

When another writer suggested that the rape comment be about Mike Wallace, Franken said, again assuming the Rooney role: "What about 'I drag Mike into my office and rape him. Right here! I guess that makes me bad.'"

The steady dredging of Franken's lengthy and sometimes scatological comedic career now threatens the very point on which he had hoped to capitalize -- his viability as a Democratic alternative to Coleman, a Republican who clinched his party's nomination last week by acclamation.

"Clearly, what is not going to work for him is just continuing to say that he knows the difference between satire and being a senator," said Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, who had counted herself a strong Franken supporter. "He was so charming and wonderful when I saw him interacting with students. I thought, 'He excites a new generation and that's so important.' But now this thing. I just don't know. I think he has to say, 'Boy, that was a stupid thing to do.' Insensitivity and poor taste are not even strong enough terms."

Until now, Franken has defended his humor as satire that he said prepared him well for Congress.

Many supporters continue to solidly back him and on Wednesday he snagged a dream endorsement for any Democrat -- the effusive backing of former Vice President Al Gore. Singer Bonnie Raitt is slated to perform at a fundraiser for him this summer, and Franken is expected to tap heavily into his extensive network of celebrity contacts on his behalf. He also has been a tireless fundraiser for Minnesota DFLers, including Planned Parenthood.

But closer to home, some DFLers say his stumbles have become a distraction that could cost them a chance to take back a Senate seat and even hurt down-ballot candidates.

"Delegates have some very important work to do this weekend," said Sen. Kathy Saltzman, DFL-Woodbury, who released a statement with Rep. Sandy Wollschlager, DFL-Cannon Falls, that called the articles "most disturbing ... offensive and highly inappropriate when linked to a candidate for the United States Senate."

Some supporters say that while Franken may be flawed as a candidate, he remains their best shot at defeating Coleman's attempt at a second term in the Senate, where Democrats hold a one-vote majority.

"I'm not saying there are no problems here," said Jackie Stevenson, a godmother of feminist politics in Minnesota and a superdelegate. "But none of this matters to people under 40. We need to keep our focus on beating Norm Coleman."

Some DFL insiders have suggested that internal party criticism of Franken is part of an effort to revive a fizzled Senate bid by former candidate Mike Ciresi, who is thought to be mulling a primary challenge against Franken.

But Ciresi has made no decision and while Franken rival Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer continues to gather strength, no big-name contender has emerged. Darryl Stanton and Dick Franson are also seeking the DFL nomination.

Rep. Laura Brod, R-New Prague, said Thursday that the issues surrounding Franken cut "across ideological lines. ... This is just egregious, whether you're pro-choice or pro-life, pro-Al Franken or not. Reasonable people just do not think it's OK."

Franken campaign spokeswoman Jess McIntosh directed reporters to an e-mail sent by Shannon Drury, president of Minnesota NOW, defending Franken and criticizing Republican women who "use their idea of feminism only to attack and provoke."

But the critiques of Franken on Thursday crossed party lines, with Perpich expressing appreciation for those same GOP women who spoke up.

McIntosh also directed attention to Coleman, saying that he should be "ashamed" for voting against funding for the 2005 Violence Against Women Act.

Coleman campaign spokesman Luke Friedrich said that Coleman was a co-sponsor of the funding bill and that the provision he voted against was a

procedural motion to fund it without offsetting budget cuts. Once budget offsets were included, Friedrich said, Coleman voted for the funding.

Coleman's office also announced a crime fighter award he received this week from the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

DFL delegates are expected to make their Senate endorsement on Saturday afternoon and some say they are waiting to see whether Franken will address his problems in his speech.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.