

# Rep. Ellison tackles race, religion

By Ron Walters

Special to Sentinel-Voice

This session of Congress begins the political career of Attorney Keith Ellison of Minneapolis, an African-American who is also the first Muslim elected to the Congress at a time when the U.S. is at war in the most Islamic region in the world. Yet, receiving his law degree from the University of Minnesota, practicing in Minneapolis and serving in the Minnesota House of Representatives, he would appear to have substantial challenges of both race and religion in his new role as Congressman Ellison.

Ellison will be representing a district in the traditionally liberal Minneapolis, that is only 13 percent Black (23 percent "minority" altogether), where formerly liberals Hubert Humphrey and Martin Sabo held sway. And although Sharon Belton, an effective African-American female who served as mayor, it was arguably the late Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone who was Ellison's closest political role model — and he would often take visitors out to Wellstone's grave to make the point.

Although Ellison won his election by a strong 56 percent, backed by the dominant Democrat-Farm-Labor coalition, it will likely be his religion that may complicate his tenure in Congress the most.

During his election campaign, Ellison was attacked by his Republican opponent Alan Fine (who subsequently won only 22 percent of the vote) for being a Muslim, alleging that he had a close association with Minister Louis Farrakhan. But more recently, Dennis Prager, a radio talk show host on the Salem network, complained that Ellison's decision to take his private oath of office on the Qur'an "undermines American civilization." But in response, Ellison, who attended the Million Man March in 1995, did not disavow Minister Farrakhan, while noting that several other elected members of Congress chose to take their oaths using books other than the Bible. (The official swearing in of elected officials is done with the Bible; it is the private ceremonial oaths where it is optional.)

The most recent attack on Ellison was by U.S. Rep. Virgil Goode of Virginia, a conservative Bible-belt Republican who sent a letter to his constituents urging a Bush administration crack down on immigration and objected to Ellison's use of the Qur'an. Goode said that unless Americans "wake up" there are "likely to be more Muslims elected



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to office and demanding the use of the Qur'an."

Ellison countered that he was not an immigrant and could trace his family's origins back to 1742, but Goode persisted in an interview with FOX News, urging a restriction on immigration "so that we don't have a majority of Muslims elected to the United States House of Representa-

tives."

These comments by Goode have been denounced as intolerant, but they also appear ignorant, since he failed to spell out under what contorted logic Muslims immigrants could become a majority in the U.S. Congress.

Goode's comments resembled the mean and ugly racial rhetoric of conservative politicians in the legislative fights of the early '90s. But despite their vehemence, Bill Clinton was re-elected in 1996, and in a seeming rebuke to his impeachment, the American public continued to support him.

The 2006 elections could also be interpreted as a repudiation of another radical conservative approach to governing. The reason Americans are in Iraq today is a manifestation of radical conservative doctrine of

pre-emption, which served as a pretext to remake the politics in the Middle East in the image of the U.S. that would allow increased access to its oil resources by a private cabal and enhance the security of Israel at the same time. But Goode has apparently missed this rejection of radical conservatism, trying to use his popularity with his conservative base to elevate a radical view of immigration to the national level — by attacking Ellison. But I am betting that it won't work.

Ellison has a strong social justice streak and spoke to fellow Muslims in his native Detroit recently urging them to stand up and confront injustice in these perilous times, saying, "You can't back down; you can't chicken out; you can't be afraid."

On the other hand, he will concentrate on being an effective legislator and as such, has held out the hand of friendship to colleagues like Rep. Goode and encouraged them to learn more about Islam. As he said in his speech, "How do you know that you're not here to teach this country?"

Just as he won over his constituency in the Fifth Congressional District, it appears that he has the right stuff to do it in this new arena in the Congress.

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## We befriended Vietnam, so why not Cuba?

By Harry C. Alford

Special to Sentinel-Voice

One of the last acts of the 109th Congress was to declare the nation of Vietnam a "favorite nation trading partner." This officially opens up opportunities for businesses from this nation and the Peoples Republic of Vietnam. President Bush was a big backer of this legislation and is proud that we now have an open business relationship with this communist country.

This is a big mystery of the present day: Why do we run to communist nations, such as China and Vietnam, for friendship and favorite nation status and still, officially, abhor neighboring communist nations, such as Cuba, located 90 miles off our shore. Cuba is treated like a pariah. One would think it was the most oppressive and anti-democratic na-

tion in the world. The reality is it isn't. In fact, Cuba is a product of the U.S. foreign policy — just like Vietnam. How Vietnam became our good friend and Cuba is officially taboo is a prime example of the confused and awkward foreign policy of the United States during the last 60 years.

Vietnam was under French colonial rule for more than 100 years. The Japanese imperial Army took over during the 1930s and provided ruthless oppression. The Vietnamese fought back and from this struggle evolved a great hero — Ho Chi Minh. He led his people to victory, at great costs, but still victory. Immediately after



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World War II ended in the mid-1940s, the French thought they could walk right back in. He once again led his people to victory in 1954. It was perceived that finally there would be total independence for the people of Vietnam. But, no, our CIA convinced our government to intervene and put up a puppet rival group of opportunists to resist the very popular national movement led by Ho.

Ho offered a national election to decide who should rule. It was quite apparent that 80 percent of the popular vote would go to the communists. Thus, our government resisted a democratic election and plunged the nation into a manufactured civil war. We initially sent in a few U.S. troops. Before you knew it we had more than 600,000 troops on the ground.

It was "Good vs. Evil" and we were the "Evil." After losing more than 50,000 troops, we eventually packed up and went home (unofficial surrender). The Vietnamese paid a great price; more than 2 million of them (documented) died in this conflict. What a shame and what a waste.

After the American intrusion, Vietnam got back on its feet and has become a communist nation that is rapidly learning the advantages of capitalism. It is now a major trader in fishing, coffee and tea. Growth is rapid and the United States wants to play in this market in a very big way. There is peace and an evolving prosperity.

So, if we can now love Vietnam, what is our problem with Cuba?

Cuba had been a possession of imperial Spain for hundreds of years. A slave state, it developed a Black population that today rep-

resents about 70 percent of the national population. The U.S. stole Cuba along with Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines from Spain during the Spanish American War. This was part of our Manifest Destiny campaign. Cuba and Puerto Rico should have become official states of America but their Black populations were too large for our Jim Crow South to align itself with. Cuba eventually became somewhat independent with puppet like tendencies towards the United States.

Unlike Vietnam, communism was nothing new to Cuba. Since the 1920s, the communist party has been a player in the Cuban political landscape. It didn't become a major entity until the U.S. sponsored economic oppression of an elite upper class and the business enterprises of the Mafia became too much for the Cuban people to stomach. They rebelled and the disgust was so large that Fidel Castro marched into downtown Havana in 1959 with only 600 troops and took the nation over. For the first time in history, the Cuban people were about to be self-ruled. Castro nationalized all the businesses and told the oppressors and opportunists to leave immediately. They all ran to the United States and have been pouting ever since.

Cuba is still communist, but its people certainly enjoy more freedom than the Vietnamese. It has never gone to war with the United States. We, the National Black Chamber of Commerce, have been there twice and viewed a very happy population ready to do business with the United States. So, what is our problem?

It is time to look at Cuba for what it is — a nation ready to do business. If Vietnam meets the test, then Cuba also does.

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## Curry

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As a congressman from Grand Rapids, Ford voted for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. But he was no liberal, voting against mandatory school busing for desegregation and calling for the impeachment of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

Completing Nixon's term, Ford appointed William Coleman, an African-American, as his Secretary of Transportation. That appointment also underscored the difference between Bush and the Ford model. Bill Coleman and Assistant Secretary of Labor Arthur Fletcher were Black Republicans yet never stopped pushing for affirmative action.

By contrast, most of Bush's Black cabinet appointees have fervently opposed affirmative action. Some have opposed affirmative action even though they acknowledge

that they have personally benefited from it.

Another indication that the Gerald Ford model has been taken off the GOP market is the type of judges appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. So far, Bush has appointed John G. Roberts and Samuel Alito, both staunch conservatives. Ford, on the other hand, appointed John Paul Stevens, a moderate, to replace retiring Justice Douglas, the court's most liberal member.

"There is no question Ford has been a sincere proponent of civil rights," Jeremy Mayer, author of "Running on Race: Racial Politics in Presidential Campaigns 1960-2000," told the *Detroit Free Press*. "He seems to have had a much greater comfort level with African-Americans than other Republicans."

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