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In South Carolina Congressional Race, Drama Outpaces Discussion of Issues

By: Kim Severson – April 27, 2013

Mark Sanford has taken to debating a life-size poster of Nancy Pelosi on the streets. His Democratic opponent, Elizabeth Colbert Busch, issued a tribute to Margaret Thatcher, the conservative former British prime minister who died last month.

Those are among the least theatrical aspects of a Congressional race that has been long on drama and short on examination of the issues that concern voters in this sunny coastal district.

One has to scratch hard to get through the divorces and lovers, the tearful odes to Mama, the exploitation of celebrity and the Sharks-versus-Jets nature of the political parties to find out what the candidates propose to do if they win a special election on May 7 to succeed Representative Tim Scott, a Republican who was appointed to the Senate.

“You really have to search for any campaigning on the issues,” said Scott Buchanan, the executive director of the Citadel Symposium on Southern Politics. “It’s been really more about what comes up on Sanford. This election has become a referendum on Mark Sanford, pure and simple.”

Despite several attempts by civic groups and news organizations to schedule debates, the candidates have agreed to only one. They will take the stage together on Monday at the Citadel, where every one of the 500 seats has long been reserved.

The next day the candidates, including Eugene Platt of the Green Party, a former Army paratrooper, will appear together at a forum sponsored by a local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P.

In a race expected to have a low turnout, the black vote could mean a lot. About 22 percent of registered voters are black, and most of them vote Democratic in a country club Republican district that supported Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election by 18 percentage points.

Still, even with the two candidates side by side, it might be hard to parse the differences. Each accuses the other of not being supportive enough of Boeing, which is based in the Charleston area and is the largest private sector employer in the state.

Both give a nod to the importance of education and conservative government spending. Each has laid claim to being the best fiscal manager, with Ms. Colbert Busch referring to her experience as a business executive in the maritime industry and as a mother who had to start with nothing after a messy divorce left her to raise three children alone.

With regularity, she invokes the word “trust” when referring to Mr. Sanford. It is an effort to remind anyone who might have forgotten that while governor in 2009, he gave aides a fake story about hiking the Appalachian Trail when he disappeared to spend time with an Argentine woman who later became his fiancée after his wife, Jenny, divorced him.

“He can’t be trusted to seek common-sense solutions that we need to grow our economy,” Ms. Colbert Busch said during a campaign appearance last week.

Mr. Sanford, a Republican who likes to say he was Tea Party before the Tea Party was cool, emphasizes his record. The Cato Institute, a libertarian group, rated him the most fiscally conservative governor during his tenure; for six years before holding that post, he held the seat he is running to fill now.

Once considered the likely victor in the race, Mr. Sanford has of late found himself scrambling. He is attacking Ms. Colbert Busch for her ties to the national Democratic Party, which has spent nearly \$800,000 from various sources, including the House Majority PAC (thus the faux debates with Ms. Pelosi, a former House speaker).

But he is most vocal about Ms. Colbert Busch’s relative silence on the issues. She has given few interviews lately and has refused several offers for debates. Her strategy, it appears, is to count on Mr. Sanford to implode.

In a recent interview, when pressed to describe the top three issues in the campaign, Mr. Sanford said her unwillingness to express her views more publicly made them hard to define.

“I don’t know that I can fully answer that question,” he said. “The question of this campaign is, what does she believe in?”

Governmental concerns pale when from the start the race has played more like reality TV. For those just tuning in, a recap:

After a campaign that began as an apology tour and moved quickly into a redemption tour, Mr. Sanford gained traction with voters based on experience and a well-articulated plan to manage government spending.

Ms. Colbert Busch courted the vote of women, who make up 55 percent of the district. She leaned heavily on her personal story, gave tearful homages to her mother and raised money in a series of high-priced fund-raisers featuring Stephen Colbert, her younger brother and the star of “The Colbert Report” on Comedy Central.

On April 16, The Associated Press released sealed divorce documents. Mr. Sanford’s ex-wife claimed that he had slipped into her house to watch the Super Bowl with their 14-year-old son in violation of court orders. She found him leaving the property, using his cellphone as a flashlight. The two are scheduled to appear in court on May 9, two days after the election, to resolve the issue.

The Republican Party immediately pulled its support. Even if the Republicans lose the seat, the thinking went, the party can come back next year during the regular election cycle and easily take it back with a more appealing candidate.

“It’s hard to find a weaker candidate than Sanford,” said Tom Davis, a former head of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

All in all, it made for a bad week for the Sanford campaign.

“We were in free-fall,” Mr. Sanford said.

So he took out a full-page ad in The Charleston Post and Courier last Sunday to explain himself. He said that he wanted to make sure his son was not watching the game by himself, and that he could not get in touch with his wife to tell her what he was going to do.

He painted himself as the underdog, “outgunned, outmanned and outspent” by the Democrats. Referring to William Travis, the South Carolinian said to have drawn a line in the sand with his sword during the battle to defend the Alamo, Mr. Sanford asked voters to cross the line and fight with him.

Meanwhile, Ms. Colbert Busch leaned in with an appeal to Republicans, asking that they cross the line in her favor.

On Tuesday, she announced the formation of Republicans for Colbert Busch. In a particularly soapish turn, one of the organizers is Leslie Turner, a Charleston lawyer who had a contentious divorce from Teddy Turner. He is the son of the media mogul Ted Turner and is one of the candidates who ran against Mr. Sanford in the Republican primary, which was held in the first week of April.

Late last week, the House Majority PAC turned up the heat, sending a fund-raising e-mail to supporters that included Mr. Sanford’s personal cellphone number, which he had included in his newspaper ad. He said he was flooded with calls from people around the country.

Now, local polls put Ms. Colbert Busch in the lead, and Tea Party conservatives have pushed for a write-in candidate.

But with just over a week until the election, there is still plenty of time for more drama to unfold.

“That’s the great thing about South Carolina politics,” said Robert Oldendick, a political science professor at the University of South Carolina. “You don’t have to make up anything about it.”