

The Washington Post

Charlie Crist needs a hug

By Dana Milbank

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What is it about a man crush that is incompatible with the two-party system?

When a Democrat, Sen. Joe Lieberman, kissed George W. Bush on the House floor, the smooch became the symbol of Lieberman's embrace of the Bush war policies, and he was drummed out of the party.

This time, it's a Republican, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, who hugged (or weakly returned a hug from) Barack Obama; the hug has become the symbol of Crist's embrace of the Obama economic policies, and he's being drummed out of the party.

Crist has until April 30 to decide if he's going to abandon his hopeless Republican primary bid and instead run for the Senate as an independent. Those of us who still hope that some measure of sanity can be restored to our absurdly polarized political system must wrap our arms around Crist -- metaphorically, of course -- and deliver a simple message: Run, Charlie, run.

The crucifixion of Crist by Republican leaders says less about him than it does about the party. Both parties have been undergoing ideological cleansing, as Sens. Arlen Specter (forced out of the GOP in Pennsylvania) and Blanche

Lincoln (facing a Democratic primary challenge in Arkansas) can attest. But the Crist crisis is a whole new level of Jacobin excess; in the case of Lieberman, Democrats at least waited until he lost the primary to purge him.

Not so the Republicans, who are in a dogmatic race to the bottom as they drop Crist for his far-right challenger, Marco Rubio. Sen. John McCain, who defied the Viet Cong but cowers before the wing nuts, had this to say in 2007: "Gov. Crist has set an example for the rest of the party in a variety of ways, but certainly in bipartisanship." In 2008, McCain, who probably owed the Republican presidential nomination to Crist's endorsement in the Florida primary, hailed Crist's "principled, conservative leadership."

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But now McCain has nothing supportive to say about his "dear friend" Charlie. "I support Republicans," he told the Hill's Molly Hooper when asked if he would back an independent Crist.

Second prize in the craven contest goes to Sen. John Cornyn, head of the Senate GOP campaign, who early on endorsed Crist as "one of only three Governors who earned an 'A' from the CATO Institute for his efforts to restrain spending and cut taxes."

Now, Cornyn's National Republican Senatorial Committee has essentially rescinded its endorsement, suggesting that a good course of action for Crist would be to "drop out of the race and wait for another day." Senate Republican leaders have similarly tiptoed away from their earlier Crist endorsements.

There's also Mitt Romney's Naked Opportunist wing of the party, which endorsed the Rubio challenge only after his victory in the primary became inevitable. Eric Cantor, the number two House Republican, now bravely proclaims that Crist isn't somebody who "keeps his word."

Cantor's got that exactly backwards: Crist is saying and doing what he always has done; it's GOP leadership that has changed.

From the start of his time as governor, Crist developed a reputation for bipartisan work, appointing Democrats to top jobs and sharing credit with them for accomplishments. His agenda was relatively conservative -- reduce property taxes, cut the state budget -- but his style, long before the Obama hug, was to embrace the opposition. "We need to do it in a bipartisan way," he said in a February, 2009 speech about the economic stimulus. This "is about helping our country. This is not about partisan politics." It was at then that Crist received Obama's hug of death.

Practical Republicans would realize that Crist offers them the best hope of retaining the Florida Senate seat. A Quinnipiac University poll this month found that Crist would fare far better than Rubio against the likely Democratic nominee Kendrick Meek, a lackluster candidate (and one who Obama was very

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careful not to hug on his recent Florida trip). Crist leads Meek 48 percent to 34 percent, but Rubio's lead is just 42-38.

The only reason a far-right candidate such as Rubio is competitive at all is because this year heavily favors Republicans. In a normal election year -- 2012, perhaps -- Republicans will rue their purging of the Crists and Specters who could have kept them competitive.

Win or lose, an independent Crist candidacy would remind Republican leaders that ideological cleansing has a cost. That's why Crist should be encouraged to run. Hug him if you wish, kiss him if you must, but show Charlie Crist some love.

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Dana Milbank will be online to chat with readers at noon. Submit your questions and comments before or during the discussion.

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