

"Federation Corner" column  
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Abrams erases line between party and nonpartisan positions  
by Wayne Goldstein

"Steve Abrams has been a fixture in Montgomery County Politics since he and Judy moved to Rockville in 1974... Steve was elected to the Montgomery County Republican Central Committee... He served as party Chair... Steve Abrams is a veteran of Maryland Republican politics, having served as a member of the Maryland State Republican Central Committee representing Montgomery County for two terms... Steve's a Republican and proud of it..." These words are from the campaign website of Steve Abrams. Since the 1980s, he has run for partisan elected offices several times.

There is another Steve Abrams described in this website. "As an elected member of the Montgomery County Board of Education [BOE], Steve serves as Chair of the system's Audit Committee, where his insights and experience have enabled Montgomery County's Public School System to maintain its recognition for quality in all aspects of fiscal audits... In 1992, Steve Abrams was elected to his first of three non-consecutive terms to the Montgomery County Board of Education... Steve is currently the longest serving member of the Montgomery County School Board, where he is widely regarded for his dedication, knowledge, commitment and strong voice for both the students of Montgomery County and for the institution... Through Steve's efforts, Montgomery County public schools have maintained their reputation as being a model for the State of Maryland and one of the finest systems in the nation."

This Steve Abrams is a member of the non-partisan BOE. "Nonpartisan... means school board candidates may not campaign 'based on party affiliation'." The vast majority of school boards are non-partisan. Why is this important? In 2003, the president of the California School Boards Association (CSBA) was asked "How do you reconcile the differences that arise between your own political beliefs and the goals of CSBA as an organization?" He answered "I think I owe it to my constituency, and certainly to the children in my district and in the state of California, to keep an open mind and do what is in their best interests, regardless of party politics."

Mr. Abrams claims: "Steve's support for the Board comes from Republicans, Democrats and independents... Everybody in Montgomery County knows of Steve's political preference and a majority of them consistently vote for him!" He doesn't appear to have the concern held by a president of the nation's largest state school board organization that his partisan political behavior could ever negatively impact his BOE constituents and their children.

But what if Mr. Abrams is unable to separate his partisan duties from his nonpartisan duties? When he also states: "Steve is currently one of only two Republicans in Montgomery County who is elected countywide"; and, he continues to describe his nonpartisan BOE position as if he won it by running as a Republican. The second Republican does not discuss party affiliation at all. Mr. Abrams has alternated between serving on the BOE and running for partisan office. He served on the BOE from 1992-1996, running for County Executive in 1994. He lost his BOE seat in 1996 but returned from 1998-2002, running for Circuit Court judge in 2002. He returned to BOE in 2004, and is now running for state Comptroller in 2006.

While he has every right to run for partisan office, something done by a number of BOE members over the years, the frequent switching from nonpartisan to partisan and back seems to have lost its distinction last week when Maryland's highest court, the Maryland Court of Appeals, ruled on a lawsuit that Mr. Abrams had filed, challenging the candidacy of a Democrat, County Councilmember Tom Perez, for state Attorney General. The Court agreed with Mr. Abrams and ordered Mr. Perez to be removed from the ballot. "Abrams says he filed the suit, in part because of a dispute between the school board and the county council, in which

the attorney general's office was consulted. Abrams told WBAL News today he was 'gratified and stunned' at today's Court of Appeals decision."

On his website, Mr. Abrams writes: "When the Montgomery County Council tried to force Montgomery School Board members to break the law by contracting for imported Canadian drugs and, after the school board refused, tried to force the Montgomery County Executive to do the same thing, it was Steve Abrams who raised the legal issue, convinced his fellow School Board members to join him, giving the Montgomery County Executive the support he needed to uphold the law at the county level as well."

A Washington Times reporter opined in early August: "... The legal case itself is fascinating. But the relationship between Mr. Abrams and Mr. Perez is just as interesting... Mr. Abrams said part of his motivation was what he saw as Mr. Perez's 'activist view of the law.' Mr. Abrams was referring to clashes with Mr. Perez in the past... Mr. Abrams told me in a recent phone interview, 'My opposition was the same opposition that [Montgomery County Executive] Doug Duncan had. And that is, Mr. Perez, why are you asking me in my official capacities to break the law?' 'I took institutional umbrage to that,' Mr. Abrams said after the court hearing Monday."

In mid-July, the same reporter wrote: "... 'If I'm elected comptroller, the attorney general is my lawyer,' said Mr. Abrams, also a lawyer who has worked on Capitol Hill and as a financial adviser. 'I want to make sure the attorney general is the one who follows the law, not the one who makes the law. It's just a quaint notion that I have.' Mr. Abrams said he filed the suit, in Anne Arundel Circuit Court, because other people were talking about the requirement but doing nothing about it. 'So I did,' he said."

Mr. Abrams filed his suit as an individual and had every right to do so. However, how can one tell if he did so just as a concerned individual, or to support his party and his candidacy, or to support the BOE? The separation between those roles and the issue of whether there could be actual or potential conflicts-of-interest for him appears to have disappeared. If Mr. Abrams is now seen, rightly or wrongly, as a political operative misusing his BOE position, what will restrain other partisan officeholders from seeking to punish Mr. Abrams and perhaps the BOE for his victory of ending the candidacy of either an apparent policy rival or a political rival? What will restrain other nonpartisan officeholders from introducing their own partisan behavior if it is acceptable for Mr. Abrams to do so?

What started as nonpartisan policy disagreements concerning either drug importation or the authority of the county Inspector General to investigate the school system were used by Mr. Abrams to justify his intended or unintended partisan results. Future BOE policy disagreements may become partisan struggles by virtue of Mr. Abrams' participation or his precedent. Mr. Abrams' too-frequent, unrestrained outbursts at BOE meetings, one as recently as last week, may no longer be tolerated by others as he may be seen as a self-promoting political operative looking to write more laudatory descriptions of himself for his website. This issue is not about either his party affiliation or the office he is seeking and I do not intend to make or infer any recommendation about his candidacy. The issue is solely about his apparent inability to separate his partisan aspirations from his current nonpartisan duties. Some may now be wondering if it is too soon or too late to call for Mr. Abrams' censoring of or resignation from his nonpartisan position.