

TO CAMERON

FROM PEGGI

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Capizzi's Choice: Forgive or Get Even

LATIMES

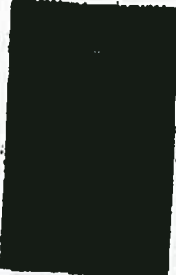
I'd make a lousy politician. Way too un-forgiving. If someone gave me the kind of grief this state Republican Party has given Mike Capizzi in the last few years, I'd be plotting revenge. The last thing on my mind would be whether I should help the party.

But that supposedly is what Capizzi is chewing on these days. From his Elba-like exile on the second floor of the Orange County Courthouse, with his last few months as district attorney winding down, Capizzi has a decision to make. Should he let bygones be bygones and, adhering to conventional political custom, endorse the fellow Republican who wined him in last month's primary for the state attorney general's nomination? Or should he stay neutral?

Or, heaven forbid, should he do the unthinkable and endorse the Democratic nominee?

To be sure, Capizzi is hardly a kingmaker. In the grand scheme of things, it may not matter whether he does anything. But it is true that the Republican who beat him, Dave Stirling, has asked for Capizzi's support and still doesn't have it.

And then there was this little nugget tossed out Tuesday by Dave Labahn, deputy director of the California District Attorneys Assn.: "Would that be huge



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if [Capizzi] jumped over? [Democratic nominee Bill] Lockyer spoke to [the association] two weeks ago, and the one thing he kept repeating is that he wants to have a bipartisan attorney general's office. That could have a lot of political sway, should Lockyer be able to make some kind of deal with Mike. What if he brought in Mike as No. 2?"

Before readers hitherto mesmerized by the attorney general's race get overheated, a note of caution: Labahn made it clear he was merely thinking out loud and not sending out any signals. The association will remain officially neutral in the race.

However, Labahn, a former deputy under Capizzi, noted that Lockyer has said that "the only real prosecutor in the race was Capizzi."

Should anyone wonder why Capizzi would even contemplate turning state's evidence against his own party, consider this remark a couple months ago from GOP state treasurer Shawn Steel: "Capizzi shows an ugly Stalinist side of prosecutors."

And that's when they weren't calling him Hitlerian. Even for political rhetoric, that was a bit much. But it reflected the ongoing enmity at party headquarters toward Capizzi since he chose to prosecute Republican Assemblyman Scott Baugh and several others involved

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in Baugh's election in 1995.

State GOP party chairman Michael Schroeder, an Orange County attorney and one of Capizzi's most vocal critics, says a Capizzi endorsement of Stirling would be nice but not crucial. Or, even, all that important. Schroeder notes that unlike a Pete Wilson or a Dianne Feinstein, Capizzi has no track record of influencing loyalists in a statewide race. "Outside of Orange County, he's really not known and doesn't have any real following," Schroeder says.

Schroeder suggests that Capizzi might be acting a bit thin-skinned. "This is not the first time in the history of the state that there's been a hotly contested primary. It may only seem that way to Capizzi. This happens all the time, and most people find it in themselves to support the nominee."

Mike McCoy, Stirling's campaign manager, scolded the same theme. "What really needs to happen is for Dave and Mike to sit down and talk. We've made that invitation, but Mike says he needs time to relax and think."

McCoy clearly is trying to walk a fine line. The Stirling camp would like Capizzi's endorsement, for whatever political value it would represent and is miffed that it isn't in hand. But it doesn't help to hash the guy anymore.

"It's frustrating to the campaign," McCoy says, diplomatically. "There are certain courtesies and decorums when you're a member of a party. Being a good loser is one of those. That's been my big question all along. I don't want to criticize [Capizzi]. That's why I'm using this in a general context."

Yeah, right.

The suspense is killing all of us,

but we'll eventually find out what Capizzi intends. In the meantime, McCoy says Stirling will be patient. Schroeder says he has no regrets about criticizing Capizzi's performance and won't devote any more time to mending fences with him.

Meanwhile, my calls to Lockyer and Capizzi went unreturned. That's just as well, because now we're free to assume they were huddled somewhere, plotting something ingenious.

On a slow summer's day, before the A.G.'s race really heats up, why not let the mind wander?

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