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PERSPECTIVE



Democratic Sen. Al Franken of Minnesota arrives Wednesday for a hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington. Thursday, he faced another allegation of sexual impropriety. CAROLYN KASTER/AP

It's time for Franken to go, but hold off on Keillor



ERIC ZORN

"Uncle,"
That was my one-word message Thursday morning to a conservative reader with whom I've been sparring via email over whether or not liberal Democratic Sen. Al Franken of Minnesota should resign.

My initial position — that the allegation of mild sexual impropriety against Franken was isolated and might have been a one-off lapse in judgment — had already eroded. Several other women had come forward or anonymously related accounts of Franken groping them inappropriately while posing for photographs, but then came news Thursday morning that Stephanie Kemplin, a 64-year-old U.S. Army veteran, was accusing Franken of cupping her breast for up to 10 seconds during a photo shoot in 2003.

True, the number and nature of these assaults still pale next to the allegations against President Donald Trump, who also isn't going anywhere, but if the Democrats want to try to claim any high ground on this issue in the upcoming special U.S. Senate election in Alabama in which the Republicans are running alleged epileptic Roy Moore, they ought to exercise independent moral judgment and demand Franken's resignation.

His effectiveness as a senator and fundraiser have been sharply limited, and his prospects for re-election in 2020, when he will turn 69, are bleak. Further, since Minnesota's Democratic governor is empowered to fill vacancies in the U.S. Senate, the partisan balance in the Senate will stay the same if Franken steps down.



JIM MOSE/AP 2015

Minnesota Public Radio severed ties with Garrison Keillor on Wednesday.

I like him. I like his politics. I like his intelligence. I like his wit. But it's time. For the good of his party and the sake of his allies, it's time.

But when it comes to Garrison Keillor, Franken's fellow Minnesotan, I'm still reserving judgment.

Minnesota Public Radio severed ties with the noted humorist and author Wednesday due to unspecified "allegations of his inappropriate behavior with an individual who worked with him." They didn't elaborate and his alleged victim did not amplify.

By Thursday, The Washington Post said it was dropping Keillor's occasional column, which the Tribune also publishes.

Keillor, in a series of peculiar statements on social media and elsewhere, said it was all a misunderstanding: "I put my hand on a woman's bare back," he said. "I meant to put her back after she told me about her unhappiness, and her shirt was open and my hand went up it about six inches. She recoiled. I apologized."

Was a mere slip of the hand that touched only a woman's back, even if deliberate, really enough to prompt MPR not only to sever its 48-year relationship with Keillor but also to change the name of "A Prairie Home Companion," the weekly program he made famous but retired from last year?

That does seem unlikely. Adding to my sense that there are

more damning details to come is that, in other statements Wednesday, Keillor said he wanted to "respect the privacy of the two employees who have made the allegations," when MPR said there was only one victim, and that he said "I'm 75 and don't have any interest in arguing about this."

Excuse me, but being 75 is a great reason to argue to restore your honor. At 75 you know as well as you ever have that the most important thing you can leave behind when you die is a good name, and that fame, success and riches pale next to an excellent reputation.

Arguing to defend yourself against false or overblown allegations is always important, but it's particularly important in the twilight of life when the opportunities to do so or to otherwise restore your legacy are waning.

So is Keillor a handy leech whose predilections demand his professional erasure and banishment, similar to the punishment meted out to other famous men in the last two months?

Or is he the folksy, awkward, serially monogamous nerd he always seemed to be who has become the victim of a ghastly misunderstanding at a time of heightened awareness of sexual harassment and assault?

I realize it's unfashionable and considered to be abuse-enabling not to issue wholesale condemnations and expression of knowing revulsion at even the vaguest first allegations. But this one juror among tens of millions sitting in the court of public opinion would, once again, like see more evidence before reaching a verdict.

So I'll close with my one-word message for those who have already convinced Keillor to the cultural trash heap:

"Really?"

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