

RACE BETWEEN KIRK AND SEALS TAKING ON HIGHER PROFILE

Eric Krol

If there's a sleeper race in the suburbs this fall, it's the 10th Congressional District contest pitting well-respected three-term Republican Mark Kirk against impressive Democratic newcomer Dan Seals.

The district, which includes eastern Lake and northwest Cook counties, is just starting to register on the national political radar screen, with the D.C. pundits moving it up a notch closer to competitive.

That's partly due to voting history — Democrats Al Gore and John Kerry both carried the district, with Kirk successfully swimming against that top-of-the-ticket tide both times. It's partly due to dissatisfaction with the Iraq war and military expert Kirk's out-front support. And it's partly due to Seals.

The 35-year-old is good-looking, intelligent and engaging. He's raised \$770,000, with \$507,000 in the bank as of June 30. That's far more than any Democrat's been able to muster since the seat was last open in 2000 following Congressman John Porter's retirement.

Seals has drawn buzz among Democrats as being "the next Barack Obama." I jokingly asked Seals whether that meant, as even Obama himself has admitted, that means he's over-hyped and hadn't yet accomplished much nationally.

"I'm no Barack Obama," Seals replies, explaining the comparison as simply him bearing a physical resemblance to the Barackstar but acknowledging his speaking style isn't quite as flashy. Both also identify as African-American but hail from diverse families.

Growing up a South Sider, Seals' dad was a Chicago Bears linebacker who played with Gale Sayers and Dick Butkus. Seals went to college on the East Coast before getting an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago. He's on leave from G.E. Commerce Finance as director of marketing.

On the issues, Seals lines up with this year's national Democratic playbook, talking about the need to reform the Medicaid prescription drug program, getting back to a balanced budget, and axing oil company subsidies to provide money for alternative energy research.

It's on Iraq and health coverage where Seals branches out on more liberal limbs. He favors a "responsible withdrawal" from Iraq he argues could be accomplished in one year. He also wants a national health care debate, with his starting point the "single-payer" (as in: government-run) health system.

Of course, any race with an incumbent tends to be a referendum on whether the office-holder is doing a good job. And Kirk will have some good rebuttals for Seals' criticisms.

Seals points to Kirk's 39 percent voting record with a leading environmental group, but Kirk can bring up his work to ban Great Lakes drilling and to reduce Lake Michigan mercury emissions. Seals points to a vote that cut veterans'

benefits, but Kirk can talk about his work keeping open the North Chicago VA Hospital.

While Kirk will try to focus on local issues and how he's addressed them, Seals apparently will try to nationalize the race and argue Kirk is not living up to the moderate mantle he promised six years ago. "If he's voting 90 percent of the time (with the GOP), he's clearly no John Porter," Seals told me, citing a CQ analysis.

For Illinois, Kirk tilts conservative, but in the House Republican caucus, he's the leader of the moderates.

Kirk has been raising money like mad, with \$1.85 million in the bank. He'll have the ability to blanket the district with ground troops and glossy mail pieces touting his record.

Ultimately, Seals' challenge could rise or fall depending on whether the national Democrats, led by Chicago Congressman Rahm Emanuel, provide some help. But Emanuel probably can't afford to spend much more in Illinois, given the \$4 million-plus he's already pegged for TV ads in the 6th (Hyde) and 8th (Bean) Districts.

But as Seals knows, you can't count on the cavalry. It might not come until late, if at all.