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Rep. Allen West – and the Congressional Black Caucus

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March 17, 2011 9:15 AM

Of all the developments worth following these days, from the vigorous Republican insurgency to the apathetic Obama presidency, I'd like to add another: the relationship between the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and Republican freshman Allen West of Florida.

West, 50, is the first Republican to join the CBC since Congressman Gary Franks of Connecticut. In his three terms in the House, 1990 to 1996, Franks joined the black caucus, threatened to quit, then recanted and signed on again.

West joins Tim Scott of South Carolina as the only black Republicans currently in the House. Scott was unequivocal about spurning the CBC's invitation. "My campaign was never about race," he said. "My campaign was about themes that unite all Americans."

But West, a former Army lieutenant colonel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, was eager to join. It wasn't because he represents a large black constituency – quite the contrary. His oceanfront district, which stretches from Jupiter and Palm Beach to Fort Lauderdale, is only 5 percent black and includes some of the richest (and predominantly white) enclaves in the country. "My parents would have been highly upset if I hadn't done this," he told me.

West is one of the most prominent of the 87 members of the House Republican freshman class. A Republican operative, who watched dozens of the freshmen as they campaigned, rated West the most impressive candidate of the 2010 class. After losing his first bid for a House seat in 2008, he ousted Democratic incumbent Ron Klein, 53 percent to 46 percent.

Chances are, West and the CBC's 42 Democratic members won't find much on which to agree—unless he pulls them to the right. He's a hard-nosed conservative who retired from the Army in 2003 after firing a pistol near the head of an Iraqi insurgent to prompt him to reveal plans for attacking American soldiers. West is also a Tea Party favorite. CBC Democrats tend to be very liberal.

It was the ideological and partisan divide that made Franks's membership in the CBC so difficult. Like West today, Franks was the only Republican member. He was not hesitant about criticizing the liberal positions of his Democratic colleagues. Their opposition to the Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas was "politics at its worst," Franks insisted.

Trouble ensued. Several Democrats accused him of being a mole for Republicans. He was barred from CBC strategy sessions and from the first half-hour of meetings, when members ate lunch. Franks was later restored to full participation, but eventually he stopped coming to meetings.

At the three CBC meetings and one reception he's attended, West has made an effort to get along. He walked up to John Lewis of Georgia, he told me, and said: "I'm from your district. My parents voted for you." Lewis represents most of the city of Atlanta, where West grew up.

He's met twice with Emanuel Cleaver of Missouri, the CBC chairman. "We both want the same things," West says, but wouldn't try to achieve them in the same way. West and CBC member Alcee Hastings of Florida held a joint press conference to promote a "new mega-yacht repair facility" in Rivera Beach. So far, so good.

West, like Franks, has done nothing to mask his conservatism. When he addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February, he said federal spending should be capped at 18 percent to 20 percent of GDP and the corporate tax rate slashed to 25 percent from 35 percent.

“Liberal progressivism,” he said, “has been tried and has repeatedly failed all over the world. So why should we think it can be successful here?” And if the health care law enacted in 2010 “is so great, someone explain to me why over 200 Democratic political groups are going to the president and asking for waivers.”

As you might expect, West is hawkish on national security and foreign affairs. “A weak America has never proven good for the world,” he declared in the CPAC speech. He’s also pro-Israel. “I shall never let Israel down,” he said.

West believes “there’s a growing black conservative voice” in the country. “There’s something happening out there. The left doesn’t want to admit it.”

The black community “is a very conservative community,” West says. If Republicans take advantage of this, they can cut into the Democratic lead among blacks. “It’s never going to be better than 70-30.” But if 30 percent of blacks vote for Republicans, “that’s huge.”

In January, West was sworn in as a black caucus member. He called it a “great day,” though he said he brings “a different perspective.”

“The last time there was a black Republican congressman from Florida it was back in Reconstruction, Josiah T. Walls,” he told Felicia Sonmez of the *Washington Post*. West said he was resurrecting Walls’s legacy. “When you talk about the greatness of America, I think that it shows that [the CBC] is where I should be and this is where my parents would’ve had me.”