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Astro candidate: Politicos talk up Gabby's husband for Senate



By Dennis Welch and Bill Bertolino
The Arizona Guardian

There are a lot of rumors and a whole lot of names being dropped these days speculating about who carries the Democratic flag into next year's Senate race if Gabrielle Gifford's doesn't do it.

And right now there's only one name out there who excites Democrats and stresses out Republicans at the same time:

Commander Mark Kelly, Gifford's husband.

If you don't believe it, just pick up the phone and call any of the state's political wizards and they'll tell you roughly the same thing: These are desperate times for Democrats.

The party's so-called political bench is hardly stocked with up-and-coming talent. And Democratic pols with deep pockets like developer Jim Pederson and attorney Jon Hulburd have shown little or no interest in taking on this fight.

So unless the state's perennial minority party can find someone with a fat bank account or someone with an A-list name, Democrats could be out of the running a year-and-a-half before the 2012 election.

Kelly, who's currently orbiting the Earth, fits at least part of that description. As a space shuttle commander and Gifford's husband, his entry in to the U.S. Senate sweepstakes is the very definition of the term "game changer."

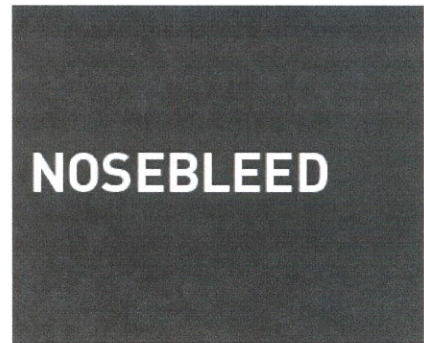
Right now former Attorney General Terry Goddard leads Democrats in recent polls of the race. But as a three-time loser for governor, his candidacy would hardly stoke the political fires of Democratic voters. A Kelly candidacy could do just that.

To be clear, Kelly has expressed no interest publicly in running for office. And most politicos (Democrats and Republicans) have no idea about his politics. For example, Democrats close to Giffords said they don't even know what his political registration is.

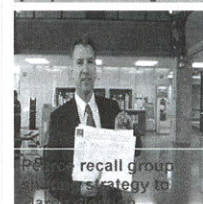
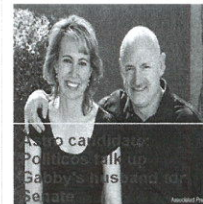
Giffords' office has given few hints about the congresswoman's political future and instead is focusing on her recovery from the gunshot wound she suffered in the Jan. 8 Tucson shooting rampage.

But that hasn't stopped the rumors from spreading. Every political consultant contacted by the *Arizona Guardian* says they've heard the Kelly gossip. And one Democratic operative, who did not want to be named in this story, said he knows Kelly has been talked to about the possibility of running.

Republican tactician Chuck Coughlin says he's also heard the talk and isn't too surprised. That, he says, would be a good play to run for the Democratic National Committee. But the longtime politico wonders whether Kelly wants the job.



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"Kelly, as far as I know, is enjoying his life as an astronaut with a rocket strapped to his ass," Coughlin said Thursday afternoon. "That's a very different life than running for public office."

But he and other Republican consultants, did say Kelly brings instant credibility to the race if he wants to run.

Besides being married to one of the most recognizable political names in the state, Coughlin said Kelly has his own compelling story to tell.

The 47-year-old is a longtime fighter pilot who flew nearly 40 combat missions over Iraq during Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s. He joined NASA in 1996 and flew his first space mission in 2001.

His handling of his wife's shooting has also boosted Kelly's political stock. Republican political consultant Kurt Davis says the space shuttle commander has dealt with the tragedy with "grace and professionalism."

"He's either a natural or the people around him are doing a great job," Davis said of the way Kelly conducts himself with the media.

But if Kelly doesn't run and if his wife can't or doesn't want to, Democrats need to find a quality candidate as soon as possible.

Already, the Republican front-runner, Congressman Jeff Flake raised more than \$1 million in the first quarter of the year to wage his Senate battle. That, according many political consultants, put Democrats at a huge financial disadvantage.

And it's beginning to look like Flake may not have a top-tier contender in the GOP primary. As of right now, no other well-known Republicans have said they will take on Flake.

If that happens, it means Flake could conserve his considerable resources for his Democratic opponent in the general election.

Democratic strategist Mario Diaz said he doesn't know Kelly personally, nor does he know his politics. But the idea that people are talking about the astronaut as an option shows how dire the situation is for Democrats.

"It just really goes to show the Democratic Party has a ways to go to get formidable candidates to run for statewide offices, especially on the federal side when we have to think about someone who is up in space right now," he said.

Diaz estimates it would take at least \$6 million to win the race. With that kind of a war chest, Diaz said, it simply doesn't look good for the minority party.

"It's just very difficult for anyone, but in particular someone who doesn't have a thick Rolodex to raise (big money) to be formidable," he said. "That really just goes to show, unfortunately, the state of our party. We have bright, talented individuals, but we are just not ready to run a statewide federal office. I just don't see anyone right now that we have on the bench who can do that."

House Minority Leader Chad Campbell, who also is viewed by many to have higher-office potential, said he, too, has heard the Kelly buzz. But the Phoenix Democrat chalked it up to Capitol-circuit chatter.

"I've heard this. I don't know Mark. I can't comment in terms of his interest. But I've heard the chatter out there," Campbell said. "Astronaut to politician. I'm pretty sure that's a step backwards somehow. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it would be bad for running for office. But I'm pretty sure that's a demotion though, in some capacity."

At least one Tucson legislator believes the idea is far-fetched.

Assistant Minority Leader Steve Farley, who is personal friends with Giffords and Kelly, said he's actually heard the astronaut groan about the rigors of political office.

"Just from what I know, he is not real enamored with politics. And I don't think anyone knows what his politics are, for that matter," the Tucson Democrat said. "I'm sure people are thinking, 'jeez, he could win.' And I'm sure he could win. I'm just not sure he wants to."

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