



## OPINION: THIS IS NOT THE CAMPAIGN THAT CORY BOOKER EXPECTED TO BE RUNNING

CARL GOLDEN | SEPTEMBER 5, 2013

Questions about sexual orientation and dope-dealing acquaintances were definitely not on the mayor's political agenda



Following his landslide win in the August primary to become the Democratic nominee for the unexpired term of the late U. S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, Cory Booker looked forward to a campaign that played to his strengths, solidifying his already sizeable lead and smoothing the way for a two-month sprint to victory in the October 16 special election.

Instead, he's spent the last two weeks attempting to clarify his comments about his sexual orientation and fending off allegations that his oft-repeated tale of meeting and befriending a drug dealer -- he identified him as "T-bone" -- while living in a public housing project in the city is a figment of his imagination.

Whispers about the mayor being gay have been around for several years without any impact on his political career. But for some reason, Booker tossed it onto the front pages when, in an interview with a Washington Post reporter, he said of the gay rumors, "Well, what if I am? What difference does it make?"

His Republican opponent, former Bogota mayor and conservative leader Steve Lonegan, dismissed Booker's comments, saying the campaign was about who was best suited to represent New Jersey in the Senate and help steer the country in the right direction.

He should have stopped there. But Lonegan -- who conceded he could benefit from a filter before he spoke -- inflamed the issue by referring to Booker as someone who preferred manicures and pedicures, while the conservative candidate was interested in more masculine pursuits, like sipping scotch and smoking cigars.

Booker's story about his acquaintance with the dope-dealing T-bone has been around for nearly as long as the gay rumors.

Despite his insistence that T-bone is a real person, no one -- not even those who live and thrive in the culture that rules the city's mean streets -- has been able to find him.

And Dr. Clement Price, a well-respected historian, academician, and scholar, has said that Booker admitted to him a few years ago that T-bone was a composite representing a deeply-ingrained way of life in the city, one of threats, intimidation, murder, and survival.

To use an overworked phrase, Booker and his campaign staff are in the midst of a "teachable moment."

They are learning that the attention given to questions about sexual preference and the T-bone tale reflect the irresistible temptation for the media to take the path of least resistance.

It's a lot more fun -- not to mention considerably easier -- to write about private matters and potential truth-stretching than it is to fill newspaper pages or airtime with dull examinations of the candidate's proposals to solve the debt crisis, for instance.

Proof? Recall the debate among Republican presidential contenders last year when the first question was directed at Newt Gingrich, asking him to respond to reports that he had asked his wife for permission to fool around outside his marriage.

It was once remarked that reporters cover political campaigns the way sports writers cover the Indianapolis 500 -- not so much to see who wins but to see who crashes and burns coming out of the fourth turn.

Like most cynical observations about politics, this one contains an element of truth.

Lonegan has backed off his comments about Booker's personal life, but it's certain that the "scotch and cigar" comment will live on.

The necessity to change the conversation weighs more heavily on Booker than it does on Lonegan. He faces the need to clarify his response on the matter of his sexual preference and to prove to the extent that he's able that T-boone isn't a figment of his imagination.

He's already begun to steer the campaign dialogue to safer, less controversial ground by dismissing the two issues as silly distractions that have no bearing on who is better qualified to serve in the Senate. Through a combination of filling his campaign speeches with policy proposals and characterizing the personal issues as manufactured controversies, Booker is hoping voters and the media will tire of them and they will quickly fade.

Thus far, he remains the favorite, leading by double digits in polls -- although the margin is somewhat slimmer than most supporters would have liked -- and with a campaign fund dwarfing that of his opponent.

Should the race tighten and Lonegan close to within single digits, the national Democratic Party