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To: Letter to Editor

Re: Recall of Mayor

The commentary in this week's *St. Louis American* by black attorney Don Calloway, criticizing the effort to recall Mayor Slay is both misinformed and symptomatic of the racial paradox plaguing the city's majority population. Contrary to Calloway's contention that the recall effort is a "reactionary" move, it is a strategy that has been well-thought through by some of the best minds in the black community. But unlike Calloway, they have not allowed their analysis to paralyze or excuse them from being intensely active on this issue.

This issue - the mayor's utter disrespect for the black community – became magnified when he publicly ousted the city's first and only black fire chief, Sherman George, and then quickly installed white firefighters in 80% of thirty-four upper-level positions of battalion chief and captain. He did this despite the strong objection of the venerable black organization, the St. Louis Clergy Coalition, which Calloway considers, "our most important advocacy group."

Dissatisfied, distraught and angry at being slapped by Slay, the Clergy Coalition arranged an emergency meeting of black ministers, elected officials and community leaders immediately after the mayor defiantly demoted George. The packed meeting was conducted in a deliberate and analytical manner, with the room replete with wise old heads, veterans of the racial politics of this city. Options to oppose and punish the mayor were laid out – even placed on a flip chart – with a recall effort being one of them.

While Calloway and other black professionals sat in their downtown offices reading about this issue in the newspapers and despairing about the humiliation being inflicted by the mayor, Zaki Baruti, the long-time and well-respected community activist, was down at the St. Louis Board of Election Commission researching the law and the mechanics for initiating a recall action against the perpetrator. At the emergency meeting, Zaki presented a five-page document outlining a strategy for a mayoral recall, complete with citations from the City Charter and voter registration and demographic information. Following his presentation, the vote to support the recall was unanimous.

Calloway is correct that a large number of signatures – 43,456 - are needed for the recall petition and that a recall effort has the same daunting demands as a political campaign. However, he is apparently emotionally reacting to the size of the task rather than astutely assessing how doable it is.

The recall effort – incorporated under the name of Citizens to Recall Francis G. Slay – entails a systematic sixteen-week petition drive strategy that will culminate the week of the February 5, 2008 Missouri presidential primary. With a huge voter turnout of the city's 200,000 registered voters expected that day – particularly with Barak Obama on the ballot - massive numbers of signatures for the recall petition will be collected at polling places. Obviously, Calloway cannot envision how the data-base and sense of political empowerment being engendered by the recall movement will carry over into future elections.

His claim that the recall is infeasible because it “doesn't have the support of an established political base,” is indicative of the racial paradox that has stymied the collective progress by blacks in this city. That paradox, simply put, is the difference between talk and action, the difference between black leaders being captive or being free.

Too many of this city's black leaders (and blacks in positions like Calloway) live in a benign state of captivity in which they dare not confront the powers that crush beloved black men like Sherman George. They are as afraid today to face and fight a mayor as Frederick Douglas was initially with his slave master. They say it is a difference of means and methods and approaches, but in the end it is fear.

In the end, they are leaders who, as Douglas poetically put it, “profess to favor freedom and deprecate agitation,” but “want crops without plowing up the ground...rain without thunder and lightning.”

In the end, they will realize that Douglas is right about Mayor Slay: “power concedes nothing without a demand.”

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