

“That’s our job”

The Way I See It-Jamala Rogers

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“That’s our job.” These were the words that former St. Louis Alder John Collins-Muhammad allegedly said to John Doe in a pay-to-play scheme that has rocked the city. Doe was being assured that he was going to get the big hook-up once he made the big payoff.

This is where some elected officials get it all wrong: extortion, embezzlement, bribery, political favoritism, sexual favors and lining one’s pockets are NOT part of the job. For too many, it’s incorporated into public or appointed office under the noses of an unsuspecting public often too consumed with their own survival to notice or feeling powerless to do anything about it.

Three African American elected officials were listed in a federal indictment, complete with the transcript of conversations of how they would help businessman John Doe circumvent the system in exchange for monetary and material goodies to enrich themselves. The political careers of Alder President Lewis Reed, Jeffrey Boyd and John Collins-Muhammad are over. In anticipation of the impending indictment, Collins-Muhammad resigned from his post last month admitting he had made “mistakes.”

The response to the scandal seemed to depend on one’s relationship to the three. An impromptu protest was organized at City Hall demanding the resignations of Reed and Boyd. Boyd has since resigned.

Reed is the longest serving president of the Board of Alders, a powerful position of influence over city politics and finances. The position has a seat on the Board of Estimate and Apportionment with the mayor and comptroller.

There seemed to be genuine sadness that Reed allowed himself to be caught up in such political shenanigans. The impact on his political career and personal life would be much greater than his co-defendants.

For Collins-Muhammad, there were comments about exchanging his impressive suits for an orange prison jumpsuit. These digs were based on his proposed legislature a few years ago to require dress attire for the Board of Alders. He insisted that a dress code was needed, stating “we are professional legislators.”

For Boyd, the response to his indictment was almost jubilant, especially from his constituents in the 22nd Ward. They never saw themselves as the alderman’s priority despite the alderman’s parting words of how well he had served them. There were unconfirmed reports of spontaneous dances throughout the ward as people chanted “Bye, bye Boyd.”

Boyd’s indictment ignited a reaction from Mayor Tishaura Jones who often was the brunt of Boyd’s political arrows, from filing lawsuits to uncut her authority to blocking bills that favored her as treasurer and mayor. Boyd lost two bids in his run against Jones as treasurer.

It’s easy to be gleeful when Karma finally knocks on the door of someone who has wronged us or our community. It is much harder to view a situation through the lens of transformative changes.

And no, I'm not getting soft in my old age. I still don't believe in turning the other cheek or loving my enemy. I do believe in holding people accountable for their harm. The consequences should fit the harm or the crime.

In the spirit of restorative justice, it can be a real struggle to balance or replace revenge with something more lasting and impactful. The Black community gets victimized in so many ways by so many different predators, we have scar tissue on top of scar tissue. It hurts double with the predator looks like you.

This is a time to reflect on how we contribute to an environment that allows people who commit acts that dehumanize and exploit us. It's time to re-imagine our communities where people think twice before they double-cross us-- either out of respect or fear. That's *our* job.