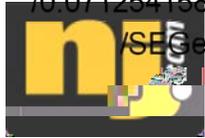




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There's speculation that the party hierarchy is considering presenting a stark choice to the senator: Retire gracefully and go out a winner or face the indignity of being kicked to the curb by his own party.

For Booker, the decision wasn't difficult. He didn't wrestle with his conscience. He didn't wake up at 3 a.m. in a cold sweat of indecision. He knew he'd be the odds-on favorite in a run for the Senate, but for governor, not so much.

A primary contest for the Senate nomination remains a possibility, but the party would almost certainly coalesce around Booker. As for Rep. Frank Pallone of Monmouth County, who's waited patiently for Lautenberg to retire and clear the way for him, he's destined to be a bridesmaid yet again.

Republicans, who haven't won a Senate election since 1972, face a grim 2014. Its bench is sparse and no Republican in the state's congressional delegation, for example, has expressed any interest in trying to reverse 40 years of futility.

Booker's decision leaves the Democratic Party in something of a muddle as it goes about settling on a candidate to oppose Christie. Even though the governor's job approval rating soared into the uncharted territory in excess of 70 percent, it will



Gary (<http://connect.nj.com/user/Kaiserg/index.html>)

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