

On My Mind
5/26/00

It doesn't surprise me - though it is more than a little regrettable - that the Department of Interior's spin doctors seem unwilling to come to the defense of its Office of Insular Affairs field representative in the CNMI in light of the patently absurd charges being made against him. The Department of Interior, after all, isn't known for its assertiveness.

With <I>Tribune</I> stories taking the lead, Jeff Schorr, U.S. Department of Interior's liaison to the CNMI, has been charged with engaging in "partisan political activities and other improprieties" and with being untrustworthy. The <I>Trib</I> goes so far as to report, in its opening paragraph, that local lawmakers are calling for Schorr's replacement. The charges stem from a memo issued by U.S. Representative Don Young in which he alleges that Office of Insular Affairs officials, including Schorr, have been guilty not only of violating federal laws but also of abusing privacy rights of businesses and individuals for political and legislative objectives. Specifically, Schorr has been accused of forwarding information given to his office to his superiors.

What does surprise me is that CNMI legislators have been so prompt in taking up the charges, have become so strident so quickly. Schorr, the <I>Tribune</I> quotes CNMI legislators as saying, is untrustworthy, unfriendly, should be recalled and replaced, should suffer the consequences of his transgressions. His very presence is suspect, a CNMI Senator is quoted as saying.

Jeff Schorr has served in his present position for almost fourteen years. Over the years he has repeatedly been invited to represent not only the Office of Insular Affairs, but the Department of Interior, at official CNMI functions. Until now, no real questions have ever been raised as to his trustworthiness, his role, his performance. Yet overnight, it seems, as a result of one highly political statement, from one highly partisan politician in the United States, Schorr has not only been charged, but been tried and found guilty of, among other things, violating federal law.

That's absurd. It's shameful. It's embarrassing.

There has been no attempt to ascertain the truth of the accusations. There has been no attempt to investigate the basis of the charges. There has been no consultation with constitutional authorities as the validity of the alleged transgressions. There has been no cross-check with members of the "other" political party, with members of the U.S. Congress less rabidly political, not tied to Congressman Young's field of influence.

The function of the OIA's office in the CNMI is to serve as liaison, as conduit, between the CNMI and Washington, D.C. On-site observations are expected as part of the responsibility of the position. Information given to the CNMI office is forwarded to Washington as a matter of course, information from Washington routinely delivered to the CNMI office for its information and use.

As part of the executive branch of government - and particularly at the level of the office in the

CNMI - no policy decisions are made. To the extent that it is part of an executive department, however, the office does reflect the party affiliation of the President. That is to be expected, and that is not a crime.

It will be interesting to see whether, or how, the Department of Interior - with only a mediocre reputation for either sensitivity or effectiveness - will respond, and just what its response might be. It will also be interesting to see just how far this farce will be allowed to go.

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It was Froilan who first tainted the CNMI's image in Washington, by hiring a PR firm that openly and decisively aligned the CNMI with the Republican Party. Until that time, the CNMI had not been identified with one party or the other, and thus was able to gain support on the basis of the issue in question, rather than on artificial political grounds.

Now Benigno S. Fitial, House Speaker, seems determined to see that the CNMI remains a political football, subject to the whims and outcomes of party politics. By having it appear that it is the CNMI - when, presumably, it is the local Republican Party - that is hosting a fund-raising dinner in support of Republican candidate George W. Bush, Fitial is re-enforcing the perception that the CNMI is wholly under the thumb of Republican interests.

Should Bush not make it into the White House (and it ain't over til it's over, as they say), the CNMI will suffer the consequences of any minority supporter. In the case of the threat of federal takeover of immigration and imposition of the minimum wage, it may appear that it is an advantage to be allied with Republicans - but even that is not certain. In the long run, however, alignment with one party over another is not to the CNMI's advantage.

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Studies show that cigarette smoking seems to be on the decline in the U.S. While that may be good news for some, it is bad news not only for the tobacco companies themselves, but also for all the beneficiaries - already confirmed or yet to come - of those huge law suits against the tobacco companies.

The ability of the tobacco companies to pay out the billions of dollars courts have awarded to those who have won their law suits depends on the continuing sale of tobacco products. If tobacco companies don't stay afloat, don't continue to make a profit, there will be no source of revenue for the pay-outs.

The tobacco companies are now targeting third world countries - who are not sophisticated enough to understand or cope with the impact of tobacco-related health problems on the health of their citizenry - with their deadly nicotine-laced products..

Ironic, isn't it - that those awards depend on others' continuing to maim themselves by using those same lethal tobacco products. Surely there's a better way to do things?

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How long has it been since the Hollywood Theatres opened their (its?) doors? No matter. At least the management has finally figured out how to advertise its wares. For those of us, like me, who don't make a practice of seeking out and reading reviews, the brief synopses of the movies' plots are very helpful. Thank-you!

Now, if the management would only deign to give us a bigger percentage of the better movies that are out there.....