

Kenneth Tomlinson's ethical problems don't prevent reappointment

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Bush crony re-nominated as chair of the Broadcasting Board of Governors

On November 14, in a move indicative of President Bush's intention to continue to surround himself with political cronies with questionable ethics records, Kenneth L. Tomlinson was re-nominated by the president as chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors -- the agency that supervises the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, the Arab-language Alhurra, Radio Marti and other government radio and television operations that are heard by an estimated 100 million people worldwide.

Tomlinson, a close friend of Karl Rove, has a decidedly spotty record in government service, having been previously forced to resign from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting over charges that he tried to politicize that agency.

In early August, the New York Times reported that Tomlinson had barely survived an effort by fellow Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) members to remove him from his post.

According to the Times, "a report... by the inspector general at the State Department... [found] that Tomlinson had used his office to run a horse-racing operation and that he had improperly put a friend on the payroll." The Associated Press pointed out that the investigation found that while with the BBG, Tomlinson "signed invoices worth about \$245,000 for a friend [retired VOA employee Les Daniels] without the knowledge of other board members or staff."

"Tomlinson also used the board's office resources to support his private horse racing operation and over-billed the organization for his time, in some instances billing both the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for the same time worked."

After a review by the U.S. attorney's office in Washington concluded that a criminal investigation was not warranted, it did acknowledge that "a civil investigation related to the charges he hired a friend as a contractor was pending," AP reported.

The BBG vote on Tomlinson's removal was taken after the three Democrats on the board -- Joaquin F. Blaya, D. Jeffrey Hirschberg and Edward E. Kaufman -- offered two resolutions: One called for Tomlinson's "resignation" as chairman "during a continuing inquiry [while] the other sought to curtail his authority sharply.

The seven-member board -- reduced to six (three Democrats and three Republicans -- Karen P. Hughes, the under secretary of state for public diplomacy, who serves as the representative for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Steven J. Simmons, and Blanquita Walsh Cullum) without the participation of Tomlinson -- voted along party lines.

Denying any wrongdoing, Tomlinson said that he thought the investigation "was inspired by partisan divisions" inside the BBG. "Surely reasonable people should conclude that it is time to move on," Tomlinson added.

In an interview, Tomlinson told National Public Radio that he couldn't "wait for this fight, because the distortions are not to be believed."

According to NPR, Les Daniels "retired in 1997 from Voice of America after a long career there working on logistics." Tomlinson denied that Daniels got consulting work because of their friendship: "He's been described in the press as 'having his job because he's a friend of Ken Tomlinson.' He had the job because he's a real contributor to the Voice of America."

NPR also reported that "the inspector general and the broadcasting agency's lawyers found Tomlinson didn't have the legal authority to put him on the payroll. Tomlinson says his friend helped again with logistics, and

offered advice on how to boost morale -- suggesting an award for teamwork, for example."

According to the inspector general's findings, Tomlinson used BBG time to work on his horse-racing interests: NPR reported that he "made more than 400 calls from government phones and sent or received more than 1200 e-mails on his official account related to horseracing. He was repeatedly in touch with his horse trainer and even emailed a Broadcasting Board employee and a Senate staffer dangling an 'investment opportunity' in front of them -- and urging them to bet on his horse Massoud."

Tomlinson claimed that the calls and e-mails added up to a very small amount of time: "You can't question the contributions I've made in terms of time I've spent on BBG activities. I'm a hard worker," he said.

Clearly Tomlinson, now re-nominated, continues to have the support of the Bush Administration. However, he is no stranger to controversy, or inspector general investigations. Late last year he resigned as chairman of the board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) "after a report by that agency's inspector general" found "evidence" that Tomlinson "violated rules intended to insulate public television and radio from political influence," the New York Times pointed out.

According to SourceWatch, a project of the Center for Media & Democracy, "Findings from the investigation were released in a November 15th, 2005 report in which [CPB inspector general Kenneth] Konz found Tomlinson had violated statutory provisions and the board's code of ethics in regards to how he dealt with programmers creating new public affairs programs. Konz also state[d that] Tomlinson improperly reviewed shows and applied political tests when seeking a CEO and president for the CPB."

Tomlinson began his career as a journalist for the Richmond Times-Dispatch in 1965 and three years later he moved to Washington to work for Readers Digest. After working for the Digest in Vietnam, in the early 1980s he was appointed by the Reagan Administration to serve as a director of Voice of America. He became Readers Digest's executive editor in 1985 and served as its editor-in-chief from 1989 to 1996. Tomlinson also served on the BBG from 1986 to 1994.

Interestingly enough, Tomlinson was appointed to the CPB board in 2000 by President Bill Clinton. In 2003, he was appointed chairman by President Bush. According to Wikipedia, Tomlinson "embarked upon a mission to purge CPB of what he perceived as 'liberal bias'. His efforts sparked complaints of political pressure. His close friendship with Karl Rove is one of many concerns the public has had about his own bias and his intent with respect to CPB, and accusations that he was attempting to turn the balanced content to a right wing agenda similar to FOX television.

"Tomlinson commissioned a \$10,000 study into Bill Moyers' PBS program, 'Now with Bill Moyers' without informing the board of the investigation. He also retained two Republican lobbyists to try to defeat a Congressional proposal that would have increased the representation of broadcasters on the board, again without informing the board of the contracts."

The inspector general's November 2005 report pointed out that Tomlinson may have "violated both the federal law and the corporation's own rules in raising \$5 million to underwrite" a program called "The Journal Editorial Report," a PBS program run by editorial board of The Wall Street Journal.

A mid-September editorial titled "Time for Kenneth Tomlinson to sign off," which appeared in several newspapers owned by the McClatchy-Tribune News Service uncompromisingly suggested that it was time for Tomlinson to move on:

The editorial chastised Tomlinson for hurting the credibility of the agencies he had chaired because those federal broadcasting entities need a "wise" board that will endeavor to strengthen U.S. broadcasting entities. "Those entities like Voice of America, which has been broadcasting since 1942," the editorial pointed out, "are not babbling mouthpieces, and they are not and never should be parrots for manipulative Republicans, Democrats or any other small-minded group that isn't freedom-loving and people-focused."

The editorial not only encouraged President Bush "to fill the BBG chair with a sophisticated visionary who places a priority on explaining America," but clearly advocated a changing of the guard at the BBG. The fact that Tomlinson was re-nominated does not bode well for the credibility of America's overseas broadcasting network.

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