

American zampoliti

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In the bad old days of the Soviet Union, it was the practice of the Communist government to embed a political officer with every military unit and aboard every Soviet ship. The duty of a zampolit, an abbreviation of the Russian phrase "deputy of the commander for political work," was to operate independently from the military chain of command, enforcing party discipline.

How odd that now, some 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the concept of the political officer has returned - and in Washington, D.C., of all places. President George W. Bush last month signed an executive order creating regulatory policy officers within every federal agency. These regulatory zampoliti will be political appointees operating outside the civil service chain of command, charged with making sure that the agencies don't stray from the president's policies.

The move further extends Bush's claims of broad executive powers. Having previously asserted his right to ignore parts of laws passed by Congress by appending "signing statements" to legislation, and having asserted his right over the courts in certain intelligence cases, Bush now has reached deep within the bureaucracy where regulators flesh out the framework of legislation.

Regulatory agencies already were top-heavy with industry insiders. Indeed, one defining characteristic of the Bush administration has been the revolving door between industry and top policy positions. Thus J. Steven Griles, a mining industry lobbyist (who may be indicted soon in the slop-over of the Jack Abramoff scandal) became deputy secretary of the interior and then revolved back to a top industry lobbying job. Thus Philip A. Cooney, a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute, became chief of staff of the White House Council on Environmental Policy, where he edited out critical parts of scientific papers in order to minimize the certainty about global warming. When Bush wanted someone to head to the Mine Safety and Health Administration, he tapped Richard Stickler, a former Pennsylvania mine operator whose mines had racked up twice as many reported safety violations as the national average.

Despite friends in high places, business interests complained that down in the bowels of the bureaucracy, pointy-headed regulators still had too much power. Bush's order will give political appointees the final say over the rules and guidance documents set forth by regulators.

Bush's order also says that regulators must define a "specific market failure" when issuing regulations. If, for example, the EPA wants to issue guidance to widget manufacturers on the rules for dumping widget waste into streams, the agency no longer can say it's doing so merely to protect public health. It also must define the specific "market failure" that keeps the widget market from cleaning up the mess. At the very least, this adds another cumbersome layer to the rule-making process, meaning it will take longer to get the streams clean.

The "market failure" criteria were developed by Susan Dudley, former director of the Mercatus Center for

Regulatory Studies at George Mason University, a free market think-tank largely funded by corporate interests. Bush has nominated Dudley, a longtime critic of federal regulatory policy, to head the Office of Management and Budget's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, making this anti-regulation zealot the nation's top regulatory officer.

Her nomination stalled in the Senate last year, and it is even less likely to be approved now that the Senate is under Democratic control. Bush may appoint her on an interim basis, meaning she'd serve until this session of Congress adjourns in December 2008.

The first six years of the Bush administration enfeebled regulation of dangers to public health, safety and the environment. Under Dudley and the zampoliti, the next two years could be truly disastrous.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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