

A troubling trail

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

U.S. attorneys are strange entities. They're political appointees, but they're not supposed to let politics influence their decisions about whom to prosecute for what crimes.

They serve at the pleasure of the president, which means they can be replaced at any time during their tenure. But since 1981, of the nearly 500 U.S. attorneys who have been appointed by Republican and Democratic presidents alike, only three were fired before their terms were up - until the Bush administration's recent firing of eight. (This doesn't count those replaced at the outset of a new administration.)

U.S. attorneys, like federal judges, make decisions that might make enemies of the powerful. But, unlike federal judges, they don't have lifetime appointments to shield them from the winds of politics.

The Bush administration stands accused of letting those winds topple eight U.S. attorneys. Among the casualties was David Iglesias, the former U.S. attorney for New Mexico, who told Congress last week that he felt pressured to prosecute local Democratic officials before the November election and that this pressure came from two Republican lawmakers - Sen. Pete Domenici and Rep. Heather Wilson, each of whom called him and demanded to know if he planned to pursue those prosecutions.

For weeks, the line from the Justice Department was that the dismissals were due to performance issues. Only recently did administration officials acknowledge that there were, in some cases, policy differences with those who got the ax. But, they assured us, one thing that played absolutely no role whatsoever in the firings was politics.

Now comes the news that the trail of bread crumbs leads to the doorstep of Karl Rove, the chief White House political adviser. In an interview with McClatchy Newspapers, Allen Weh, the chairman of the New Mexico Republican Party, admitted that he complained in 2005 about Iglesias to a White House liaison who worked for Rove and asked that Iglesias be removed. A White House spokeswoman told McClatchy that Rove "may have had a casual conversation with" Attorney General Alberto Gonzales about the Republican complaints against Iglesias. Weh said he followed up with Rove personally in late 2006 during a visit to the White House for a Christmas party. "Is anything ever going to happen to that guy?" Weh said he asked Rove. According to Weh, Rove said, "He's gone." Weh told McClatchy that, in response, he "probably said something close to Hallelujah."

Not to ruin Weh's good mood, but this is most troubling. If Rove was involved, even if it was only a messenger relaying concerns from political officials to the attorney general, it becomes really hard for the administration to make the argument that at least one of the firings, that of Iglesias, wasn't about politics.

Maybe the administration can prove otherwise. If so, it had better do so. Meanwhile, Congress should keep pursuing this matter wherever the evidence leads. The truth needs to come out. This isn't about Republicans and Democrats. This is about right and wrong - and the principles that guide this republic, principles that are worth preserving.

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