

## While I was away

*by Lionel\_Van\_Deerlin*

A heart attack, I've found, has a way of concentrating one's attention. Hourly bulletins on one's blood pressure make lively competition for the content of any cable news channel.

And now that I'm up and looking 'round again, I discover that nothing has stood still in recent weeks. Even without my gawking, the Bush administration appears to have suffered a slide in fortunes matched only by those ill-fated New York Giants of nearly 60 seasons ago.

A new Congress has been on the job scarcely two months. Yet already its covey of investigative committees has turned over so many rocks we can hardly believe the administration's first six years had reduced Capitol Hill to the timid oversight vigor of newborn kittens.

New management seems to have changed Washington overnight. Multiple committees have rediscovered the magic of the congressional subpoena to compel testimony by White House functionaries. Yet some important ones are playing as tight-lipped as Al Capone's bootleg buddies from the 1920s.

It's hard to keep up. Consider all that's been learned while I dallied with one bicep in what nurses call the pressure cuff. There's been the imbroglio over those ousted U.S. attorneys, for one thing. A bunch of them were fired around Christmastime, remember - all for good and sufficient reason, we were asked to believe.

Like Carol Lam of San Diego. Why did they show her the door? She didn't say a word - no one could call Carol gabby. So some people were inclined to accept the official spin. Here she was, almost within sight of the world's busiest international border crossing. But was she training her prosecutorial sights on the flow of illegals, or on the smugglers who feed America's multibillion-dollar narcotics market?

Certain congressmen were asking why not? Yet e-mails recently discovered to have passed between Justice

Department functionaries and their White House counterparts shed a flicker of light on what really happened. Attorney Lam thought it important to run down what appears to have been high-level crime involving prominent politicians, even some pointing toward (gulp!) elected legislators.

Such revelations naturally pose a subsequent question - to wit, where was the attorney general while those nervous Nellies were badgering his lady in San Diego and a half-dozen faithful functionaries elsewhere?

It turns out Alberto Gonzales can't really remember. Gonzales used to remind some of us of the open-faced kid from down the street who occasionally drops in for milk and cookies. Think again. This man may have helped put the December purge in place. In which case, it may be back to milk and cookies before his term is up.

And yes, other noteworthy changes have marked my absence. The California Legislature advanced its presidential primary to Feb. 5, assuring that the Golden State will help settle the party nominations as never before. But don't be surprised if teeming millions of Californians tend to vote exactly as folks do in tiny New Hampshire. Also, first-class stamps will go to 41 cents - which is hard to take for a guy who remembers when they were just 2 cents, and postcards a penny.

It's also obvious that persons of prominence continued saying dumb things while I was out of earshot. Our chairman of the Joint Chiefs, for one. Gen. Peter Pace not only thinks the military is wise to bar known gays from service, whatever their skills. Beyond this, he rates their immorality up there with straights who prove unfaithful to the marriage vow.

Our top-ranked soldier, Pace has spent more than 40 years in uniform - far overshadowing my own paltry four years of wartime service. Yet competent statisticians could pinpoint at least one reliable common measurement - our exposure to fellow soldiers who were gay.

At least half of my military time was experienced in a barracks venue. By applying accepted percentages of gay men per thousand population, I'm assuming I've showered with somewhere between 50 and 100 of them -

not one of whom "came on" to me in all that time.

Put that estimate beside the far longer and more impressive experience of Gen. Pace - most of it served in years before the gay ban took effect. The numerous list he has showered with (presumably without incident) might fill several columns of type.

Under "Don't ask, don't tell," Pace can't know who they are. But he figures they're every bit as bad as those home-wrecking roues.

I fervently hope his concern over this doesn't induce a heart attack in the general.

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