

Meet The Fiery Karl Zinsmeister

by *Bill Berkowitz*

I can't say with absolute certainty, but I suspect that Karl Zinsmeister, the Bush Administration's newly appointed top domestic policy advisor, unlike his predecessor, has not been ripping off Target, Hecht or any other D.C.-area department store. I can only assume that his credit card record is clean, and that this vetting process was more thorough than the one used when former New York City Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik was nominated by George W. Bush to head up the Department of Homeland Security: Shortly after being nominated, Kerik -- a longtime buddy and business partner of former NYC Mayor Rudolph Giuliani -- was forced to withdraw his name after admitting to employing an illegal immigrant as a nanny, and revelations surfaced about extramarital affairs and past conflicts of interest.

So while Claude Allen -- the Black conservative who previously held the job -- is waiting for the legal system to deal with charges that he committed serial fraud at several department stores in the Washington, D.C. area, Zinsmeister will stroll on over to the White House from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and assume the position.

Zinsmeister, 47, is a most loyal Bushite. During his 12-year tenure as editor-in-chief of AEI's American Enterprise magazine, the publication focused on a host of cultural and social issues. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq he has visited the country four times as an embedded journalist, written three books defending the president's policy, and is writing and producing a forthcoming PBS film called Warriors that profiles U.S. troops.

"Karl has broad policy experience and a keen insight into many of the issues that face America's families and entrepreneurs, including race, poverty, welfare and education," Bush said in a statement on the appointment. "He is an innovative thinker and an accomplished executive. He will lead my domestic-policy team with energy and a fresh perspective."

Many of the early news stories that reported on Zinsmeister's appointment mentioned his role as AEI editor-in-chief, characterized him as a "scholar," and noted that he'd written stories praising Wal-Mart's "efficiency," and "extolling" the role religion plays in "bonding communities." In a story headlined "A great pick by Bush," conservative columnist Mona Charen called him an "intellectual powerhouse."

Conservatives pleased with the appointment

Under the headline "New White House Adviser Could be Refreshing 'Jolt'," Pete Yost, the associate editor of Focus on the Family's (FOF) CitizenLink.org, wrote that "Pro-family conservatives say Zinsmeister ... [was] a wise choice to lead the White House shop that crafts policy on many issues that affect the family."

Gary Bauer, the former head of the Family Research Council who served as President Reagan's domestic-policy adviser and currently runs an organization called American Values, told CitizenLink that Zinsmeister will be "a positive addition" to the White House.

"Karl is a very bright man, an intellectual, a conservative in the very broad sense of that word," Bauer said. "He's somebody that has, over the years, devoted a lot of time and energy to writing and speaking about family-related issues."

Bauer offered a cautionary note, telling CitizenLink that Zinsmeister had not "devoted a significant part of his energy" to the life issue.

"But in the broader sense," he added, "Karl understands that the family is the bedrock of American society, that marriage is the union of a man and a woman and the importance of values to democratic capitalism. He has written and spoken about those things extensively, and I think will be very sympathetic to most of the items on the pro-family agenda."

Marvin Olasky, editor of World Magazine, described Zinsmeister as a "pavement-pounder."

"Pavement-pounders actually go out and walk down the hot pavement and the muddy and dirty streets and see what's actually going on," he said. "Karl is of that type. That's the way he's been as a journalist. Very much grounded. He's always impressed me as a guy who is more interested in talking about reality than in just spinning out theories."

"He impresses me as a very honest and gutsy guy. He's very well-rooted." Olasky told CitizenLink. "He certainly sees and values the importance of Christianity in public life -- and to the best of my knowledge -- in his own life."

According to Tom Hess, the editor of FOF's Citizen magazine, Zinsmeister has written several pieces for the magazine, many of the recent ones have focused on the situation in Iraq: In the June 2004 issue of the magazine Zinsmeister wrote a piece called "Search for Citizens," which detailed the dishonesty and corruption he found in Iraq:

"Several soldiers involved in Iraq's civic reconstruction said some of the country's problems remind them of the welfare culture the United States has struggled with in its own inner cities--particularly the dependency syndrome which leads people to automatically look to someone else to solve their problems. But in Iraq, passivity and dependence appear not just in pockets, but across broad swaths of society. As we passed through

the filthy yards and trash-strewn streets of Iraqi residential districts on various errands, U.S. soldiers would often puzzle: "Why don't they at least pick up their own garbage? That doesn't cost anything, and it would improve their lives overnight."

Zinsmeister pointed out that: "In the book *Human Accomplishment*, social scientist Charles Murray came to a conclusion which, as a nonreligious man, surprised him: After years of historical study, he discovered that the key to the flowering of science, art, enlightened governance, and many other good things in Europe, was the Christian religion's influence on individuals and societies."

"The emphasis on individual righteousness, personal character, and accountability before God doesn't just give Christians ways to draw nearer to the divine. It also provides them with valuable tools that help them live more decently on earth. George Washington argued in his Farewell Address that "morality is a necessary spring of popular government," and he advised Americans to keep a tight grip on their Christian faith. As I observed failures of citizenship in Iraq, I saw evidence that nations which lack Christianity's ethical infrastructure face a harder climb to the good life.

In the March 2006 issue he penned a piece with a self-explanatory title, "Worth the Sacrifice."

He hasn't hesitated to criticize the press for its reporting of the war. According to Mona Charen, in a 2004 report, Zinsmeister wrote: "This bias toward [assuming] failure is fanned by what [U.S. News and World Report columnist] Michael Barone calls the 'zero defect standard' of today's media. For months, armchair journalists without the slightest understanding of what real war is like have howled that this guerilla struggle hasn't been run according to a tidy 'plan.' Why did we 'allow' the looting? How come nobody anticipated the IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) threat? Is it wrong for GIs to invade people's houses?...Wars never proceed according to plan; they are always fought by the seat of one's pants, through constant improvisation.

"On D-Day (one of the most carefully 'planned' military events ever), 4,649 American soldiers were killed within just a few hours -- many through what an accusatory mind could characterize as 'screw-ups' (gliders and paratroopers landing in the wrong places, amphibious and landing craft unloading in water that was too deep, Air Force and Navy failures to suppress German fire on the beaches)...By standards of war invoked by some contemporary media observers, those landings could be viewed as traumatic bumbles."

Altering Quotes

While Zinsmeister doesn't appear to have Claude Allen-like predilections, Think Progress reported that he had "altered his own quotes and other text that appeared in a published profile of him, originally written by the Syracuse New Times but later amended and posted on the AEI website. The White House claims that the alterations were 'corrections' due to 'misattributions' by the reporter, an unlikely story given that Zinsmeister emailed the New Times reporter after the interview to thank him for his 'fair and thoughtful treatment.'" In his

note, Zinsmeister wrote that "he really appreciate[d] your professionalism and kindness. You wrote it straight up, which is the best and hardest kind of journalism. Let me know when I can next help out your journalism."

Josh Gerstein of the New York Sun further investigated the story and spoke with the story's author, Justin Park, and the paper's editor, Molly English. They both "rejected" the White House's "explanation," Gerstein reported. "If there's an inaccuracy, he should have called me or he should have called Justin," English told Gerstein. According to Gerstein, English "said it was unethical for...Zinsmeister to post an altered version of the story without permission. 'It's reprehensible, frankly,' English said. 'Once this is published, it's not his property. From that point in time, he can't just pick and choose.'"

The New York Sun reported that the original quote read: "People in Washington are morally repugnant, cheating, shifty human beings." In the version posted on the AEI web site, it read: "I learned in Washington that there is an 'overclass' in this country stocked with cheating, shifty human beings that's just as morally repugnant as our 'underclass.'"

On Tuesday, May 30, Zinsmeister admitted that he altered the text of the New Times piece. "Looking back, this is foolish," Zinsmeister told the Washington Post. According to the newspaper, "Zinsmeister said he did it to correct the record while protecting a young journalist who had made mistakes."

According to the Washington Post, Zinsmeister explained the changes "by saying he has long studied issues of class and morality and he was confident he would have used the kind of specific language in the quote on the institute site rather than the more broad description in the original article."

He also acknowledged other changes "to fix errors he believed the New Times reporter had made because of misunderstandings or truncated notes -- taken in an interview in a noisy restaurant."

"I should have contacted the New Times to say that there were four errors in the story and they should be retracted and corrected...At the time it seemed innocent."

In a Zinsmeister piece dealing with the treatment of captured "terrorists," he displayed his kinder, gentler side: "Would you believe that the number of formal U.S. investigations of how terror detainees are being treated recently reached 189?...Of course we need to weed out cruel or out-of-control guards, but the clear picture of the many commissions and blue-ribbon investigations is that our detainment system is pretty tight and self-regulating, that gentleness to the point of political correctness is the norm, and the rogue actions are nearly always found out and punished, usually quite severely."

Zinsmeister has also worked as a legislative assistant to the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y., and served on the advisory board for the Foundation for Community and Faith-Centered Enterprise. In addition, he was on an Education Department school-reform panel.

By praising Wal-Mart, quoting Charles Murray, and altering his own quotes, Zinsmeister may be a natural follow-up to the ethically-challenged Claude Allen. What his appointment means for domestic policy remains to be seen.

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