Questionable concern about mine safety

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

President George W. Bush telephoned Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman last weekend. A White House spokesman said Bush wanted families grieving over the Huntington mine disaster to know "they are in his thoughts and prayers."

Appropriate words, these. And no fair person, I think, will question Bush's faith in the power of prayer. But in the matter of Utah's multiple and probably unnecessary deaths in that coal mine, the president could have given so much more. It is something that he, and he alone with a president's appointive power, could have provided - a mine safety chief who knows what's needed to halt the mounting toll in America's most dangerous jobs. The times called for a regulator of stature and courage. Someone who'd stand up to those owners whose quest for profits might override a concern for worker safety.

Regrettably, Bush wasn't equal to the task. Instead, a little more than a year ago he nominated a man so ill-suited for this responsibility that even a Republican Senate majority refused to confirm him. Whereupon, seemingly delighted as ever in finding a legal loophole to exploit, the president contrived a "recess" appointment of Richard E. Stickler. Like a number of Bush's executive nominations who couldn't pass Senate muster, Stickler became mine safety czar while Congress was out of town.

The result of that partisan chicanery has been written large this month. Six coal miners apparently entombed forever in collapsed subterranean chambers, along with three would-be rescuers whose failed effort to reach the stricken work force only widened the tragedy. The mine's owner attributes both unfortunate occurrences to "seismic tremors" (presumably limited to the mountain containing his mine) rather than to the dangerously deep level from which he was extracting coal - below 1,500 feet.

Joining a bevy of fearful folk gathered near the mine entrance, day after day, was this man Stickler - yes, our president's choice to see that things like this don't happen. Stickler's guarded comment for TV cameras seemed always the same: "We cannot know how this happened until there's time to investigate."

It isn't that Stickler doesn't know plenty about the coal industry. Quite the opposite - he'd been a mining company executive all his adult life. Nor could one think him unfamiliar with mine safety rules. The record shows he had numerous run-ins with federal regulators while pushing the interests of management. Thus the only unanswered question concerns a conflict of interest so blatant, so outrageous we may wonder that word of Stickler's nomination sent no seismic tremors across the West Wing of the White House.

In bygone times every important ruler or pope seems to have earned a descriptive cognomen - Peter the Great, Richard the Lion-Hearted, Leo the Wise, Attila the Hun. If this were still the practice, we must wonder what distinctive nickname would attach to our 43rd president.

In light of his distressingly bad appointment of Richard Stickler and others like it, I think historians might memorialize Bush as George the Uncaring. From the official neglect that marked Hurricane Katrina to more recently revealed oversight in rehabilitating seriously wounded war veterans - and now to the grim evidence of misfeasance in mine safety - one factor remains constant. This president has habitually entrusted the supervision of critical government agencies to persons unprepared or psychologically unwilling to do the jobs given them.

The archetypical example probably remains his selection of horse breeder Michael Brown ("You're doing a heckuva job, Brownie") as director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. That travesty played out along the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast two years ago. But the horror of lax mine safety cannot be far behind.

Virtually half of the nation's electricity depends on the burning of coal - making this the richest of all U.S. mining, as well as the most dangerous. As the push for productivity has sent excavation ever deeper, the national toll in lives has risen to more than 125 a year.

As for Utah's Huntington mine, one may understand the resentment voiced by victims' families when Chief Executive Officer Robert Murray spoke of abandoning the rescue effort. Beyond that, it seems premature to point fingers of blame. But the following facts, offered without elaboration, could prove pertinent:

- In years before the recent cave-in, Murray had received 32 warnings of alleged safety violations, and paid a total of $260,073 in fines since 1996.

- Murray also has contributed a total of $639,600 to Republican candidates and political action committees over the past 10 years.

So perhaps President Bush wasn't wholly uncaring, after all.Lionel Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in the U.S. House of Representatives for 18 years.

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