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# No 'Profile in Courage'

Richard Nixon's Cambodian operation in May 1970 sparked fiery street demonstrations, bloody campus protests and a petition to the secretary of state from more than 250 department and foreign aid employees expressing their "deepest concern and apprehension" over the U.S. troop incursion and the administration's rising rhetoric against Vietnam War protesters. I was one of the signers.

An angry Nixon White House, through special counsel and former journalist, the late Clark Mollenhoff, demanded that the State Department supply him with names of the "dissidents" who signed the petition. To the everlasting credit of then-Secretary William P. Rogers, Mollenhoff was told to take a hike and to not interfere in internal State Department business.

A State Department insider later slipped the names to the White House, so Mollenhoff got his list anyway. But what mattered most was the secretary of state's refusal to knuckle under to White House pressure—and the way he stood up for his employees.

What brings that grim period to mind is the response of the D.C. financial control board to the latest, and most egregious, act of congressional meddling in a strictly local matter to be seen around here in years.

To explain.

Rep. Ernest Istook, the anti-gay,

no-D.C.-gun-control, social conservative Republican from Oklahoma—who is chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on the District—is one of the city's straw bosses on Capitol Hill. But unlike the other three D.C. subcommittee chairmen—Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.) Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and Rep. Tom Davis (R-Va.)—Istook loves throwing his weight around on D.C. matters.

Oh, Ernie the Overseer goes about pulling rank politely. His moves are right out of the old school of courtly southern manners. But make no mistake: When it comes to the District, Istook sees himself as *bwana*, city folks as indigenous yahoos, and the men and women representing D.C. residents—including financial control board members—as little more than lackeys put on this earth to do his bidding. Which would be of little consequence were Istook back home in Oklahoma. But he's here. And he's also one of the charter school movement's biggest fans.

A stipulation: I like the idea of public charter schools, too, and was honored to deliver the commencement speech at a very successful charter school last year. However, I also happen to think that the decision to convert an existing public school into a public charter school should allow for the broadest possible community participation, be-

cause the change will have wide-ranging effects on many people beyond those attending the school.

The controversy surrounding the Paul Junior High conversion underscores that concern. The decision has not been cheered in every corner of the Northwest D.C. community where Paul is located, especially among families opposed to sending their children to a charter school. The proposal to give the Paul building to a charter group has ignited phone calls, letters, even a demonstration.

Enter Ernie the Overseer, who loves the Paul conversion and wants to see more of the same.

Istook fired off a five-page letter to financial control board Chairman Alice Rivlin; it contained 47 separately numbered charter school-related interrogatories, many of them with multiple parts, demanding voluminous information—all by return mail in two weeks.

Most riveting were his questions about Paul Junior High. Two especially jumped off the page:

■ "How many parents of current Paul Junior High students have complained to [D.C. Public Schools] or to the control board about the conversion (please do not count anonymous surveys or other anonymous complaints)? Please provide us with the names and telephone numbers of these parents," Istook demanded.

He then turned his sights on par-

ents at elementary schools within the vicinity of Paul.

■ "How many parents of sixth-grade students in the Paul catchment area have complained to DCPS or to the control board about the conversion (please do not count anonymous surveys or other anonymous complaints)? Please provide us with the names and telephone numbers of these parents."

Clark Mollenhoff would have been proud.

The control board's response, on the other hand, was not exactly a profile in courage.

No one on the board had the guts to tell Istook to go jump in a lake—that the names and telephone numbers of D.C. parents who communicate with their superintendent are none of his business. Instead, the board's response to both questions was a tepid "We do not know."

One public school official told me jail would be preferable to turning over parents' names to Congress. So the control board told Istook: "Inquiries received by DCPS were from individuals at public and community functions who spoke informally, sometimes with a request for confidentiality, and oftentimes without introduction, to the superintendent and other DCPS administrators. Their names and telephone numbers cannot be supplied by DCPS."

The control board did muster up enough nerve to tell Istook that in-

quiries came from parents who didn't want to enroll their children in the new charter school. But the board wasn't about to take on Istook in behalf of District residents the way Rogers confronted Mollenhoff in behalf of his employees.

Istook's press secretary, Micah Swafford, said this week that her boss wanted names and phone numbers because charter school proponents had told him there was no real parental opposition to the Paul conversion and he wanted to check for himself. Yeah, right.

Unmoved by the control board's answers, Istook is hauling a select group from the city before his subcommittee on Tuesday.

D.C. charter school proponents have been called to the Hill to tattle about their dealings with the city and school system. Financial control board members will be grilled on the slow pace of turning over more D.C. school property to charter schools. And Superintendent Arlene Ackerman—for being protective of D.C. public schools, teachers and parents, and for constantly getting uppity with the wrong folks in this city—will be given a verbal "whupping," which will probably please no end her chief D.C. council fault-finders Kathy Patterson, David Catania and Sharon Ambrose.

Lawd, Lawd, jes' like ol' times.

Where is the District's William Rogers when we need one?