

off the record

a legislative
update from
Senator Kim Elton

a weekly way to stay in touch

Room 115, State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99801 * 465-4947 * 465-2108 FAX * April 19, 2002

Capitol Undercurrents

An Art Linkletter moment—

Astronaut Eugene Cernan, the first out of the box in this year's Pillars of America Freedom lecture series,



addressed nearly 500 Wednesday in Juneau. After his lecture/slide show, the second American to walk in space and the last to walk on the moon answered questions. The

first question was from an eight-year-old, dressed in a shiny silver space suit. The young boy climbed up onto his chair and, in his best 'kids say the darndest things' voice, asked "How did you get your mom to let you go to the moon?"

Now, a Jodie Foster moment—Sen. Johnny Ellis, the Democratic minority leader, suggested to the Senate's sergeant at arms that he needed a bright red alert button for Alaska's panic room—the senate chambers. The Democratic minority leader's tongue-in-cheek comment was in reference to the hit Jodie Foster movie. Jodie's character retreats a fortified home bunker (called a panic room)—where the bad guys have forced her.

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Hate messages hits our offices like a brick through a window

Sometimes, if you listen closely, you can hear the steady drip, drip of hate. And sometimes you don't even have to listen closely—it thunders into your yard or office.

My office and other legislators' offices were violated last week. A tape cassette and a packet of hate articles, with titles like *Who Rules America* and *The Color of Crime* arrived in plain envelopes. The cover letter began by saying: "The National Alliance is a civil rights organization dedicated to the preservation of the traditional White majority in America. National Alliance members from all walks of life live in your district."

The paranoia-laced letter ended with: "Members of the National Alliance are *active* (emphasis theirs) members of your constituency and we will not be dismissed by our legislators. In the future we will be attending local political meetings for the purpose of distributing literature and open participation. We look forward to meeting you."

Well, I look forward to meeting them, too. I'd like the cloak of anonymity stripped from those involved in an organization that drops hate literature in the yards of my neighbors in the dark of night. I'd like to put a face on members of our community who support a neo-Nazi organization (that's not my characterization, that's the characterization of others more temperate than me when it comes to hate groups). I'd like to know why they follow a leader, William Pierce, who wrote the book that allegedly inspired Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber.

I did read the trash they sent to my office. My mother would say they ought to wash their garbage mouths with soap and water. I didn't listen to the tape by their leader because my gag reflex was already under sustained attack.

The upshot of the time I spent analyzing the National Alliance pathology is that it sent me back to the report of the Tolerance Commission—the Alaska group formed in response to the paintball attacks on Alaska Natives last year. I reread the commission report and this second time around, it meant even more. If nothing else, the time I spent reading material from haters gave me a greater appreciation of the efforts by the Tolerance Commission and the challenges facing Alaskans when dealing with hate and intolerance.

The commission of distinguished Alaskans (Juneau members included Fran Ulmer, Tom Stewart and Shari Kochman) held public meetings around the state and, in their words, "heard heartbreaking testimony on discrimination

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hate messages...

and injustice.” The commission report, issued last December, focused on education, institutions, economic concerns, and the judicial system. Each of the sections included findings and recommendations.

The recommendations range from improving teacher cross-cultural training to dealing with homelessness. Few of the solutions are easy. Few of the solutions promise immediate results. Few of the solutions require no investment of time or resources. But all of the solutions demand consideration by school boards, local officials, parents, teachers, church leaders, business leaders, and others. I don’t say that lightly. When communities are confronted with the raw, extreme malevolence of hate groups like the National Alliance, it is difficult to dismiss the commission’s suggestions.

As an aside, it should be noted the Alaska chapter of the National Alliance attacked the tolerance commission. Part of their letter read: “. . . was a single European-American, white person asked to join the commission simply because they were white? No. Therefore, because the commission didn’t include a white civic leader simply because they were white the commission’s findings and the governor’s implementation of them should be reviewed by the legislature.”

The National Alliance should spend some time checking facts before loading up their poison pen. They asked a loaded question that falsely assumes nobody but a white person can understand whites. Then they answered it as if there were no whites appointed. Then they suggested the legislature take an action based on their misinformation and twisted view of the world.

While the National Alliance defines the radical extreme on the intolerance/tolerance spectrum, knowing that its hate flourishes in the hearts of a few makes it easier to understand that less extreme prejudice can take root in the minds of more.

Maybe, instead of thinking of a tolerance/intolerance spectrum, we should think of it as kind of a bell curve of prejudice with neo-Nazis on the low end on one side and those rare people with no prejudices at all on the low end of the other side. Everyone else is someplace else on the curve in between. Everyone someplace on that curve has the responsibility to recognize their imperfection and commit to improve. We need to acknowledge that we can do better, that we must do better, that we must make our homes better, that we must make our neighborhood better, that we must make our community, state and nation better.

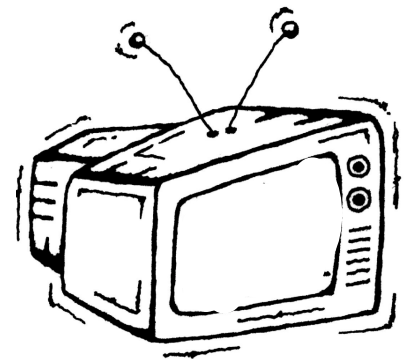
Perhaps the good news is that that the venomous message by the National Alliance spurs the rest of us to do better. When they say they “favor common sense approaches to racial/ethnic issues until the current multi-

cultural society can be replaced by a more natural one” we must respond by celebrating diversity, by respecting the cultural richness that adds, not subtracts from our notion of community.

We must respond, otherwise we allow the animus of the National Alliance to shine like a lighthouse.

Undercurrents cont...

A political moment?—The New York Times, in a long article Friday on the failure of the ANWR drilling amendment, noted: “Mr. Murkowski, who is running for governor in November, held the Senate floor for hours Wednesday night, speaking to an almost empty chamber, making the same points and showing the same posters over and over. Presumably, he wanted to stay on television until his constituents, most of them four hours behind Washington, got home from work.”



Defining ‘unfortunate juxtaposition’—On the state senate floor Tuesday were two substantive items. The first was a bill that removed the two-decade-old Alaska statute provision protecting poor families who otherwise would lose benefits when they and their kids get the PFD. They lose benefits because PFDs are counted as income that can bounce them from programs. Since the beginning of the dividend program, we’ve shielded them and made them whole. The second was a resolution urging Congress to get rid of the estate tax so kids of the well-to-do don’t pay taxes on estates worth two-thirds of a million dollars or more. The bill means more than 10,000 Alaska children will fall even further below the poverty level than they are now. The resolution protects wealthy kids. Go figure.

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