

Probe Of Old Friend Hart Draws Cohen Undeserved Flak

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Defense Secretary William Cohen is taking heat for the punishment that a Pentagon investigator received after asking some touchy questions about the sex life of Cohen's longtime friend, former Colorado Sen. Gary Hart.

The controversy began when the investigator, David Kerno, was assigned to do a routine background check on Hart, who was asked by Cohen to serve on a national security panel that required top-secret security clearance.

As part of his investigation, Kerno interviewed three of Hart's colleagues at his law firm in Colorado. Given Hart's history -- his sexual relationship with aspiring actress Donna Rice destroyed his 1988 presidential campaign -- Kerno asked some probing questions about Hart's marriage and conduct with women.

That upset Hart, who called Cohen's office to complain.

Within 30 hours, Kerno, a 53-year-old veteran who had worked for 19 years as an investigator for the military, was removed from the Hart investigation, stripped of his badge and credentials and reassigned to a desk job.

The military agency that Kerno works for, the Defense Security Service, has since recommended that he be suspended without pay.

According to a report first published in USA Today, a disciplinary letter issued by the security service links Cohen directly to the case. Cohen and Hart served together in the Senate and co-wrote a spy novel called "The Double Man" in 1985.

The letter says that Hart called Cohen directly to complain about Kerno, and it says that Cohen met with the director of the security service before the internal investigation of Kerno began.

But Pentagon officials said the letter is inaccurate. Cohen's longtime adviser, Bob Tyrer, said Hart called Tyrer, not Cohen. Tyrer also said he, not Cohen, contacted the security service, and informed Cohen of Hart's complaint.

"(Hart's) complaint was not so much about his own case, but his fear that if this was standard investigative practice that we would start to have people opt out of serving," Tyrer said.

A defense official familiar with the case said Kerno's questions were inappropriate. It was "well beyond the scope of what you'd look for this type of investigation, where a guy's going to chair an unpaid (board)," said the defense official interviewed by The Associated Press.

Kerno's friends say he's a principled investigator who is being railroaded out of a job. "Dave Kerno did the job he was supposed to do," said his lawyer, Daniel Minihan. "He was asking the right questions about the wrong guy."

New prescription plan

News from Capitol Hill . . .

Maine's two Democratic congressmen have backed a new proposal designed to lower the price of prescription drugs for the elderly.

The latest proposal, introduced by Rep. Marion Berry, an Arkansas Democrat, would allow American pharmacists and distributors to purchase American-made drugs in foreign countries and re-import the drugs into the United States.

American-made drugs are often cheaper in foreign countries, because some foreign governments -- unlike the U.S. government -- negotiate lower prices with pharmaceutical companies. Under current law, only pharmaceutical companies are allowed to re-import drugs back into this country.

Reps. Tom Allen and John Baldacci are among the 20 co-sponsors of Berry's legislation. FDA Commissioner Jane Henney has criticized the proposal, saying it would be difficult to monitor the importation of safe prescription drugs.

Allen maintains the legislation "highlights the discrepancy" between the prices charged by pharmaceutical companies in different countries. However, Allen agreed that Berry's legislation is not "a comprehensive solution" because "you can't have all the senior citizens getting their drugs funneled through Canada and Mexico."

Allen and Baldacci also support legislation that would provide prescription drugs to Medicare beneficiaries, and legislation that would force pharmaceutical companies to sell drugs to pharmacies at discounted rates -- a proposal that Allen introduced.

Vote raises hackles

Maine conservatives are taking issue with a vote that Rep. Tom Allen cast recently dealing with sexual relationships between adults and children.

The House voted 355-0 to condemn "suggestions in a study recently published by the American Psychological Association that sexual relationships between adults and children might be positive for children."

Rep. John Baldacci supported the measure, while Allen and 12 other House Democrats voted "present." Sixty-six House members didn't vote at all.

The conservative Internet newsletter As Maine Goes featured Allen's vote as its top story last week. Editor Scott Fish called Allen's vote "an absolute disgrace."

Allen said he voted "present" because House members weren't given the study to read. "Who knows what the study said?" he asked.

"It's really not our role to go out reading academic journals to condemn academic studies. But if the article said what the (Republican) resolution said it said, then it should be condemned," Allen said. "It's horrible."

Allen goes to All Stars

Republican campaign consultants will no doubt take notice of this item.

Rep. Tom Allen played hooky from Congress Tuesday night -- and missed three votes -- so he could attend the final All-Star Game of the century at Fenway Park in Boston.

The Democratic congressman said he couldn't resist the chance to see the baseball game with an old friend from high school. Allen landed the tickets with the help of Rep. Joe Moakley of Massachusetts, who contacted officials from Major League Baseball.

Allen said he "hardly ever" misses a vote, and tried not to miss any Tuesday night. He caught the last flight to Boston, but even so, he missed three votes that dealt with the funding of parklands and fish and wildlife programs. Both issues are important to Maine, but Allen noted that his absence didn't affect the outcome of the issues.

Allen, Baldacci say no

In other news from Capitol Hill . . .

Maine's Democratic congressmen voted against a proposal Thursday to increase the salaries of members of Congress, but supported a plan to double the salary of the next person elected president.

The House voted 276-147 to give representatives and senators a 3.4 percent pay increase, which would boost their salary to \$ 141,300 in January. Reps. Tom

Allen and John Baldacci both opposed the measure, arguing that the increase was too much.

"I have people in Maine who are having a hard time making ends meet," said Baldacci.

Allen and Baldacci voted to double the president's salary to \$ 400,000 in 2001, a measure approved by a vote of 334-82.

"It's been 30 years" since the president's pay was increased, said Allen. "So it's long overdue. It's the most difficult job in the world."

Baldacci supported an increase in the president's salary, but hopes it will be cut to \$ 300,000 when Senate and House negotiators reach agreement on a plan.

Bush's Maine money

In presidential politics . . .

Texas Gov. George W. Bush has raised nearly \$ 35,000 in Maine this year, more than all the other Republican and Democratic candidates for president have raised in the state combined.

According to new fund-raising reports, Bush received \$ 1,000 donations from John P. Campbell, a lawyer from York; William R. Tower Jr., chief executive at Barnacle Billy's Inc.; and Shane Flynn, an executive from MBNA.

Bush also received \$ 1,000 donations from James Stanley, an executive of the Liberty Group; David Sparks, president of Conversion Products; Robert A. Monks of Ram Management; and Hugh Farrington, president of Hannaford Brothers.

Other Republican candidates also received contributions from Maine:

Elizabeth Dole: \$ 3,500 total, including \$ 1,000 from Douglas Piehl of Orr's Island, \$ 500 each from Kevin Keogh of Portland, Barbara Schneider of Durham and Louise Boldebook of Biddeford.

John McCain: \$ 2,500 total, including \$ 1,000 from Harry and Susan Konkel of Portland and \$ 500 from James McNally of Kittery.

Dan Quayle: \$ 1,400 total, including \$ 520 from Martin Jones of Caribou, \$ 400 from Cynthia Battel of Bremen, and \$ 200 from Cynthia Apgar of Danforth.

Gary Bauer: \$ 1,300 total including \$ 1,000 from Richard and Virginia Kurtz of Cape Elizabeth.