

Kmiec faces friendly fire

Joe Feuerherd | Apr. 8, 2011 NCR Today

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Says the report: ?The public affairs section [of the Malta embassy] has done a commendable job reaching out to Malta's migrant population, many of whom are Muslims from Africa. The consular section operates effectively and efficiently. Visa applications have fallen significantly since Malta joined the visa waiver program in 2008.?

Further, ?Coordination between the Defense attaché office and the political section is good, with responsibilities and information properly shared between them.? Embassy staff morale is high and Ambassador Kmiec is well liked by government leaders and others influential in Malta's society.

Meanwhile, the embassy is getting a new state of the art facility to carry out its work and there are the thoroughly predictable issues related to its construction. All in all (though Kmiec should spend more time focused on the nuts and bolts of the construction, according to the report), that project seems to be going relatively well.

So what's the problem?

Kmiec, it seems, ?has created friction with principal officials in Washington, especially over his reluctance to accept their guidance and instructions.? God forbid anyone ?create friction? with Washington bureaucrats, who always know best. Better to not rock the boat.

Of particular frustration, says the report, are the time Kmiec spends on writing and speaking, especially in areas seemingly unrelated to his ambassadorial post. (Some of those [writings have appeared in NCR](#)[2].)

?Based on a belief that he was given a special mandate to promote President Obama's interfaith initiatives, he has devoted considerable time to writing articles for publication in the United States as well as in Malta, and to presenting his views on subjects outside the bilateral portfolio,? says the 49-page diplomatic hit job.

Where do you suppose Ambassador Kmiec got the idea that he has a ?special mandate? to ?promote President

Obama's interfaith initiatives?? One imagines that it came from President Obama. And there's nothing that drives Washington-based State Department bureaucrats crazier than ambassadors, particularly those serving in relatively obscure postings, who have a direct line to the president, which, of course, is how that relationship is legally structured. Ambassadors serve the president directly ? not State Department bureaucrats, not even, in the formal chain of command, the Secretary of State.

Kmiec, recall, came to public attention during the 2008 presidential campaign. A respected Catholic layman and Republican ? he worked in Ronald Reagan's Justice Department and headed the Catholic University of America's law school ? Kmiec strongly backed candidate Obama for president. He wrote op-eds in prominent newspapers and spoke at college campuses and other venues.

It's not a large leap to imagine a private conversation between president and ambassador in which the president urged his new appointee, a persuasive speaker and writer, to continue his outreach efforts to the faith community.

Private instructions to an ambassador are hardly rare and, as history has demonstrated, often vital to US diplomatic efforts. But, of course, Foggy Bottom bureaucrats don't like them; such actions put them out of the loop.

So who are the ?principal officials? upset with Kmiec who orchestrated this shot across his bow? They surely don't include either the Secretary of State or the President or the report would have been more specific. It would have used code words such as ?highest ranking officials? or identifiers more powerful than ?principal officials.?

No, the source is likely lower ranking careerists who don't like their ambassadors freelancing (even if they do so with presidential approval.) Administrations and ambassadors come and go, but civil servants outlast them all.

"I must say that I am troubled and saddened that a handful of individuals within my department in Washington seem to manifest a hostility to expressions of faith and efforts to promote better interfaith understanding," Kmiec told the Associated Press. "Our constitution proudly protects the free exercise of religion ? even for ambassadors,?" said Kmiec.

Nonetheless, according to the Inspector General's report, Kmiec plans to cease writing and speaking about issues unrelated to Malta.

The silencing of Kmiec will be a loss; his writings and public presentations are positive contributions to the public debate. Perhaps the next time he's in Washington he will get some time on the president's calendar and seek a renewal of his private marching orders. Or perhaps he'll simply ignore the bureaucrats and continue to speak and write as he has since taking office.

In any case, Kmiec should watch his back; his State Department antagonists seem quite serious about ousting him.

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