

Agriculture by Suzanne Rose

Espy ouster 'not a coincidence'

The cartel which has dominated the USDA bureaucracy for years had a major role in forcing Espy out.

Statements made by Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy in an interview given to *AgriNews* on Sept. 29, days before he announced his resignation as secretary on Oct. 3, raise some of the same questions about his ouster that have been raised by this magazine, which has charged that members of the Clinton administration are under attack by British oligarchical circles and their friends in the Bush networks which desire the destabilization of the U.S. government for political objectives.

In the case of the African-American agriculture secretary, the allegations of wrongdoing also bear the imprints of the FBI's "Frümenschen" policy of assuming that any black elected official deserves to be investigated simply because of his color. (Espy was a congressman from Mississippi.) Given the notorious corruption in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), such as the fact that for decades its top officials have been the handmaidens of the grain cartels, the allegations against Espy, that he accepted transportation and other perks from people who did business with the department, sometimes repaid, sometimes not, of a total amount of less than \$10,000, seem particularly paltry.

Ironically, former Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter, who held that position immediately prior to Espy, had longstanding public ties to both the meat monopoly and the anti-farmer center of speculation, the Chicago Board of Trade. Yeutter was a board member of ConAgra, and former president of the Mercantile Ex-

change, and never ceased to represent their interests.

The charges against Espy followed a pattern similar to those against other Clinton administration officials, of appearing first in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The other element suggestive of a political witch-hunt, was the immediate appearance of bias on the part of the independent counsel assigned to investigate Espy, and the involvement of the Bush networks.

Shortly after Espy indicated an intent to defend himself vigorously against the charges, Independent Counsel Donald Smalz, in an interview prior to beginning his investigation, characterized Espy's subsequent repayment of the small amounts at issue as similar to the actions of a bank robber hoping to evade the consequences of his crime by repaying his victims. "Repayment after disclosure of a crime isn't a defense to a crime. If somebody robs a bank and pays back the money, it doesn't mean he didn't commit the crime," Smalz said.

Smalz also said that he believed Espy came under the jurisdiction of the 1907 act which prohibits meat inspectors from taking gratuities from those they inspect. To be convicted of violating this act does not require evidence of criminal intent. Espy's lawyer has vigorously contested applying this act to the secretary of agriculture, saying that standards for meat inspectors do not apply to agriculture secretaries. Shortly after Smalz's pronouncements, Espy resigned.

In his interview with *AgriNews*,

Espy attributed the charges against him to his opposition to the meat cartel, and his introduction of legislation requiring that meat be tested for pathogens and that a minimal level of bacteria be allowed on USDA-inspected meat and poultry. Espy said, "I've been trying to change the culture of the bureaucracy, and that sometimes makes people mad. I've been a very active secretary. I've made a mark at this place and I've been marked. I am not trying to advance conspiracy theories, but I've been in this town for 10 years, and I don't believe in coincidences." One example of making his mark, he said, was the introduction of new meat inspection legislation.

His war with the meat cartel began in March 1993 after 400 people became ill during an outbreak of *E. coli* bacteria from contaminated hamburger meat. His aggressive criticism of the USDA bureaucracy brought him right up against the pro-cartel networks in the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. Individuals in the FSIS were later revealed to be those making damaging claims to the FBI and Justice Department that Espy's crackdown on beef inspection implied a favoritism toward Arkansas-based Tyson chicken interests, from whom he had accepted small gifts of sports tickets and transportation fees (subsequently repaid). At the time of the *E. coli* outbreak, Espy charged that the meat inspection services were insensitive to the loss of human life which the present lax system had caused.

The head of the Food Safety and Inspection Service, Bush appointee Russell Cross, an avowed partisan of the meat cartel, was forced out. Charges that Espy was biased toward poultry interests were subsequently made to Justice Department officials and FBI agents by deputy administrator Wilson Horne, after weeks of rumors in the press.