

National News

Mike Espy, black farmers protest USDA settlement

Former Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy joined a group of about 400 farmers and civil rights advocates on March 2, packing a Federal courtroom in Washington, D.C. to complain about the terms of the proposed settlement of the black farmers' class-action lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Their complaint is that the proposed settlement would only give \$1 billion to 12,000 farmers who have substantial claims of discrimination. At \$50,000 per farmer, it is not enough even to buy a medium-sized tractor. Espy, the country's first black Agriculture Secretary, was forced out of office by a "Get Clinton" prosecution, and later acquitted.

Speaking to the National Newspaper Publishers Association Mid-winter Workshop in February, Gary Grant, president of the National Black Farmers and Agriculturalist Association, said that many black farmers think the lawsuit should go to trial, and not be settled out of court. "How many of you walk into a [USDA] office to talk to a government agent who is wearing the Sons of the Confederacy necktie with Confederate militia marching to victory. These are the kinds of things that we are confronted with on a day-to-day basis," said Grant.

Starr vendetta: McDougal starts third trial

The trial of Whitewater defendant Susan McDougal began on March 8 in Little Rock, Arkansas, on charges of criminal contempt and obstruction of justice brought by Kenneth Starr after McDougal refused to give the false testimony to a grand jury, which Starr was demanding. Ruling on pre-trial motions on March 5, Judge George Howard, Jr. said that McDougal cannot introduce evidence of her prison conditions, or of "prosecutorial vindictiveness." However, Howard denied a prosecution motion to ban any evidence regarding "allegations of prosecutorial misconduct or outrageous government behavior based on the allegations that she was asked to lie" before the grand jury.

Her lawyer, Mark Geragos, said that the claim that McDougal was pressured to lie is "the core of our defense." "We will attempt to show a pattern by this guy . . . Starr and his office . . . to go through and wreak havoc in people's lives and just make them so miserable and threaten them so badly and scare them so much that they will say whatever it is he wants them to say," Geragos said. Prosecutor Hickman Ewing, a veteran of the Operation Fruehmenschen prosecutions against minority elected officials, said that he will fight any effort to put such evidence before the jury.

As jury selection started, McDougal, who had spent nearly two years in prison for refusing to lie for Starr, said that her new trial will expose the ugly nature of the Whitewater investigation. "I think it will be an all-out fight, and I think it has become a personal vendetta" by Starr, she said. Two jurors from her California trial, where she was acquitted on embezzlement charges, came to Little Rock to support her. They said that local officials in California were cooperating with Starr. "We feel used and we are convinced there is collusion going on," they said.

Pat Robertson: 'God and Mammon go hand in hand'

The Bank of Scotland and Lynchburg, Virginia televangelist Pat Robertson have announced that they are seeking U.S. regulators' permission to launch a banking-by-telephone scheme. The American "New Foundation Bank," would be 30% owned by Pat Robertson and 65% by Bank of Scotland; Robertson would be the chief executive of New Foundation. There would be no branches. A similar scheme is under way in Britain, in a venture between the Bank of Scotland and the Sainsbury grocery chain, in which customers carry out all transactions with the "bank" over the phone.

The *Herald* of Edinburgh commented on March 3 that the idea for the venture with Robertson originated in the Bank of Scotland's New York office, observing that "in America at least God and Mammon go happily hand in hand."

Meanwhile, Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore appointed Robertson to his Virginia Economic Development Partnership on March 3. Based in Lynchburg, Robertson was the

largest contributor to Gilmore's two campaigns for statewide office, giving some \$100,000. By March 6, an uproar had been raised by State Sen. Janet Howell (D) and the Masonic Americans for Separation of Church and State, because Robertson is still under investigation over allegations that he violated his tax-exempt status with Operation Blessing. Howell has alleged that Robertson used his Operation Blessing aircraft, supposedly taking humanitarian aid to war-torn Congo, to ferry dredging equipment to a diamond mine he owned near the Congo border with Angola.

Philadelphia mayor blasts killer welfare cutoffs

At the March 2 hearing of the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee on "Welfare Reform," Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell (D) testified that the expected cutoff from welfare of 39,000 heads of households this year in Pennsylvania (at least 25,000 in Philadelphia), beginning March 3, could be fatal to children. Rendell said that he had urged President Clinton to veto the 1996 Federal welfare bill, because it was \$12 billion short of providing adequate child care, training, or jobs. Rendell said that even if 62% of families cut from assistance find jobs (citing the "best case" state of Wisconsin), there will still be 14,000 households with no income this year, once they are cut off.

In 36 other states, when heads of households are cut for failure to work, the family still receives a portion of benefits, for the children. But, Gov. Tom Ridge's Act 35 mandates a "full family sanctions" policy. Rendell pointed out that Senate Republicans had shot down an amendment to the welfare bill to protect the children, because, they said, "The states will take care of the children." But Pennsylvania has no provision for this, throwing the cost to Philadelphia to care for at least 14,000 families—\$42 million a year, for shelters, foster care, health care, and transportation.

When a LaRouche activist later showed Rendell the interview in *EIR* with Dick Morris saying that Vice President Al Gore was the key in conning Clinton into signing the welfare bill, Rendell responded emphatically, "I know he was."