

Interior secretary to face prosecutor

By Martin McLaughlin
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Attorney General Janet Reno formally requested February 11 the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate charges of corruption and perjury against Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. The special prosecutor will be the sixth appointed during the Clinton administration and Babbitt is the fourth cabinet secretary to face such an inquiry.

Babbitt, like every other Clinton cabinet member, is a defender of big business. He has a particularly reactionary record as a union-buster. While Governor of Arizona in 1983, he mobilized 1,000 state police and national guard troops to smash a bitter strike by copper miners against Phelps Dodge. The strikers were fired, blacklisted and replaced by strikebreakers, and the company's Arizona mines and refineries remain nonunion.

This event was the turning point in Babbitt's political career, catapulting him to national prominence as a right-wing "New Democrat," like his fellow governor from Arkansas, and leading to an abortive presidential bid in 1988, followed by his selection as Secretary of the Interior by Clinton.

The case in which Babbitt is charged with influence peddling involves the kind of lobbying routinely practiced by capitalist politicians in both parties. One Wisconsin Indian tribe sought approval of a casino development and another group of tribes, already operating a rival casino, sought to block it. The Interior Department rejected the casino in 1995 and the prevailing tribes contributed \$230,000 to the Democratic National Committee the following year.

Babbitt has denied any direct involvement in the casino decision, which was made by a lower-level Interior Department official, and in sworn testimony before a Senate subcommittee last year he denied that White House pressure, based on the anticipated campaign contribution, was responsible for the outcome. These statements are the basis of the perjury

allegations.

As in most of the other independent counsel investigations of Clinton administration officials, the flimsiness of the charges suggests there are other political motives involved in the allegations and media attacks. The Interior Department independent counsel provides another weapon in the ongoing campaign, backed by an array of right-wing groups, to destabilize the Clinton administration.

The inquiry into Babbitt is the first independent counsel probe in which the financing of the 1996 election campaign will be an issue. Last fall Reno blocked Republican demands for the appointment of an independent counsel into charges that Clinton and Gore violated federal election laws by making fundraising calls from White House phones.

The three federal judges who will appoint a special prosecutor include David Sentelle, a former top aide to North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, and Lawrence Silberman, a former Reagan campaign official.

Silberman and Sentelle were responsible for the firing of Robert Fiske in 1994 as Whitewater special prosecutor and his replacement by Kenneth Starr. This was shortly after Fiske brought in a legal finding that the death of White House deputy counsel Vince Foster was a suicide, and that there were no violations of law in contacts between the White House and the Treasury Department over the investigation of an Arkansas savings and loan tied to the Whitewater deal.

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