Clinton fires Elders as surgeon general

Surgical strike in a political war

By Donald Lambro
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Clinton's firing of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders is the latest in a series of carefully calculated postelection moves toward the political center to save his embattled presidency.

With the president's public approval falling and his policies coming under fire even within his own party, yesterday's ouster of the controversial Dr. Elders underscores the turmoilastraying the administration.

Her firing for suggesting that masturbation be taught in public schools follows the departures of two Cabinet secretaries this month, Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen and Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, who is be-

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NEWS ANALYSIS

President Clinton yesterday fired Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders for recent comments suggesting that masturbation be taught to children.

"The president feels that's wrong. That's not what schools are for and it's not what the surgeon general should say," White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta told reporters. "There have been too many areas in which the president does not agree with her views. This is just one too many."

Mr. Panetta noted the White House objected to Dr. Elders' statement that drug legalization should be considered as a way to reduce crime, her support for teaching children how to use condoms and her assertion that pro-life Catholics have a "love affair with the fetus."

The White House decision to fire Dr. Elders, 61, comes as Mr. Clinton is trying to forge a more centrist political agenda after his Democratic Party lost control of Congress in last month's midterm elections.

In addition to Dr. Elders, the Clinton administration is losing Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen, who resigned this week, and Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, who leaves office at the end of this month under investigation for reportedly accepting gifts from businesses his agency regulates.

Mr. Panetta said Mr. Clinton asked for Dr. Elders' resignation in a phone call he made from Miami, where he is hosting the Summit of the Americas. "If she had not resigned, she would have been terminated," the chief of staff said.

The president issued a statement saying, in the least diplomatic language he has ever used in a personnel matter, that he forced his long-time friend out of her job.

"Dr. Elders' public statements reflecting differences with administration policy and my own convictions have made it necessary

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ELDERS' EXIT

President Clinton's statement on Joycelyn Elders:

"Dr. Joycelyn Elders is a physician of outstanding ability, energy and commitment. As a pediatrician, she dedicated her life to improving the health of children. As Surgeon General, she worked tirelessly to reduce teen pregnancy and AIDS, and to improve the health of all Americans, especially our children. Therefore, Dr. Elders' public statements reflect the administration's position, and my own convictions have made it necessary for her to tender her resignation. "Those statements in no way diminish her devotion to her work and the enormous positive impact she has had on the problems she tackled and the people she served."

Dr. Elders' note to her superior, Donna Shalala, secretary of health and human services:

"I have submitted my resignation as Surgeon General of the United States to the President and he has accepted it. I feel this halfway point is a good time for me to go. While some Administration officials and I have some honest differences over the issues, President Clinton and I maintain our strong mutual respect for one another — a respect and friendship that has endured for many years. I look forward to returning with my family to Arkansas. I will also enjoy the opportunity to continue working and speaking out as a private citizen for the public health causes that are dear to me, especially my work to prevent AIDS, promote good health, a strong education, and hope for our bright young people."

taken the proper step by canceling the Surgeon General's office hours.

Sen. Nancy Lunden Kassebaum, Kansas Republican and incoming chairman of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, called Dr. Elders' ouster "necessary and long overdue." Mrs. Kassebaum voted to confirm Dr. Elders to the post in 1987."

The surgeon general touched off a firestorm in an appearance at the National Press Club last year, when she said she believed legalizing drugs would sharply reduce crime and called for its study. In that instance, Mr. Clinton quietly distanced himself from her comments, saying he opposed drug legalization.

Months later, her 28-year-old son, Kevin, was arrested for selling cocaine to undercover agents. He was subsequently convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The Planned Parenthood Federation, which advocates birth control to limit population growth, said Dr. Elders "brought to Washington a welcome dose of real-world wisdom that raised the stature of the office."

Donald Sugars, spokesman for the New York-based Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation, called her ouster a "chilling development. . . . Elders had an obligation to be forthcoming on such issues. It's really chilling that she'd lose her job for focusing on this vital issue."

The National Association of People with AIDS said it's "disheartened" and "disillusioned by this action because it reflects a lack of commitment to aggressive public health measures in favor of political expediency." We must not and cannot give in to those who would stifle open and honest dialogue in the fight to end this epidemic."

Frank J. Murray, Paul Bedard and Major Garrett contributed to this report.
White House finally moves to put out liberal fire

Elders created constant uproar

By Michael Hedges

Dr. Joycelyn Elders arrived in Washington with a reputation as a liberal firebrand, promising to boil the blood of conservatives and warm the hearts of pro-choice, homosexual and sex-education advocates.

During her nearly 15 months as surgeon general, the former director of the Arkansas Health Department never failed to meet the expectations of either side.

By the time she was ejected from the Clinton administration yesterday, Dr. Elders had called for studies on legalizing marijuana while seeking limits on tobacco and led pro-lifers as "stunt-lovers" while advocating free birth control for prostitutes so they "could still use sex...to buy their drugs."

And she had a knack for the quip, as when she equated sex education to driver's education by saying, "You taught them what to do in the back seat, now it's time to teach them what to do in the front seat."

Those nuggets of controversy generated outrage among conservatives and cheers among some advocacy groups.

Dr. Elders' departure had been rumored for weeks, and those whispers had intensified since the anti-Elders heat began to boil the blood of conservatives and the constant uproar

Yesterday, President Clinton fires Dr. Elders.

Dr. Elders: A decade of headlines and controversy

Elders' tenure:

Sept. 7, 1993: After six months of debate over her advocacy of early sex education, condom distribution in schools and other topics, the U.S. Senate confirms Dr. Elders as President Clinton's nominee for surgeon general, the first black woman to hold the position.

Dec. 8, 1993: Dr. Elders tells reporters the nation should consider legalizing drugs as part of its crime-fighting strategy. The White House immediately denies that the president shares that view.

Dec. 15, 1993: Arkansas police issue a warrant for the arrest of Dr. Elders' son, Kevin, on charges of cocaine distribution. He is convicted seven months later and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

March 19, 1994: In an interview with a homosexsual-oriented magazine, Dr. Elders calls gay sex "normal...and a healthy part of our being," endorses homosexual adoptions, and calls on the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to admit homosexuals. Roman Catholic Cardinal James Hickey, archbishop of Washington, issues a public letter to the president asking him to disavow her comments.

June 23: Dr. Elders tells a homosexual health conference that conservative Christians are harming the nation's children by opposing comprehensive sex-education programs. The next day, 87 Republican members of Congress call for her resignation.

Nov. 17: In an appearance on ABC's "PrimeTime Live," Dr. Elders calls religious conservatives "non-Christian" in part because "they are against welfare...and against Medicaid, against women's rights."

Dec. 1: Dr. Elders tells U.N. that schools should consider teaching children about masturbation.

Yesterdays: President Clinton fires Dr. Elders.

The Quotable Joycelyn Elders

"In regard to masturbation, I think that is something that is a part of human sexuality, and it's a part of something that perhaps should be taught. But we've not even taught our children the very basics." — Dec. 1, 1994, during a question-and-answer session at a World AIDS Day forum at the United Nations.

"I don't feel that was a crime." — Aug. 31, 1994, in commenting about the conviction of her 28-year-old son, Kevin, for distributing cocaine in Arkansas.

"We have got to be strong to take on those people who are selling our children out in the name of religion." — June 22, 1994, in remarks about the "un-Christian religious right" to the Lesbian & Gay Health Conference.

"Yes, I also think girls who are lesbians should be allowed to join the Girl Scouts." — June 3-5, 1994, in an interview with USA Weekend, when asked if the Boy Scouts should be open to homosexuals.

"I do feel that we would markedly reduce our crime rate if drugs were legalized." — Dec. 8, 1993, at a National Press Club luncheon.

"I would hope that we would provide [drug-addicted prostitutes] Norplant so they could still use sex, if they must, to buy their drugs." — June 19, 1993, in an Interview on CNN's "Larry King Live."

"It's a way to keep people poor, ignorant and enslaved." — January 1993, in remarks about a proposal to deny Medicaid funding to pay for abortion, as reported in American Medical News.

"We taught them what to do in the front seat. Now it's time to teach them what to do in the back seat." — March 4, 1992, in remarks about the content of prospective school-based sex-education courses, as reported in The Washington Times.

"Look at what is fighting the pro-choice movement: a celibate, male-dominated church. . . . We would like for the right-to-life, anti-choice groups to really get over their love affair with the fetus and start supporting the children." — January 92, at a pro-choice rally in Little Rock.

"An integral part of a comprehensive school-based health clinic today is that we have sexuality education beginning in kindergarten." — July 3, 1988, as reported in The Arkansas Gazette.