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Columnist

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HITTING BACK AT HIT MAIL

GUILT BY A GROSSLY CONTORTED ASSOCIATION

June 3, 2006

Just when you think you've seen it all. A political action committee has sent out a mailer in the final days before Tuesday's primary election that smears Paul Krekorian, one of two Democrats looking to win the chance represent the party – and likely win - in November's race for the 43rd Assembly District. It easily stands as the ugliest, most appalling and hypocritical campaign piece I've seen in almost 20 years of covering the 43rd. Considering some of the effluent discharged via US mail by campaigns in the past, that's saying a lot.

Krekorian's opponent is Glendale Councilman Frank Quintero. The offending mailer did not come from Quintero, but instead from a PAC supporting him. By law, candidates and their campaigns are prohibited from coordinating with or directing the campaign activities of their supporters, also known as independent expenditures. But I suspect Quintero will be paying a price for this one for a long time to come.

That a last-minute mailer, known in campaign parlance as a "hit piece," was sent isn't the surprise. That it levels below-the-belt charges against a candidate that internal campaign polls show leading in the race isn't the surprise. That the piece was sent as an independent expenditure, an entity technically disconnected from the benefactor's campaign, isn't the surprise. Sadly, all those have become campaign standards.

The shocker this time around is that the hit piece actually links Krekorian to terrorism, bizarrely contorting some activities of the candidate (and even those of his wife) into implicit support for terrorism.

The Armenian National Committee honored Mourad Topalian with its 2000 "Freedom Award."

At the time, Topalian was already under federal indictment as a suspected terrorist.¹

Topalian pled guilty. He was sentenced to more than three years in prison.²

Now, the Armenian National Committee has a new friend: Assembly Candidate Paul Krekorian.

¹U.S. News & World Report, Feb. 5, 2001
²Federal Bureau of Investigation "Terrorism 2000/2001"

When the Armenian National Committee honored a suspected terrorist, responsible public officials steered clear.

Not Paul Krekorian.

Krekorian accepted the ANC's endorsement for the State Assembly.³

His wife serves as an ANC representative.⁴

And Krekorian helped get ANC books and literature into libraries for schoolchildren.⁵

California Latino Leadership Fund #1281849,
5490 College Avenue, Oakland, CA 94618

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U.S. POSTAGE
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Remember to vote on Tuesday, June 8

³Autobank Online, Jan. 5, 2005
⁴Burbank City Council Minutes April 19, 2005
⁵Armenian National Committee news release February 6, 2004

The "hit piece" literature delivered in voter mailboxes in recent days.

Forget accusing the opposition of failing to sufficiently support education. Contorting an ancient vote on an obscure issue into a supposed contempt for the environment is old hat. This time, charging a candidate with favoring fatcat developers just wasn't enough. And the ultimate irony is that the piece rips Krekorian for his association to an organization that Quintero himself has enjoyed support from, and courted steadily over the years.

In recent days the California Latino Leadership Fund has sent a mailer premised largely upon Krekorian having been endorsed by the Armenian National Committee. The mailer notes that, in 2000 a man named Mourad Topalian honored by the ANC with its “Freedom Award.” The award came at the same time Topalian, a former president of the ANC, was under indictment, accused of being a leader of the “Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide.”

In 1996 the rent went unpaid on a storage unit in Ohio, and in it federal officials ultimately found a 100 lb. cache of old dynamite, blasting caps and weapons. The unit was linked to Topalian, and he was subsequently indicted on charges that included conspiracy, possession of explosives and several weapons charges.

The FBI alleged the Justice Commandos intended to commit acts of terrorism to back demands for national and international attention to the Armenian Genocide attempted by Turkey’s Ottoman Empire in the early 1900’s. Largely thanks to Turkey’s influence in a variety of business pursuits, and that nation’s importance to US military in the region, Turkey has long escaped being held morally accountable for the roughly 1.5 million who were killed.

Some of the FBI’s claims, such as Topalian helping to train fighters, were tied to activities like weapons practice that allegedly took place more than 15 years before the charges were leveled.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 2000 Topalian pleaded guilty to illegally storing the explosives and owning two machine guns, and early the next year he was sentenced to 37 months in federal prison. It appears the Latino Leadership Fund’s rationale goes as follows; The ANC gave an award to one of its leaders, a man the FBI called a terrorist. Five years later, the ANC endorsed Krekorian. In addition, Krekorian’s wife serves on a volunteer ANC panel. Also, Krekorian supported ANC efforts to see school textbooks in the state include information on the Armenian culture and the genocide. Therefore, Paul Krekorian supports terrorists.



Candidate Paul Krekorian - target of hit mail piece.

All this is offered in a stark, ominous half-page mailer that even offers a damning mug shot of Topalian. One wonders why the people who design and create literature like this are permitted to raise and influence children.

It appears unimportant to the PAC that Quintero himself has been endorsed in the past by the ANC, winning the group's support for his first election to the Glendale city council in 2001. Indeed, that was the very same year Topalian was sentenced, and so the supposed terrorism connection is even more

direct. To continue the obscene game one more step, the Ca. Latino Leadership Fund would presumably have no problem if local newspapers charge the PAC with endorsing terrorism by virtue of its support for Quintero, once a candidate supported by the ANC.

Not surprisingly, Quintero couldn't be reached for comment this weekend. His campaign manager, Phil Giarrizzo offered a statement spelling out the technicalities of independent expenditures and prohibitions on candidates playing any direct or indirect role in the efforts of such organizations. Of course, if Krekorian and his team want to scoff at that technicality, doing so would imply THEY do or know how to coordinate with or help plan the campaign activities of independent expenditures made on Krekorian's behalf. It's a can of worms they're unlikely to open too publicly.



Candidate Frank Quintero - Nothing to say... for now.

In a statement published today on the political blog "Around the Capitol," Giarrizzo did make the improbable claim that he hasn't yet seen the piece put out to rip his client's opponent.

I've been hearing about the piece for days. Even while I traveled out-of-state for a week, I fielded multiple offers of copies received by readers. Giarrizzo's claim is tantamount to admitting either that he's alarmingly out of touch with the goings on of his firm's most prominent client in the final critical days of campaigning, or that he's comfortable making a claim virtually certain to be regarded by insiders and outsiders alike as a bald-faced lie.

Further complicating the episode is the reality that Quintero and Giarrizzo have, since the start of the campaign, maintained that the Armenian bloc of votes – vital to Quintero's previous races for City Council - isn't as significant district-wide as the Latino vote.

Remaining silent on the piece today seems to imply the Quintero team has weighed the risks and decided they're better off offending the Armenian group and its supporters today, and avoiding any insult to the Latino PAC which has already spent \$50,000 in the race to support Quintero or oppose Krekorian.

Like other PACs, the ANC has historically been quick to embrace and claim as "dear friends" pols it bitterly criticized previously if the candidate was rude enough to win without the ANC's support. But win or lose, given the depths to which this piece has sunk, I suspect even the most craven and cynical leaders of the ANC will be holding Quintero's silence on this one against him for a long time to come.

The California Latino Leadership Fund has existed at least since 1998, the limit to state records available this weekend. The PAC's goal is to promote the election of Latinos in state contests. Thus far in 2006, the PAC has reported spending more than \$420,000, with \$50,000 of that spent for literature supporting Quintero or opposing Krekorian.

The Leadership Fund receives its money from a small but eclectic variety of donors. They include PAC's for Johnson & Johnson, Pacific Gas & Electric and a carpenters union. The largest contribution received this year was \$250,000 from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians.
