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DANA PARSONS / ORANGE COUNTY

The Political Season Has Gone Sordid

Ethnic attacks are up as election day nears.

Dana Parsons

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Republican congressional candidate Tan Nguyen was expendable (meaning he had no chance of beating Loretta Sanchez), so he was expended this week by the Orange County Republican leadership. A heroic decision, tempered only by the fact that as recently as 2004 Nguyen was running as a Democrat.

In other words, Nguyen wasn't exactly dyed-in-the-wool. Still, when it was learned that his office apparently sent out 14,000 copies of a letter to registered voters saying it was illegal for immigrants to vote, the party leadership quickly leaned on him to withdraw and said all the right things about veiled intimidation of Latinos who are duly registered.

It is truly a new day in Orange County, where a generation ago the previous Republican Party leadership would have tabbed Nguyen as an up-and-comer with a good head on his shoulders.

Nguyen, who clearly doesn't yet have the hang of this running-for-office thing, said he had nothing to do with the mailing and ascribed the blame to his office manager. He presumably was going to lay out his defense Friday afternoon at a news conference, but state agents put a crimp in those plans by raiding his Garden Grove office.

You can't help but appreciate (in a twisted way) how this flare-up reflects on Orange County's changing demographics. That is, no longer is the attempted thwarting of the Latino vote limited to Anglo officeholders. Nguyen, according to his website, is a Vietnamese refugee who was 8 when his family fled the Communists and came to America.

And now, just 25 years later, he's got his name in the newspapers in connection with political dirty tricks.

A cynic would say he's assimilated well.

And speaking of assimilation and participating in the democracy ...

Over in Anaheim, Bill Dalati is getting a dose of the American political system in his first run for office. The 41-year-old insurance agent has been called a potential "Manchurian candidate" by a former state Republican Party chairman who cites Dalati's political support of a controversial

congresswoman from Georgia and his advocacy of the local Council on American-

Islamic Relations, considered an extremist group by some but which somehow manages to operate quite comfortably and openly under the noses of the entire local and federal law enforcement structure. I was once at a CAIR meeting where local public officials and law enforcement representatives praised it.

For you youngsters, a "Manchurian candidate" is taken from a 1962 movie and refers to someone who pretends to be one of us but is really an agent of the enemy. Dalati's birth name is Belal, and he was born in Syria, so you know who the critics think he's a secret agent of.

Call me irreverent, but I'd like to see what a Manchurian candidate from Syria could do to Anaheim. Sure, he says he's interested in housing and traffic, but the mind boggles at what someone with a secret agenda could do.

Hey, wait a second! Isn't Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle a more likely Manchurian candidate? Nobody looks more benign than he does. And how do we know for sure his family drapery business wasn't fronting for something else?

Sorry, mayor. It's all in the spirit of a long political season.

I got hold of a subdued Dalati late Friday and asked him how he was enjoying his first run for office. He didn't sound overly amused. "I was trying to run a straightforward campaign," he said. "Unfortunately, they brought race and religion into it. Because of the Islamophobia out there, I think it's hurt me."

He said he was getting calls of support from "true Americans" but that other e-mails included threats. He's one of seven candidates for two council seats, and I asked if he regretted running. No, he said. "I know what I ran for. I wanted to serve ... and give back to a community and country that has given so much to me."

In the present climate, you say something like that and your critics only chalk it up to more cunning.

There you have it. That's my report from today's Politics & Ethnicity front.

Kind of gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling about things, doesn't it?

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