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## Faced with an ordeal, he flourished

By Kevin J. Sweeney

Earlier this month, the special prosecutor investigating alleged wrongdoing by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said she would issue no indictment in the case. In the bland phrasing unique to prosecutors, she “concluded that the evidence was insufficient.” While most media (and Babbitt himself) have already moved on, we shouldn’t drop the subject so quickly.

Babbitt had refused to transfer federally owned lands to a Minnesota Indian tribe hoping to build an urban gaming casino. In rejecting the tribe’s application, Babbitt did what every interior secretary facing similar requests had done. He did what the entire Minnesota congressional delegation – Democrats and Republicans – asked him to do. And he followed the will of the state’s voters, who in a referendum had overwhelmingly rejected increased Indian gaming.

Though the decision was obvious, when representatives of the rejected tribe cried foul and suggested the decision was based on something other than the merits, congressional Republicans staged hearings designed to embarrass Babbitt and question his integrity. The hearings started nearly two years of investigations

With Babbitt’s exoneration, we ought to reflect on a law that allows investigators to focus on a person rather than a specific allegation of wrongdoing. We should question the expense of these witch hunts; all told, the investigations of Babbitt by House and Senate committees, the Justice Department and the special counsel cost taxpayers \$10 million. We should reject the “gotcha” mentality that defines much of politics these days.

But I’ll leave all that to others. I know Bruce Babbitt well – he is a friend and was once my boss. For me, his exoneration does not inspire political discussion. Nor do I feel mere relief for a friend whose turmoil has ended. As a citizen, I feel exuberant. I’ve experienced a profound affirmation.

I’ve long held, almost as deeply as a religious conviction, that a good man or woman can win out in politics – that decent people can shine, not despite their decency but because of it. It’s why I linger now not on the negatives of the past two years but on the fact of decency in public life.

Babbitt surely has suffered through this ordeal. There were times, early in the investigation, when I saw him feeling weak, even depressed. But he somehow rose above it. He held onto his graciousness. He regained his good humor. We’ll not see Babbitt uttering the usual question – “Where do I go to get my reputation back?” –

largely because he came to realize that his reputation wasn't so important to him. What mattered, to him at least, was what he accomplished.

He hasn't merely survived. He has flourished.

He has crisscrossed the country, sledgehammer in tow, leading the removal of nearly three dozen dams. In the process, he is shifting the focus of environmentalism away from mere conservation to the more powerful notion of restoration. He ushered in the creation of the \$1.9 million-acre Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, breathing new life into the wilderness movement. He has challenged orthodoxy on the Endangered Species Act, helping save a law once destined to be gutted. He has built bridges between religious communities and environmentalists, making the rather obvious connection (obvious in hindsight) between the natural and the divine. He hand-carried the first Mexican gray wolf back into the Southwest – again, the notion of restoration.

In New Jersey, his late-summer directive to the Pinelands Commission highlighted the need to preserve the long-term integrity of the commission's comprehensive management plan. That effort showed an interior secretary active and effective not just in the remote expanses of the West but in a densely populated region where access to open space can have a daily impact on people's lives.

Amid the insecurity that fosters divisive partisanship, Babbitt focused on his opportunities and responsibilities – on his job. In the process, he has emerged as one of the great interior secretaries in history.

It is not a frivolous or sycophantic exercise to make such assertions. For two years, media accounts raised the specter of impropriety and questioned his ethics. It is important to focus again on Babbitt's character, on the fact that he is an utterly decent man whose great successes are linked to his decency.

Important though it may be, Babbitt won't like this personal attention, even positive attention. He'll be uncomfortable with it. And so I'll be reduced to a more traditional and indirect form of congratulations. With National Secretary's Week coming up, I purchased a coffee mug to send along. It says "Happy Secretary's Week." He deserves a good one. He sure made mine.