

The Way I See It

Where's the fire

A public ultimatum from a white mayor to a black fire chief must be analyzed in its proper historical perspective. So must the behavior of two other white men, Local 73 President Chris Molitor and Public Safety Director Samuel Simon, who make up the treacherous trio undermining the leadership of Fire Chief Sherman George.

Mayor Slay called out the city's first African-American fire chief with an-answer-me-by-sundown or meet-me-at-the-Slay-Corral kind of memo. Because the mayor chose to make it a public duel, spectators and agitators began to gather in the literal sense choosing sides and making wagers on the victor.

The St. Louis American has carried many stories about this sad saga to maintain white supremacy in the fire department. (Last week's edition could have easily been labeled "The Chief George Issue.") It is a long and sometimes complicated tale. Since a court-mandated 50/50 settlement calling for equal numbers of black and white recruits ended in 2002, the fire department has been on a slippery slope to return to the good ole days of full employment for whites only.

With his comment "for the good of the Department and to avoid a confrontation that will hurt everyone—including you," the mayor revealed that his attempts to run the fire department from Room 200 have become more heavy-handed. At the center of the latest firestorm is a hotly contested promotions list.



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The facts are
this:

City departments such as the fire and police were job security for white families until affirmative action came along. Ask the Pollihans; they've have families members in and out of the departments for years. The nephew of current Assistant Police Chief Stephen Pollihan is firefighter Bill Pollihan who happens to be married to the niece of Sam Simon. Bill just happens to be on the disputed list for promotions. Michael Pollihan, the retired battalion chief who was implicated in the 2004 cheating allegations, is the uncle of Bill Pollihan. Did I lose you yet?

Under the city charter, the fire chief is the ONLY person with the authority to advance rank in the department. So it was with Fire Chief Neil Svantics and so it must be with Chief George. Rules cannot be changed when the race, ethnicity or gender changes.

With the pressure on to compete with their black counThe final fact is that Sherman George is a highly competent, decent, fair-minded, serious, conscientious man of character, eminently qualified to serve in his present capacity as fire chief. Attempts by Mayor Slay to portray him being incompetent, insubordinate and insensitive as a precursor to termination only exposes the true character of the mayor.