Napolitano's years at Homeland Security pay dividends for 'Arizona Mafia'

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Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told Senate committee that more than half of the undocumented immigrants who were deported in fiscal 2011 were convicted criminals, many of them convicted of drunken driving offenses. (Cronkite News Service Photo by Uriel J. Garcia)

Being part of the massive entourage that Janet Napolitano brought with her from Arizona to the Beltway has been a great career move for some of her loyalists.

At least 25 Arizonans, mostly from within her gubernatorial administration, followed Napolitano to Washington D.C., and served within the massive U.S. Department of Homeland Security that she has overseen for the past four-and-a-half years. Many have moved on to bigger and better things.

Noah Kroloff, a top staffer for Napolitano at the Arizona Governor's Office who served as her chief of staff at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, recently formed a new security consulting firm, Global Security and Intelligence Strategies, with former Ninth Floor colleague Dennis Burke, who also served briefly at Homeland Security before becoming U.S. attorney for Arizona. Former U.S. Secret Service Director Mark Sullivan, former U.S. Customs and Border Protection Deputy Director David Aguilar, lobbyist John Kaites and Chicago sports magnate Jerry Reinsdorf are part of the new firm as well.

Dora Schriro, Napolitano's Arizona Department of Corrections director, has spent nearly four years heading the New York City Department of Corrections, a job she got after a brief stint at Homeland Security.

Marco Lopez, who served as Customs and Border Protection chief of staff, now works as a consultant for Mexican business mogul Carlos Slim, who is ranked by Forbes magazine as the world's richest person.

And Tracy Wareing, who headed the Arizona Department of Economic Security under Napolitano before becoming an adviser to her at Homeland Security, now runs the American Public Human Services Association, a large Washington-based nonprofit.

In a town where it's standard practice for Cabinet secretaries to bring a few loyalists with them, the massive number of Arizonans who followed Napolitano raised a lot of eyebrows during her tenure at the sprawling agency.

David Olive, a principal at the Washington consulting firm Catalyst Partners, which specializes in homeland security, transportation and other areas that Napolitano's agency oversees, often refers to the group of Napolitano loyalists as the "Arizona Mafia."

"There was a perception that she seemed to bring a larger number of people than comparable Cabinet-level agencies," Olive said. "They were extremely loyal to the secretary and the agenda she wanted to pursue. There did not seem to be quite as many in number when (Tom) Ridge took over the department or when (Michael) Chertoff took over."

As Arizona governor, Napolitano put a high premium on loyalty among her staff, said lobbyist Mario Diaz, who worked on her 2002 campaign and served in her administration during its first year. Considering that Homeland is such a massive, sprawling agency - which incorporated 22 federal agencies and has more than 200,000 employees - it behooved her to hire people she had been close to in Arizona, Diaz said.

"Given that Janet was entering a new environment, which is the federal government in Washington, D.C., I think she calculated that it was good to have her people that would have their eyes and ears open for her across this vast agency," Diaz said. "It's difficult to create loyalty with people that you don't know."

Olive said the next Homeland Security secretary may opt to keep some of Napolitano's people. The fact that the new secretary will be from the same party as Napolitano and will be serving the same presidential administration may minimize turnover, he said.

He compared it to the transition between Tom Ridge, Homeland Security's first secretary, and Michael Chertoff in 2005. Some of the people that Ridge, the former governor of Pennsylvania, brought along to the agency stayed on with Chertoff, at least for a little while, Olive said.

"It depends on what job they're in and what the personal preference of the new secretary would be," Olive said. "It is not uncommon at all for a new person to come in and want to surround themselves with the teams that they've worked with and are comfortable with. The extent to which some of those people stay may be a testament to whoever the new person is wanting to have continuity, to not get rid of the institutional memory on how things are done."

Most of the Arizonans who followed Napolitano to Homeland Security have moved on, but more than a half dozen are still there as she prepares to depart for her new job as president of the University of California system. Some, such as Chris Cummiskey, the agency's deputy undersecretary for management, and Diane Saunders, a director at the agency's science and technology directorate, say they hope to remain.

"I do intend to continue serving in DHS's leadership," Cummiskey said in an email to the Arizona Capitol Times.

Grady Harn, a senior adviser to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection commissioner, said he has no plans to leave. But he said he thinks every day about how much he misses the Southwest.

"I thank Janet Napolitano for the opportunities to serve with her and I hope to work with her again in the future," Harn said.

Some members of Napolitano's entourage distinguished themselves in Washington. Diaz said Kroloff and Amy Shlossman, who took Kroloff's place at Homeland Security as Napolitano's chief of staff, have had great experiences at the agency.

But no one has made a better name for himself more than Cummiskey, Diaz said. The former state senator and former director of Arizona's Government Information Technology Agency has served on several White House commissions, Diaz said, and the Obama administration "values his judgment."

Diaz said he expects Cummiskey to rise within the agency. And he has his eye on Cummiskey to make a return to Arizona politics at some point as well.

"Chris Cummiskey is a person who has stood out and taken advantage of what D.C. has to offer, and what he has to offer to D.C. and to the nation. There is no doubt about it. Chris Cummiskey is by far the person who has made the most impact out of that group," Diaz said.

Some have made names for themselves, but for the wrong reasons. Suzanne Barr, who served as chief of staff to the director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, was accused of lewd and sexually offensive behavior in a lawsuit filed by a federal immigration official. Barr denied the allegations, but resigned after they came to light. And Burke, viewed as a rising star when he left Homeland Security to become U.S. attorney, was forced out of his job over the cross-border gunrunning scandal known as Fast and Furious.

Key Aides

Arizonans who joined Janet Napolitano at DHS or its subagencies

Roxana Bacon

Suzanne Barr

Paul Berumen

Dennis Burke

January Contreras

Chris Cummiskey

Brian de Vallance

Michael Frias

Andrew Gordon

Tracy Hannah

Grady Harn

DJ Harper

Lauren Kielsmeier

Leezie Kim

Noah Kroloff

Jan Lesher

Marco Lopez

Art Macias

Kimberly O'Connor

Diane Saunders

Dora Schriro

Jannah Scott

Amy Shlossman

Tracy Wareing

Jackie Wright