

A governor under cover

■ Garrison Keillor

ST. PAUL — Here in Minnesota, our governor has gone under cover, so far as we can figure out. The governor — who I will refer to as Larry so as to throw terrorists off the trail — had a fit in New York recently when he flew there for a photo op at Ground Zero, a trip paid for by ABC-TV, which then got exclusive rights to film the governor's grief and concern.

When a few Minnesota reporters questioned him on these arrangements, Larry said he would never speak to any of them ever again. Later, he amended this to say that he would speak to some of them but never with tape recorders present.

Then Larry announced that his schedule of public appearances would be kept secret because he — along with the Mall of America and the Humphrey Metrodome and perhaps the statue of Paul Bunyan in Bemidji and the famous Lift Bridge in Duluth — might be high on the terrorists' list of targets.

Now he has amended that to say that his press secretary will inform some of the press of what the governor is doing, but this information cannot be disseminated to the general public. The governor thus achieves four public announcements in less than a week without ever having actually done something.

The stealth governor is an innovation in politics, and Larry is the one who can make it work. He was elected to the post, after a career as a pro rassler, because he spoke plainly and plenty of people are tired of the political boilerplate.

His slogan was "Retaliate in '98," which seemed to promise something new. Since his election, however, he has taken a sharp right turn away from all that and become a pretty good, quiet caretaker governor. At hands-off governance, Larry is as capable as you or I.

The problem with being a caretaker is that you have very little to show for it, no large ideas to proclaim, no triumphs to celebrate, no ribbons to cut. You're just a guy sitting in a boat in calm water and not tipping it over. After a while, people's attention wanders.

Disappearance is a great way to attract attention, to become the Garbo of governors, the Pynchon politician.

It is no great thing to stand in the governor's reception room at the state Capitol and shake hands with a delegation of 4-H'ers from Kandiyohi County. It raises the occasion to a heroic level to welcome them secretly, with the governor surrounded by highway patrolmen ready to search the 4-H'ers for pitchforks. Thus does a Midwestern governor of modest talent become part of America's war against terrorism.

Before Larry, governors of Minnesota didn't bother with security. They traveled around in a midsize car, accompanied by some young staff person to spare the Honorable the embarrassment of having to drive around and around looking for a parking space. A governor used to be a guy you'd see at University of Minnesota basketball games and walk up and say "hi" to at halftime.

When Larry ascended into office, he demanded a security detail, with round-the-clock service. And now he has introduced the idea of semisecret public appearances. Occasionally he may show up somewhere, but suddenly, like the Masked Man of the Plains.

The logical next step for him is to leave town for the duration of the war and not tell anybody. Perhaps he already has. Perhaps Larry even now is hunkered deep in a Minuteman silo in North Dakota, sitting at a control console in front of an electronic map of all 87 counties of Minnesota, running state government via a secure telephone, secret couriers disguised as seed salesmen bringing him state papers concealed in burlap bags. We do not know.

While he's there, he could let his hair grow back and lose a few pounds so as to lessen his visibility and be able to return home for the holidays. I wish I knew where he is so I could tell him.

■ Garrison Keillor is host of A Prairie Home Companion on Public Radio and author, most recently, of *Lake Wobegon* Summer 1956. ■

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