

## Astorino's 'In Reply' isn't last word on Westchester raises

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A couple of days ago, Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino wrote an "In Reply" column that basically said that a front-page Journal News story, "Political ties pay off," was full of baloney.

Gosh, there was a lot he didn't like — including the "unflattering photographs" of various appointed officials whose jobs and salaries were detailed in the May 22 article.

I will grant him that. Except for the picture of Doug Colety, which I truly feel is a fair and accurate representation of your garden variety election commissioner bagging a cool 155 grand a year, the photos look like the subjects were caught on a surveillance camera, stealing Slim Jims from a 7-Eleven.

On the other hand, it's doubtful any of them would have willingly posed for the piece, considering it was about their political connections and how much they're paid.

But hey, I hate my ugly photo too. What can I do? That's the way I look.

Professor Astorino gives a semantical lecture on the different meanings of raises, promotions and patronage, alleging, of course, that the newspaper got them all wrong.

His definition of patronage was most interesting.

"Patronage is creating a job for someone who may not be qualified, simply to get them on the public payroll," Astorino wrote. He added, "I have not and will not do that."

Hold on there, you sidewinder. You haven't?

The fact is you did! Step up to the microphone, Hugh Fox Jr.

Fox is the chairman of the Westchester County Conservative Party, whom Astorino hired as a labor relations specialist at an annual salary of \$92,470 a year. Nobody knows what Fox really does all day. (Hint: The job requires good aim, well-sharpened pencils and a soft, cork ceiling.)

But anybody who knows anything about local politics knows that getting the Conservative Party endorsement at election time is critical for outnumbered county Republicans like Astorino. So put one and one together. Duh. ... It adds up to pure, unadulterated patronage.

Astorino also takes issue with The Journal News article because it referred to a certain employee of the Board of Elections whose rise to the post of deputy commissioner resulted in a \$51,230 pay increase to \$118,965. He pointed out that the Board of Elections is separate from his "administrative appointments," implying he had nothing to do with the promotion.

He is correct that the Board of Elections is a fiefdom distinct from the executive functions of the ninth floor. Astorino, however, neglected to mention that the employee in question was Nancy Meehan, who happens to be the wife of County Attorney Robert Meehan and Republican chairwoman of Mount Pleasant, which happens to be Astorino's hometown. The newspaper story pointed all this out.

Now, Ms. Meehan is known to be a smart cookie. But the truth is that, generally speaking, the Board of Elections is a patronage trough, a place to park a niece or a brother-in-law who can't do heavy lifting.

That the aforementioned Commissioner Colety of the GOP and Democratic Commissioner Reginald Lafayette also serve as the chiefs of their respective parties automatically makes the Board of Elections an active arm of the political spoils system.

In any case, to accept the notion that there are no dots to connect here is to buy a mother lode of pyrite at \$1,500 an ounce. As the great philosopher Mr. T would say, "I pity the fool."

Astorino boasts of the streamlining he's done to county government and how he's tangled with union employees.

Again, he's correct that his predecessor never had the taxpayers' back.

But I don't fully buy into the notion that his inner circle sacrificed a lot to give up their private-sector jobs. They got a regular paycheck out of the deal and guaranteed job security for at least four years.

Nobody outside of government has that in this economy.

Besides, don't kid a kidder. Working in the seat of power is fun, a lot more fun than toiling in a bank or in one of Westchester's many anonymous law firms.

Another thing about Astorino's "In Reply": Toward the end, he taunts the newspaper by paraphrasing Capt. Renault played by Claude Rains in "Casablanca." The Journal News, Astorino writes, "appears to be shocked to find out that political people are in government."

On the contrary. We are all too familiar with the permanent condition.

By the way, it's never a good idea to defend your integrity by evoking the dialogue of a corrupt cop — even if you're just paraphrasing a movie character.

With pride, Astorino asserts that politics is an "honorable profession" and that despite our cynicism, every parent still wants their kid to grow up to be president. "Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Kennedy and Reagan were all politicians," he writes.

He left out Anthony Weiner. (Sorry, I had to squeeze that knucklehead in someplace.)