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## Killing columns

Last Monday's "No Common Sense" brought demands from commissioners president Ron Sundergill that the *Post* column be deleted (killed) from the afternoon *News*.

As sorted out by this newspaper's general manager, Mr. Sundergill's only valid complaint was that I had reported money from the county's contingency fund was paying the expenses for a single secretary to attend an Ocean City conference later this month. My chief source was a budget request transfer form received in the mail, signed by Mr. Sundergill, who insisted the correct number was two secretaries.

With the afternoon paper's deadline bearing down, the general manager and I agreed that I should rewrite immediately, to correct my "mistake." I'll explain the quotation marks later.

But first let me explain how this column works, principally for the benefit of the new crop of politicians who have come along since 1984, when I started writing for this paper.

Putting words together amounts to a lesser part of this job. Most of my time goes to collecting information. Reporters gather facts. Writing a column demands going beyond facts into opinion, other peoples' as well as my own. It is a tricky business at best.

On my initiative, everything I write is submitted well before deadline to the editorial board, the three gentlemen whose names appear at the top of this page. Sometimes they ask for changes, generally for the sake of clarification.

No one should infer that thoughts expressed here belong to the management. The editorial printed above this space exists to express the "authorized" point of view. When fellow columnist Bob Reid's observations are added to the mix, it should be obvious, conformity is not a requirement. On some subjects, readers are exposed to three quite different opinions.

On rare occasions, my column has been killed. In nearly seven years, while no one has kept exact track, the

number of those occasions could probably be counted on one hand. Each time they have been instances where my usual "high horse" leaped beyond reality, or so it seemed to those responsible for this newspaper. None has been killed because of outside influence.

I have no complaints. None of my past employers surpassed the *News-Post* in guarding my journalist's First Amendment rights. In other places I was much more exposed to public pressures to shut me up; I was told of attempts to get me fired. Not here.

On the other hand I am held accountable for my factual errors.

They occur. Neither experience nor repeated attempts to double-check, including editors who vet my copy, guarantee perfection. Sometimes I flatly goof.

However, last Monday's *Post* column was not mistaken. *News* readers were misled because deadline did not permit me to verify Mr. Sundergill's story to our general manager.

As I said in both papers, my objection was not to the proposal that a secretary should accompany the commissioners to the annual Maryland Association of Counties affair. It was with the fact that taxpayers are being asked to fork out extra money, when the commissioners could have met the costs from their expense accounts.

Anything taken from contingency funds is "extra," because unused contingency funds roll over into next year's budget. Money spent must be replaced from taxes.

In the conversation, Mr. Sundergill said the transfer of contingency funds into the commissioners account had come at the insistence of Gail Bowerman in a meeting between the two in her office.

Sue Ann Yingling and Bruce Reeder had no memory of any official discussion on the source of money to send a second secretary to

Ocean City later this month. They had agreed much earlier to pay registration fees for their secretary from out their personal expense accounts. The secretary will share, at no expense to taxpayers, Mrs. Yingling's room.

Because the discussion on how to pay for another secretary's trip was held behind closed doors, Mr. Reeder and Mrs. Yingling confessed they were caught off guard when the transfer request came up for "routine" approval by the board. They vowed to maintain closer attention in the future.

At any rate, according to Mr. Sundergill, taking money from the contingency fund was the specific request of Mrs. Bowerman. She wanted her secretary counted in, three other commissioners said. They all insisted the \$450 was intended for more than Ocean City, despite the transfer form's sole reference to MACO.

Mr. Sundergill's particular complaint with the column derived from his feeling it gave the impression his personal secretary was making the trip. She is not. However, he admitted she was originally supposed to go, paying her own way.

At any rate, that's the story of one column that was not killed. It never came close, for reasons readers now obviously understand. About politicians, we can never be sure what sinks through.