

**THE BLOG**

How Do You Solve A Problem Like Urea?

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Do you remember Rolf Gruber, the nice blonde kid in “The Sound of Music” whom eldest Trapp daughter Liesl has a crush on? The one she sings “I Am Sixteen, Going On Seventeen” with? The one who becomes a Nazi and blows a whistle on her and her escaping family?

Reading about George Deutsch, the 24-year-old Republican operative who got a job in NASA’s press office and used it to muzzle, hector and put false words in the mouths of scientists at the agency, I couldn’t help thinking about Rolf.

No, I’m not saying George has an armband in his closet. But I do think that Josef Goebbels earlier saw the value of censoring scientists and other truth-tellers, and he would have appreciated George’s insistence that the Big Bang be banished from cosmology because it might offend creationists, or that global warming be demoted because the idea of it pisses off oil companies.

More than that, I think of Rolf because not so long ago, George was a college kid at Texas A&M, a nice all-American guy writing inoffensive, mainstream articles in the college paper (via Atrios)saying things like, oh, that “the ties between al-Qaida and Iraq are clear,” and that “claims that Rumsfeld orchestrated an elaborate plan to interrogate prisoners through torture and humiliation [are] laughable.” You know, fact-based, mainstream stuff like that.

Yes, it’s really puzzling, how such a grounded, sensible lad like that could go from college, to the Bush campaign, to become the scourge of the NASA scientific community.

In this story, of course, unlike the scene in the Salzburg abbey cemetery, it’s not Rolf who blows the whistle; the whistle-blowers are actually the government scientists, who risk their careers to tell the press what’s really going on, proving once again that a leak can sometimes be a force for good, and sometimes — in the hands of a compliant press — a force for evil (Libby, Rove et al).

My guess is that today there are scores, probably hundreds, of young Georges throughout the executive branch and its agencies, policing the right-wing version of America with the zeal of a commissar and the wisdom of a newt. The next time someone tells you there’s no difference between the two parties, think twice before casting a vote whose effect — rather than sending a message — would be to send the next crop of sweet young Rolfs to Washington.