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**JIM DEFEDE/COMMENTARY**

## **Elections chief needs more power**

There is no great mystery as to why David Leahy ultimately failed as Miami-Dade's supervisor of elections. He became lazy and weak and forgot he was there to champion the rights of voters. He became more interested in keeping his job than doing his job, and if that meant letting some voters fall through the cracks, then that was fine with him.

It was his complacency that led to the debacles of the 2000 presidential election and the September 2002 primary. "What happened Sept. 10 was a lack of planning," police Director Carlos Alvarez told me last year after he stepped in to clean up the mess left by Leahy. ``You needed to have someone extremely good at planning -- someone who has the guts to get things done and the respect to get the resources that were needed from other departments."

Incredibly, as we are about to hire a new supervisor, it seems county officials have forgotten those lessons.

County Manager Steve Shiver has offered the post to Candace Kaplan, the No. 2 administrator for the Chicago elections department. Kaplan wants a contract guaranteeing her the power to do her job. Shiver has so far refused, saying commissioners frown on executive contracts.

Generally, I agree department heads shouldn't have contracts. The elections supervisor is different.

There are only two essential functions of government -- providing public safety and guaranteeing fair elections. I would not be in favor of giving the police director a contract because that person has to be answerable to civilian authority. Police officers are invested with so much power that they must be held accountable.

The elections supervisor in this county, however, does not have enough power. The position needs to be strengthened.

"The voters deserve somebody who has the autonomy to bring about the necessary changes to make elections work," says Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, president of the Miami chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and a member of the supervisor selection committee.

``The supervisor of elections may sometimes be in an adversarial position with his bosses. If the institution of government isn't bringing about the changes necessary to ensure the rights of the voters, then the voters deserve an advocate in that position who will fight for their rights. That is going to require that person having the independence to tell government when it is wrong."

Let me give you an example.

Leahy knew he did not have the resources needed to run the September 2002 election, yet Shiver ignored him. But rather than go to the county commissioners and let them know a disaster was in the offing, Leahy kept quiet, gambling that everything would be OK. That is what Carlos Alvarez meant when he talked about

the elections department needing someone who had "the guts to get things done." Alvarez was saying the department needed someone willing to put his or her career on the line to get the resources necessary.

Guts would be nice. But why don't we give that person some armor, too.

I want the next supervisor to be able to stand up at a commission meeting and say: "I need X, Y and Z." I want the next supervisor to be able to make changes within the elections department, without worrying whether she's demoting someone with ties to a commissioner. And I want her to be able to do this without fear of being fired without any compensation.

Don't get me wrong, if the new supervisor is canned because of incompetence or malfeasance, that person shouldn't get a nickel. Write that into the contract, too. But no one should be afraid of the consequences of doing the job well.

On Tuesday, the County Commission passed a resolution saying the new supervisor would be in charge of the elections department. That was the commission's attempt to fix the problems created by Shiver when he devised a new position known as ``director of elections."

The new supervisor needs more protection. And so do the voters of Miami-Dade County.