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COLUMN ONE

He shows renters the door

L.A. lawyer Dennis Block boasts of having handled more evictions than anyone else. He's a hero to landlords and a pariah to tenants.

By JESSICA GARRISON
Times Staff Writer

Dennis Block seemed glued to his black leather chair, his coffee untouched, apparently impervious to physical needs such as the bathroom or food, taking one landlord's phone call after another.

Almost all the callers wanted the same thing: to evict their tenants. In a DVD he gives to landlords, Block describes himself this way: "A man who has evicted more tenants than any other human being on the planet Earth."

He has never been busier. Zooming property values have sent rents skyrocketing more than 25% in four years city-wide and even higher in rapidly gentrifying areas. But hundreds of thousands of tenants are protected by rent-stabilization laws, which limit rent increases to 4% a year. When the tenant moves, market rates can take effect — but tenants can be evicted only with good cause.

That's where Block comes in. He has dedicated his considerable creativity and intelligence to helping landlords evict tenants from rent-stabilized buildings. He boasts that his firm has filed more than 130,000 cases since 1980, a year after rent stabilization went into effect. He helps landlords identify minor violations — a pet fish in an aquarium, a brightly painted bathroom, an extra occupant — to toss out long-term tenants who are paying below market for their homes.

Tenant advocates tend to turn red with rage at the mention of Block's name. They say that in a city with a shortage of affordable housing, Block's efforts leave people with nowhere to go and in danger of becoming homeless. Worse, his example is followed by many other lawyers and landlords. "He puts people on the street totally turn communities upside down... I think it's contemptible," said Brett Terrell, the director of advocacy for the Inner City Law Center, a nonprofit that works with tenants being evicted.

Block, 55, greets such criticism with indignation. "I think my position is righteous," he said. "The average landlord is not a rich individual... Under rent control, un-

[See Evictions, Page A12]



MAKIN WILSON/STAFF PHOTO

Inquiry puts pressure on Gonzales

The White House turned over e-mails and memos about plans to fire U.S. attorneys. Atty. Gen. Alberto R. Gonzales, above, responded to allegations that the firings were based on politics not performance. In the first e-mail, Gonzales' chief of staff, D. Kyle Sampson, explains his method of determining who should be fired. In the second, White House Deputy Counsel William Kelley confirms the plan.

From: Kyle Sampson **To:** Miers, Harriet
Sent: Wednesday, March 02, 2005 5:46 PM **Subject:** U.S. Attorneys

bold - Recommend retaining; strong U.S. Attorneys who have produced, managed well, and exhibited loyalty to the President and Attorney General.

strikeout - Recommend removing; weak U.S. Attorneys who have been ineffectual managers and prosecutors, chafed against Administration initiatives, etc.

nothing - No recommendation; have not distinguished themselves either positively or negatively.

From: Kelley, William K. **To:** Sampson, Kyle **Cc:** Miers, Harriet
Sent: Monday, December 04, 2006 4:48 PM **Subject:** US Atty Plan

We're a go for the US Atty plan. WH leg, political, and communications have signed off and acknowledged that we have to be committed to following through once the pressure comes.

Lending crisis ignites broad economic fears

Stocks dive as data show more home loans in delinquency and new foreclosures at a record.

By WALTER HAMILTON, E. SCOTT RECKARD and MOLLY HENNESSY-PIRKE
Times Staff Writers

Economists have been arguing for weeks about the crisis in mortgage lending to risky borrowers and whether it could turn the entire economy sour. Wall Street said its vote Tuesday: It looks like trouble.

The Dow Jones industrial average sank almost 250 points af-

ter reports showed rising mortgage delinquencies and weak retail sales, suggesting that the woes of sub-prime lenders might be spilling into the broader economy. Sub-prime lenders make loans to people with shaky credit or erratic income and have been wracked by defaults. Although sub-prime loans make up only about 1 in 5 new mortgages nationally, the rise in defaults could damage the overall housing market as foreclosures weaken home prices and risky borrowers are unable to get new loans. That in turn could erode consumer spending, the biggest driver of the U.S. economy. "People have been using their homes as their banks," said retail

Late payments



E-mails detail goals in firing U.S. attorneys

A White House and Justice Dept. team effort led to the eight ousters.

CONGRESS INVESTIGATES

High value was placed on political allegiance.

By RICHARD A. SERRANO
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — Just weeks after President Bush was inaugurated for a second term in January 2005, his White House and the Justice Department had pretty much settled on a plan to "push out" some of the nation's 93 U.S. attorneys.

But which ones? D. Kyle Sampson, chief of staff to Atty. Gen. Alberto R. Gonzales, came up with a checklist. He rated each of the prosecutors with criteria that appeared to value political allegiance as much as job performance.

He recommended retaining "strong U.S. attorneys who have... exhibited loyalty to the president and attorney general." He suggested "removing weak U.S. attorneys who have... chafed against administration initiatives."

Those words are enshrined in some 150 pages of e-mails and other documents the White House turned over Tuesday to the Senate and House Judiciary committees. The panels are looking into allegations that the firings were motivated by political reasons rather than the prosecutors' performance, as the Justice Department has said.

The documents offer an extraordinary look at political tactics within the Bush administration, and show the White House working closely with the Justice Department to justify the firings. The administration even adopted contingency plans for how to "quiet" anyone who complained. And it was the administration that gave the final go-ahead to fire eight prosecutors, all of them Bush appointees.

The documents show that in one case, officials were eager to fire the prosecutor's slot in

RELATED STORY
Gonzales admits mistakes were made
But the attorney general rejects calls for his resignation. NATION, A16

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Little Rock, Ark., so it could be filled by Timothy Griffin, a GOP operative close to White House political advisor Karl Rove, at all costs.

"We should gum this to death," Sampson e-mailed Monica Goodling, the Justice Department's liaison to the White House. He said officials should talk up Griffin's appointment and try to "forestall" any criticism from Capitol Hill. Just "run out the clock" on any objections, he said.

Elsewhere, the documents describe the office of Sen. Pete V. Domenici (R-N.M.), who was pushing for the removal of the prosecutor in Albuquerque, as "happy as a clam" that David C.

[See E-mails, Page A16]

VIACOM FILES \$1-BILLION SUIT OVER YOUTUBE

By DAWN C. CHMIELEWSKI, MEG JAMES and THOMAS S. MULLIGAN
Times Staff Writers

With a \$1-billion lawsuit, Viacom Inc. is aiming to upend Google Inc.'s plan to change the way people watch TV and movies.

Viacom, which owns MTV Networks and Paramount Pictures, sued Google in federal court Tuesday, accusing the Internet company of "brazenly exploiting" the power of the Web to make easy money off Hollywood's hard work.

Google's YouTube video-sharing service has "deliberately chosen not to take reasonable precautions" to stop users from posting unauthorized clips of shows including "SpongeBob SquarePants" and "South Park" and movies such as "An Inconvenient Truth," the suit says. "YouTube profits handsomely from the presence of the infringing works on its site."

Viacom isn't the only media company with that opinion. Several book publishers and news agencies have sued Google for alleged copyright infringement, though none has Viacom's deep pockets or fighting instincts.

[See Viacom, Page A16]

Employers game for March Madness

More companies are allowing time for sports and personal tasks to help boost morale.

By MOLLY SELVIN
Times Staff Writer

Brooke Plautz knows that sales at his mortgage banking firm will probably plunge during the NCAA basketball tournament that begins Thursday.

But for the second year in a row, he plans to show the March Madness games on the office big-screen TVs and give a prize to the employee who picks the winning team.

"I want to have a good, fun, upbeat atmosphere," he said from his office in Hunt Valley, Md. "You spend more of your waking hours at work, so you might as well enjoy it."

His attitude is catching on. Recognizing that workers are toiling longer hours and seeking to accommodate the most tal-

ented producers, many employers are becoming more tolerant of employees who use work time for playtime or personal tasks.

Some employers are using the three-week NCAA tournament — one of the year's biggest workplace diversions — as an opportunity to boost morale. Others have launched office pools around major sports events such as March Madness and the Super Bowl instead of leaving that task to their employees.

Increasingly, bosses say they look the other way as employees peruse Nordstrom.com or book concert tickets so long as their work gets done and the company's computer system is not threatened.

Some companies make office equipment, including computers, available for workers to use for personal tasks during their breaks. One public relations company allows workers to write their personal blogs during the day, convinced that the online journals will generate new clients.

These and other employers

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Inside The Times

Shift of allegiance in Iraqi region

U.S. general visits a former hotbed of the insurgency to show how locals' attitudes have changed. A9

Thieves take a shine to copper wire
Police blame meth addicts for thefts plaguing the Inland Empire. B1

Talk doesn't move the president
Democrats know Bush responds best to force, Brownstein writes. A23

Weather: Sunny and cooler. Valley: 81/55. Desert: 81/45. Page B10

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A drug's worrisome detour

Much of Europe's cocaine now arrives via West Africa, where the law means little.

By SEBASTIAN ROTELLA and CHRIS KEAL
Times Staff Writers

MADRID — A landmark shift in trafficking routes has transformed West Africa into a hub for cocaine smuggled from South America to a booming European market, anti-drug officials on three continents say.

Traffickers have established a haven and transit area along the Gulf of Guinea to evade aggressive efforts to seize cocaine headed to Europe. Anti-drug officials fear the new route will worsen lawlessness in African countries already overwhelmed by crime, poverty and instability.

Colombian gangsters have brought their swagger to the tiny West African country of Guinea-Bissau, setting up elaborate front companies, looting around in flashy cars and allegedly

[See Drugs, Page A5]

A new way in

West Africa has emerged in recent years as a transit hub for cocaine being smuggled from South America to Europe. Isolated spots along the Gulf of Guinea have become a staging zone for traffickers.



Lawyer gives renters the boot

[Exilees, from Page A1]
like any other business on planet Earth, a landlord is being ordered to support other individuals totally at his own cost. This is not fair.

Evicting rent-stabilized tenants, he says, is his "petriotic duty."

Even his critics agree that no one does it better than Block. A legal aid lawyer once joked that if a building had rats, Block could find a way to evict the tenants on the grounds that the vermin were pests.

"Like," he yelled one recent morning in his office, a sign to his staff that he was ready to take a call.

This is ... "he paused for effect, making his listener wait. "Dennis Block."

Sometimes, the landlords don't believe they are actually talking to Dennis Block, and Block has to convince them. Sometimes, they aren't sure he exists, such as his On-the-spot status as Los Angeles' wizard of evictions.

But this caller, the irate owner of a five-unit building in West Los Angeles, launched right into his troubles. One of his tenants was in a rent-controlled unit, and he wanted to "serve her with a 60-day notice to get the [expletive] out."

Block nodded, as if he understood the impulse. But, unfortunately, he told the landlord, "that is not a proper notice" under the city's rent control laws.

The landlord paused, then offered up a litany of complaints about the tenant in hopes Block could find grounds for eviction. She'd refused to sign a new rental agreement, Block shrugged. "She doesn't have to," he said.

How about the fact that she had asked for interest on her security deposit? Block made a sardonic face. "She got a good point there."

The landlord tried again. She'd scraped off the textured paint on her ceiling. Could she be evicted for that?

Block, whose bright blue eyes animate his thin face, leaned forward, interested. But when he learned it had happened months earlier, he sighed. "Talk to me about something recent."

The landlord thought for a second, then said he had noticed the tenant had taken out her smoke alarm.

"The smoke detectors is a good one," Block said, promising to send out a notice immediately. If the tenant didn't fix the problem in three days, she could be out.

More than two-thirds of the city's 700,000 apartments are covered under rent stabilization. Most people who get evicted leave quietly — they've paid their rent late or violated their lease in some other way, so when served with a notice, they pack up. Legal aid lawyers can help only a small fraction of the more than 50,000 tenants evicted each year in Los Angeles County, and they choose their cases carefully, usually taking on only the fights they think they can win.

On this morning, over the next 90 minutes, Block took nearly two dozen calls.

In most cases, they ended with Block's computer already printing out forms to start an eviction case — but not always. To one landlord who said his tenant promised to fix up his unit in exchange for lower rent and then hadn't done any work, Block replied, "OK, you've got nothing. The next time you have a tenant proposing doing anything other than paying rent, take your head and hit it against the wall."

Other times, however, Block seemed to take pleasure in ticking it to the people who had stifled his clients.

For a landlord who complained she had not collected back rent in a vicious eviction case against a tenant, Block pledged to file a judgment even though it was unlikely the tenant would ever pay. "At least you have the satisfaction of knowing you messed her credit up," he said.

"Good," the landlord responded. "I like your thinking, Dennis. I always have."

Block argues that the city's rent-stabilization laws keep him in business by creating conditions in which some land-

lords cannot make a profit, and in some cases can't even make their mortgage payments, unless they evict their tenants and replace them with people who can pay the market rate.

One tenant advocate called him "the Henry Ford of evictions" because of the breathtaking efficiency of his office in processing cases. Another, UCLA law professor Gary Blas, said he is a "very sharp lawyer... exceptional in terms of his creativity in finding and exploiting loopholes."

Block's office computer system has turned evictions into a high-volume business. He takes such pride in the system, which he helped design, that he pauses lovingly before the server while conducting a tour of his office. Legal notices that can culminate in an eviction are generated instantly. Landlords can track their cases on his website. Block compares it to Southwest Airlines' website. Only, he says, his is better.

Most clients don't set foot in Block's office, where the reception area is decorated with community service commendations from the City Council and county Board of Supervisors for his work with the Apartment Owners Association of Greater Los Angeles. At another spot hangs a photograph of someone being evicted on New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the 20th century.

There is also a sign warning clients: "Meetings with an attorney are subject to a charge of up to \$150 per 30 minutes in addition to any charge for legal services."

A simple eviction will cost landlords about \$200 plus court costs of around \$400. If one of Block's attorneys has to go to court, that fee jumps to \$250 in attorney fees, plus court costs. If a case goes to a jury trial, fees go up by 50 percent. Most don't — in part because most tenants don't have lawyers and don't fight back.

In rare cases, Block winds up in extended legal battles.

The Inner City Law Center fought his office for weeks on behalf of Nadia Stephanian, a disabled woman who has lived in her Hollywood apartment for 28 years, now paying \$460 for a one-bedroom, which is significantly below market. The building was recently sold to a new owner, a Block client, who said Stephanian hadn't paid her rent on time and served her with eviction papers. Lawyers for Stephanian said that Block and the landlord seized the pretext that Stephanian's rent was a few days late to force her from her home so they could raise the rent. "It was unjust," said Betsy Handler, litigation director for the center. A judge ruled Feb. 28 that Stephanian could stay in her apartment.

Block knows Los Angeles well. He grew up in Hollywood and went to Fairfax High School. He met his wife, Ida, near there when he offered her a ride home. They've been married for 32 years. Their political views sometimes clash — Ida worked as a schoolteacher in poor neighborhoods before quitting to stay home with their three children.

It was Ida's father who gave Block his first eviction case. While Block was still in law school, he helped his father-in-law evict some tenants from a building he owned.

When he graduated from the law school at Whittier College in 1978, he went into business with another lawyer, Michael Katz, planning to open a general practice. But then the city of Los Angeles passed its rent-stabilization law, and Block and Katz found they had more than enough work handling evictions alone. Katz left the business in 1988.

Block rises each morning at 3:30, which he says gives him enough time to drink coffee, head to the gym and be at his desk by 7. He's there until 4 or 5 p.m. He rarely takes lunch. He rarely leaves the phones for any reason.

Michael Gilbert, a real estate agent

and friend for more than two decades, said he does not find Block's obsession with work particularly remarkable.

"He wants to make a lot of money. I think. He loves his job, and he has a passion for it, and he makes money," Gilbert said, noting that Block did not grow up rich. "It's just the ambition and the idea that you never want to go broke."

Aside from work and his family, Block has few passions.

He has a tennis court at his Calabasas home, and he sometimes plays with friends, although Gilbert joked that Block is too competitive and he won't play with him anymore.

Block has Lakers season tickets and seems to have near perfect recall of every game. Before heading to his seat he often has dinner at the Palm restaurant, eating steak and discussing O.J. Simpson and Anna Nicole Smith with two old friends.

But even these topics circled back to evictions.

On the subject of Anna Nicole Smith, his friend Zachary Lawrence quipped that Block "is to evictions what Anna Nicole is to large brasiers." As for Simpson, Block said, "if they couldn't convict, at least they could have evicted him."

Block said he is so dedicated to his work, he hates even the idea of vacation. This spring, he said, Ida is making him go to Cabo San Lucas, but he thinks he'll be able to bear it because he has figured out a way to bring his phone and hook up his computer system so he can work from his hotel room.

Despite his love for his job, there's one place Block seldom goes to court. Instead, he sends one of the nine lawyers on his staff.

On any given day, courtrooms in Los Angeles County hear dozens of eviction cases, and it's not unusual for nearly a third of those to be handled by Block's firm.

A recent Friday in Department 97 in the downtown civil courthouse was no

"I think my position is righteous. The average landlord is not a rich individual."

— DENNIS BLOCK
evictions lawyer

exception. Of 35 eviction cases on calendar 11 were Block's. The seats in the courtroom were filled with families facing eviction. One worried-looking couple took turns holding a sleeping baby.

Toward noon, a commissioner sent one case to another courtroom. John Greenwood, one of Block's attorneys, got up and headed down the corridor.

He didn't get far before he was waylaid by a lawyer who represents tenants.

"Why doesn't Dennis Block ever come here?" Daniel Brannon demanded. "I'm challenging Dennis Block to a jury trial."

Greenwood, a head taller than Brannon, stopped and snorted. "Do you see Norman Schwarzkopf in battle?" Dennis Block is the general. We are the lieutenant. We keep the system working."

That, Brannon answered. "He keeps the system working by kicking out poor Mexicans." Brannon took a step toward Greenwood. "He's scared of me."

Greenwood answered again. "No one's scared of you." He paused, then delivered his kicker: Dennis Block never comes to court because "he's too busy making money."

2006 congressional campaign that they would try to quickly remedy that if their party took control of Capitol Hill.

"Too many of our communities remain dangerously unprepared to prevent or respond to a terrorist attack," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said Tuesday in urging passage of the bill.

The Sept. 11 commission, led by former New Jersey Gov. Thomas H. Kean (R-N.J.) and former Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), did not address the collective-bargaining issue.

As it cleared the domestic security bill, the House passed a bill that would lift federal domestic security grants toward states, such as California and New York, judged to face the greatest risk of terrorist attacks. The House legislation contains similar language.

The Senate rejected a provision of the House bill that would require ship cargo containers from the largest foreign ports to be scanned and sealed within three years and from all ports within five years.

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Senate OKs bill with labor rights for screeners

With the 60-38 vote, the chamber moves closer to a showdown with Bush, who has threatened to veto it.

By JOEL HAVEMANN
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — The Senate plunged heading toward a veto threat with President Bush on Tuesday by passing a bill that would allow airport passenger and baggage screeners to bargain collectively over their working conditions.

White House officials and congressional Republicans — accusing the Democrats of bending to organized labor — contended that the collective-bargaining provision would deny the Transportation Security Administration the flexibility it needs to reassign personnel for maximum passenger safety.

Democrats backing the bill said airport security workers deserved the same negotiation

rights enjoyed by most other federal workers.

The Senate approved the legislation 60 to 38, voting for it were 48 Democrats, two independents, and 10 Republicans. All of the no votes came from Republicans.

The Senate vote fell short of the two-thirds majority that would be required to override Bush's veto.

The House this year passed a similar bill by more than two-thirds.

But Rep. John L. Mica of Florida, ranking Republican on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said he was confident a veto to overcome a veto would fall in that chamber as well. He said he had written commitments from enough Republicans — including some who supported the bill — affirming their intention to vote against overriding a veto.

"We already know that this showdown is going to end," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said. "The president threatened to veto any bill that makes airport security more like the Department of Motor Vehicles."



Chris Parnello for Los Angeles Times

SECURITY ISSUE? Critics of the collective-bargaining provision say it would deny the Transportation Security Administration the flexibility it needed.

The controversial collective-bargaining provision is part of a broader domestic security bill designed to implement the remaining recommendations of the independent commission that investigated the Sept. 11 attacks.

McConnell, predicting the bill

would become law without the negotiating measure, said the Democrats were delaying its enactment by pushing a provision "for an applause line" from union supporters.

The standoff reflects the new relationship between the administration and a Congress now in

Democratic hands.

In six years of working with a GOP-controlled Congress, Bush vetoed one bill — a measure passed last summer that would have eased limits on human embryonic stem cell research.

In two months of dealing with the Democratic Congress, he has threatened to veto several bills, most prominently any legislation that sought to set time tables for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq or to establish conditions for additional funding of the war effort.

A final version of the domestic security bill is expected to emerge relatively soon from talks between House and Senate leaders.

With both chambers having backed collective bargaining for airport screeners in their bills, that provision seemed likely to be included in the compromise legislation — setting the stage for Bush's veto.

Last year, the Sept. 11 commission gave Congress failing grades for leaving undone many of the recommendations the panel outlined in its 2004 report. Democrats pledged during the

2006 congressional campaign that they would try to quickly remedy that if their party took control of Capitol Hill.

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