

## The "Passion" Excuse

If I ever get into big trouble, I'm going to invoke the "passion" excuse. It's been gaining popularity in certain political circles.

Its first manifestation—at least the first that I heard—was last year when former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) declared himself a candidate for the Republican nomination for president of the United States. Newt, on his third marriage, was trying to explain just how it came about that he was having an affair with a staffer at the same time that he was impeaching President Bill Clinton for, uh, having an affair with a staffer. Gingrich's explanation was inventive, to say the least: "... partially driven by how passionately I felt about this country, I worked far too hard and things happened that were inappropriate."

Wow. What a concept. If you feel passionately about something, then inappropriate actions that might happen as a result of that passion are not really your fault.

I would have considered this a "one-off" kind of excuse (as the British might say) if it had not appeared at the end of the year during a House of Representatives hearing on the dysfunctional relationship among the commissioners of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

You may have heard about this dispute. It first became public in December, when the existence of an October 13 letter from four NRC commissioners (Republicans Kristine Svinicki and William Ostendorff and Democrats William Magwood and George Apostolakis) to the White House was revealed. In that letter, the four commissioners complained about NRC Chairman Gregory Jaczko, who, they said, "intimidated and bullied" senior career staff, ordered staff to withhold information, and ignored the will of the panel's majority. They continued by saying that Jaczko's actions "are causing serious damage" to the NRC and "are creating a chilled work envi-

ronment" at the agency.

When Jaczko heard about the letter, he immediately apologized to the White House for the "distraction" that this dispute might be causing, and said that the problem was that the other commissioners did not understand their statutory roles at the agency. Eventually, White House Chief of Staff William Daley was forced to mediate the issues between the chairman and the other commissioners, all the while saying that the dispute has not "impaired the Commission's ability to fulfill its mission." Daley resigned his chief of staff position soon afterward, but I'm sure the NRC dispute had nothing to do with that decision.

Anyhow, when he learned about the letter, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) called for House hearings on the issue, at which all five commissioners appeared. Issa also took it upon himself to release the text of the letter, which had been labeled "not for public disclosure."

It was at this hearing that the "passion" excuse was attempted. After the testimony of the four complaining commissioners, Jaczko spoke. At one point, Issa asked him if he felt he had done anything wrong while at the agency. Reportedly, Jaczko started to respond that he was "just so passionate about nuclear safety" when Issa cut him off.

So, being "passionate about nuclear safety" appears to be an excuse to intimidate or bully staff, to denigrate the experience and knowledge of his fellow commissioners, and to override their opinions and votes.

Now, Jaczko may actually be a pussycat and the other commissioners just whining complainers. I don't know. I'm not present at their deliberations and haven't seen any NRC staffers driven to tears. But generally, in cases when four knowledgeable and responsible political appointees throw aside party affiliations and find fault with the behavior of a fifth political appointee, maybe there's some-



*"Not for  
Public  
Disclosure"*

thing to it. However, as I said before, I don't know everything.

My real goal in this is to come up with some way that being passionate about something will help me out if I ever get into trouble. I can just see it now: "I'm sorry, officer, I know I was speeding, but I'm just so passionate about fresh strawberries that I had to get to the grocery store while they were still fresh."

Well, maybe not. If I get into trouble over this editorial, however, I will claim that my passion for putting interesting things in *Radwaste Solutions* magazine led me to work far too hard and things happened that were inappropriate.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor