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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

It's time to stop the name-calling

By Herbert G. Klein
June 13, 2007

When one goes to the ballpark and hears the crowd chant "Beat L.A." it is clear that more than a ballgame is involved. We not only want to win the game, but we want to be better than Los Angeles.

San Diegans take great pride in their region. We do not want to be like any other region, particularly Los Angeles. We admire the greatness of Los Angeles, but we take pride in our unique attributes.

In the era of the 1950s, we took personally the Time magazine description of our community as a "bust city." We were losing the aircraft industry, and the future appeared bleak. Since that time, we have cycled through being the missile center of the country, and now our scientific development along with our great universities have helped renew our pride and our economy. Our future looms bright.

More recently, however, our pension and City Council debacles caused The New York Times to label us "Enron by the sea," and again it has become difficult to call ourselves "America's Finest City," a prideful slogan given to us by San Diego's finest mayor, Pete Wilson, when San Diego lost the 1972 Republican National Convention.

Much in city government has changed in the past year as San Diego's new mayor under a newly instituted strong mayor system of government has started to bring order out of chaos. He is well along the path of rebuilding confidence in City Hall.

Today's threat to our pride comes from the next potential nationwide headline, which could read "City attorney accuses San Diego mayor of corruption."

That is serious business.

It not only would hurt our pride, but it could deal a serious blow to San Diego's economic recovery. Who wants to do business in a corrupt city? Perhaps more important, how would these false charges affect an honest, hard-working mayor – all over a possible disagreement on a budget issue?

The old saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is outmoded. I remember a remarkable, honest White House Cabinet officer once calling me and pleading, "How can I get back my good name?" He was innocent of the charges but never completely recovered his reputation.

The babble of charges by City Attorney Mike Aguirre haven't hurt the good name of Mayor Jerry Sanders, whose poll ratings phenomenally remain above 70 percent, but they can be dangerous for the community's reputation and our economy.

I have a quiet friendship with Aguirre that covers probably 15 years. We have spent many hours discussing his sometimes unique and interesting ideas, though we have disagreed on most. Our relationship may change once he reads this article. These days Aguirre offers up outrageous blasts freely. It will be interesting to see how he reacts to constructive criticism.

Somehow Aguirre has determined that his best weapon when disagreeing with someone is to engage in name-calling, usually by labeling someone "corrupt." Because he is the elected city attorney, his charges get covered by the media. Unfortunately, he rarely backs the charges with facts as a city attorney should.

"Corrupt" is a strong word not to be used lightly by anyone, particularly a city attorney.

Another example of Aguirre's false accusations is his charge that The San Diego Union-Tribune is managed by "politicians." He didn't make these absurd charges when the newspaper endorsed him for office, and the management of

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the paper has not changed. It is run by professional, competent editors.

I know Aguirre to be intelligent and energetic, but his wild charges are damaging San Diego, and it is time he stopped it. In Washington, bitter partisanship is endangering our ability to govern. Name-calling can have the same effect locally. It is dangerous, and if Aguirre is to fulfill even his own ambitions, he should realize this.

If there is real corruption somewhere, let's dig it out and make it public. Name-calling only damages the credibility of our region. It is the tactic of bullies.

San Diego would benefit greatly from an apology from the city attorney followed by a newly displayed determination to resolve its many unresolved legal problems delayed in the City Attorney's Office.

We must move ahead in a civil fashion, now – right now.

■ Klein is a national fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, retired editor in chief of Copley Newspapers and former Nixon White House director of communications.

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