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NEIGHBORS

Pennington moves to distance himself from militia groups

MICHAEL DRUMMOND THE DAILY NEWS

State Rep. John Pennington courted the votes of a local militia last fall and praised its members as "the good guys" the week of April 24.

But the leader of the good guys said the government "asked for" the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, a statement that now has Pennington distancing himself from his suddenly uncozy constituency.

"I disassociate myself from them," Pennington said April 26, the day after The Daily News ran a story about the local militia's aspirations for mainstream acceptance and its significant role in Pennington's campaign in Cowlitz County.

"I'm never going to another one of their meetings, I'll tell you that," he said.

On April 25, Pennington said members of the Longview chapter of the United States Militia Association were "not radicals" and that he wasn't "going to chicken out or back off from my support for these guys."

Pennington walked into the newsroom April 26 to say many of his more mainstream supporters have since complained about his public support for the Longview militia and its leader, Art Vinson, who suggested the government may have been to blame for last week's explosion that killed and injured hundreds in the nation's worst-ever terrorist attack.

Vinson has denounced the bombing and said his group is dedicated to the Constitution, gun rights and Christianity.

The group still conducts military-type training in the woods of Toutle, albeit without weapons since its reorganization three months ago. Vinson, who believes in the apocalyptic doom of a one-world government, called his far-right militia "more of a political action group."

A precinct committee officer with the local Republican Party, Vinson also said the federal government provoked last week's bombing by not prosecuting government agents after the deadly

debacle at the Branch Davidian camp in Waco, Texas, two years ago. More than 80 cult members died, including children.

In his denunciation of Vinson's statements, Pennington said "churchgoers, taxpayers, regular people" got him elected and that he would have been victorious here without the local militia's support.

He added that his only link to the group was

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State Representative

their shared passion for the Second Amendment. Vinson said he spoke with Pennington April 26, but the freshman legislator didn't mention he was distancing himself from the militia.

"He told me to be careful about what I say in the future," Vinson said. "He's scared that he lost political ground. He's upset and I can't blame him for that."

"I'm still a supporter of John Pennington," Vinson added. "As far as I know, based on my conversation with him, he's still a supporter of us."

Pennington beat Democrat incumbent Jim Springer here by more than 830 votes, taking 54 percent to Springer's 46 percent.

Vinson canvassed neighborhoods with Pennington last fall, ringing doorbells in a high-energy campaign. The militia leader also endorsed Pennington and other Republican can-

didates on a weekly local cable access television show.

Last year Pennington attended two meetings of what was then called the Defenders of the Constitution, and credited the group for making gun rights his major campaign thrust in Cowlitz County.

"Guns were not on my list of priorities — you made it an issue," he told about 50 local militia members at one meeting last October.

A week before that, at a forum at Lower Columbia College, Pennington echoed a principle theme of the militia movement.

The Second Amendment was important, Pennington said, because it embodies "the right to defend ourselves against our government."

On April 26 Pennington said he is "mainstream." He isn't the only Republican mending political damage.

The leader of the Cowlitz County Republican Party also scrambled to distance the party from one of its own precinct committee officers.

"I deplore (Vinson's) statement that the government asked for it," said Republican boss Bob Olson. "Babies that were butchered did not ask for anything. It's the most appalling thing that anyone could say."

He said he had warned Pennington about associating with the militia. He also said Pennington, 28, may have been seduced by the militia group's enthusiastic support last fall.

"He's young, naive," Olson said. "He heard they wanted to help him get elected and he went along with them. I'm not convinced that he fully understood what the organization stood for."

"Balderdash," replied Springer, the Democrat who lost to Pennington last year. He noted that Pennington appeared cradling a gun in a full-page ad the day before the Nov. 8 election. The ad carried the full text of the Second Amendment.

"That's not seduction — that's promotion," Springer said.



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