

Galinson a nominee for federal judgeship

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Murray Galinson, a banker and Democratic Party heavyweight, has been nominated to fill a lifetime position on the federal court bench in San Diego.

But many in the legal profession say his nomination for a judgeship by Sen. Dianne Feinstein is a political pay back.

Galinson, president of the San Diego National Bank, began his career as a federal prosecutor in Minnesota, where he later was in private practice. In San Diego, he was a special federal prosecutor for two years and was a professor at California Western School of Law for about a decade.

He hasn't practiced in court for more than 10 years.

Feinstein's recommendation to President Clinton, made Oct. 3, is the first of three steps. Galinson must be nominated by Clinton and confirmed by the Senate.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Galinson downplayed his political connections, saying that while he generally supports Democrats, he also has given money to Republicans.

He said his qualifications to be a federal judge are as good or better than many appointees.

"People who say I'm not qualified don't really understand my background," Galinson said.

"For the past ten years, yes, I have been a banker. But for the 20 years before that I had as much experience as any others appointed to the federal bench."

Galinson is among the most highly regarded Democrats in San Diego and one of the few who contributes his own money to candidates. He is active in the Democratic Leadership Council, which seeks to move the party toward more moderate positions.

During the 1990s, according to campaign reports, Galinson and his wife, Elaine, contributed more than \$75,000 to Democratic candidates. The contributions included \$10,000 to Kathleen Brown's 1994 gubernatorial campaign.

Galinson and his family gave \$8,850 to Feinstein during her race for governor in 1990 and \$4,000 to her during the 1992 Senate campaign, when he served as one of her finance co-chairmen.

The Galinsons already have contributed \$7,000 toward Feinstein's 1998 re-election campaign.

Among his rare contributions to non-Democrats was \$2,000 to help pay off Gov. Pete Wilson's debt incurred during his race against Feinstein in 1990.

Twelve U.S. senators received contributions from Galinson in the 1990s, but only one of them, Feinstein, sits on the Judiciary Committee, which would consider his nomination.

The Galinsons also contributed to the 1988 presidential bid of Joe Biden of Delaware, the committee's ranking Democrat.

Asked about the nomination yesterday, some attorneys drew parallels between Galinson's political contributions and his nomination to an important lifetime role of deciding issues in federal cases in San Diego and Imperial counties.

Most declined to be quoted by name, saying they did not want to criticize someone they may have to appear before in court.

One attorney suggested Galinson's nomination shows judgeships can have a financial price. The same lawyer added, however: "I understand he's considered a very nice guy and a wonderful human being by people of all political stripes."

Attorney Michael Crowley, a graduate of California Western Law School, praised Galinson. "I'd be happy to have him on the bench," said Crowley, a former Galinson student. "I think he has compassion for humanity; he's very knowledgeable on the law."

Others said it was unusual for lawyers out of practice for so long to be considered for a trial bench and day-to-day criminal and civil matters.

"I don't think I'm making a profound statement to say it's unusual for a person who is not a sitting judge and not a practicing lawyer to be appointed to the federal bench," said Lawrence Irving, a former federal judge who has served on committees to select federal and state judges.

"If a person were a professor at a law school that would make it less unusual.

Irving said he did not have any input into Galinson's nomination, but sources close to a committee appointed by Feinstein to help select nominees say Galinson was interviewed and turned down by the committee.

The names of two other San Diego lawyers were forwarded to Feinstein.

Feinstein's state coordinator, Bill Chandler, said yesterday that while Feinstein considered the committee's recommendations, Galinson's legal experience was compelling.

Galinson also has a supporter in George Mitrovich, leader of the City Club in San Diego.

In May, Mitrovich sent a letter to the White House, complaining that Feinstein was delaying Galinson's nomination.

Mitrovich reminded White House sources that Galinson has "assisted virtually every Democratic candidate of note who has run, not the least being Senator Feinstein and President Clinton."

"I know from five years as a Senate aide that the senators recommend the nominees," Mitrovich wrote. "But there is nothing that precludes the White House from pushing a senator along so that the nominations get made -- and Feinstein may need some pushing."

Mitrovich said yesterday that he was later told the White House wouldn't get involved.

Chandler said no one pushed his boss into nominating Galinson. Both he and Galinson said they were unaware of the letter.

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