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Date: Sun Dec 18, 2005 12:58:17 AM America/Denver
Subject: Journal Report

[By Leslie Linthicum](#)

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Gov. Bill Richardson likes to touch people. He hugs, pokes, jabs and tickles. If he sees a man with a bald pate, he rubs it. Looking to start a conversation, he might lean forward and head-butt someone— male or female.

Bored on an airplane flight? He'll lick his finger and smudge an aide's glasses.

Richardson says he's just joking and teasing to ease tension and boredom.

Lt. Gov. Diane Denish says she finds the practice irritating. She said she tries to avoid sitting or standing next to the governor at public events.

She said the governor's personality is "one of charisma, joking, joshing," but also used some other words to describe his hands-on approach.

"I think it's irritating and annoying," Denish said in a recent interview.

"I try not to put myself in that situation, trying not to stand or sit next to him."

Others who work with the governor say it doesn't bother them.

Communications director Pahl Shipley described the tendency to touch as a "sign of approval, that things are going well and it's OK."

Denish, who also used the terms "teasing," "adolescent" and "silly," made the comments after looking at photos taken at a groundbreaking ceremony for a train depot in Bernalillo.

Seated next to Denish, Richardson reached his hand behind her chair, turned to her and grinned.

Denish said the governor was poking at the side of her leg.

It went on for five or 10 minutes— the state's bored governor picking at the lieutenant governor, who tossed him some exasperated glances as he caught her eye and laughed.

"He pokes me," Denish said when she was asked about the incident.

At other times, she said, "He pinches my neck. He touches my hip, my thigh, sort of the side of my leg."

She said that he has never touched her in an improper way but that such physical contact in a public setting was inappropriate because it could be misconstrued.

Easily bored

Richardson said he didn't remember much about the Bernalillo event except that it was hot, long and boring.

"I have a short attention span," Richardson said. "I get bored easily."

"Sometimes, when she's sitting next to me, I'll tap her sort of like, 'Can you believe they said this?' " he said. "It's innocent. I'm teasing. I'm playing around."

Richardson said he picks at Denish like he does everyone on his staff— innocently and playfully.

"I tease Diane. I touch guys. It's my way of lessening tension," he said.

Denish who has known Richardson for more than 20 years and has worked closely with him during the three years she has served as lieutenant governor, said Richardson gets bored easily, likes physical contact and likes to tease people.

"He's always had a tendency to be a hugger, a pincher," Denish said.

Dealing with his physical teasing, especially in public settings, she said, "is one of the challenges of this governor. He has a lot of good qualities and this is one of the challenges."

When it happens, she said she tends to peer at Richardson over her glasses in a disapproving way.

"When he's doing it in these public environments, I have chosen not to embarrass him by not doing anything blatant about it publicly," she said. "I don't think I should embarrass him."

Denish said she approached Billy Sparks, Richardson's deputy chief of staff, to warn him that Richardson's public overtures might get him in trouble some day because they could be misinterpreted.

Richardson said he's never heard a complaint.

And he said he was surprised anyone would be irritated by his physical contact.

"It's my way of connecting with people," he said. "I mean, no one's ever complained."

With a sigh, Richardson said, "I guess that's what I get for being friendly."

In his own words

Richardson talked about his penchant for being physical in his autobiography, "Between Worlds: The Making of An American Life."

In his book, Richardson describes his two-handed handshake— one hand on the shoulder— and his penchant for a hug: "I'm not one for tight bows or formal handshakes when a bear hug or a gentle fist to the shoulder is an available option."

Anyone who has spent much time with Richardson has probably witnessed his displays of physicality.

Surprising a group of teenage girls at an event in Albuquerque last year, for example, he pulled the junior-high stunt of buckling their knees from behind.

Approaching a reporter at a bill-signing ceremony, he introduced himself with a head butt.

Appearing at a Santa Fe junior high, Richardson grabbed a boy and held him in a headlock.

Shipley said Richardson's favored technique with him is to lick his finger and smudge his glasses lens with saliva.

"It's almost like a sign of approval," Shipley said. "That things are going well and it's OK."

With chief of staff David Contarino, Richardson takes a permanent marker with the cap on and pretends to draw on his aide's white shirt.

□□□ "This is part of his personality," Contarino said, "part of his way of connecting with the people who work for him."
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