

Man in Room 424

State's redistricter knew his geography

By SHELBY GILJE

The quiet, unassuming man in Room 424 of the University of Washington's Smith Hall, was "almost the last person" suggested a year ago when a Federal Court sought a special master to redraw the state's legislative and congressional districts.

"Who?" He's a what?" were typical responses to the announcement that Dr. Richard L. Morrill, U.W. professor of geography, would do the job many had expected to go to a political scientist.

When Morrill sat in on a Federal Court session a month after submitting his plan, he went unrecognized by any of the principals in the case, including George Prince, Seattle attorney who filed the redistricting suit in May, 1971, and Attorney General Slade Gorton, both of whom had recommended Morrill on the basis of his credentials.

Other state officials and political-party representatives in the courtroom did not recognize him either.

That may have been part of the court's rationale in selecting Morrill.

MORRILL agreed to be on the list of possible masters, "but I didn't think I'd be chosen," he said. "I assumed



Dr. Richard L. Morrill is the U.W. geographer.

somebody more politically involved would be chosen."

Prince had suggested another geographer as his first preference, but that individual was ruled out because he was an active G.O.P. committeeman. "Morrill's name came up almost as a causal thing," Prince said. "His was almost the last name."

Prince found Morrill acceptable, as did the court.

Before appointing Morrill, United States District Judge William T. Beeks interviewed him.

"The judge asked if I was interested in politics," Morrill recalled. "I told him, 'Yes.'"

Morrill, a Democrat, has supported candidates and attended precinct caucuses, but never has sought an office in the party structure or in the public sector.

The 39-year-old professor was selected from a list of about a dozen geographers, planners and computer experts.

A 1955 graduate of Dartmouth University, he earned his doctorate in geography at the U.W. in 1959. Morrill has taught at Northwestern University. He spent a year at the University of Chicago as director of the Chicago Regional Hospital Study. In 1960, when he joined the U.W. staff, he received a \$15,800 National Science Foundation grant to study population-migration patterns of Sweden over the previous 100 years.

In 1970, he studied regional-development problems at the University of Glasgow.

In 1971 Morrill's book, "The Geography of Poverty in the U.S.," was published.

Morrill's principal interests are population and migration, and regional development and planning.

THE COURTS instructions to Morrill stressed that he was to avoid contact with any officeholder and advice from political partisans, as well as contact with any announced candidates.

He added a restriction for himself. He did not participate in a precinct caucus last year and did not actively support any candidate on the ballot.

His job was to divide the state into 49 districts, each representing one forty-ninth of the state's approximate population of 3.4 million, and set new boundaries for the state's seven congressional districts.

The geographer was ordered "not to make use of past election returns, nor any information relating to

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political affiliations.” He was to avoid dividing any district by rivers, lakes or other natural geographic barriers, and no legislative district was to straddle the Cascade Range.

One month from the day his appointment was announced, Morris was to file a redistricting plan with the court.

Partisans abided by the court’s rules and did not contact him, Morrill said.

The Spokane Valley Chamber and the Federal Way Chamber of Commerce both wrote to ask that their legislative districts be kept the same, if possible. The Yakima Indians had a similar concern about their reservation.

IN DRAWING legislative districts, “everybody counts—kids, too—everybody but servicemen,” he said.

Morrill and the four students who worked with him were able to draw the boundaries so that more than 80 percent of the voters remained in the same district.

The most difficult criterion to meet was the “magic number”—68428 in each legislative district, with no more than a 1 percent variation.

“The x percent criterion was so strict that it caused irregularities and divisions of counties in some cases,” Morrill said.

He is particularly apologetic about the way in which Island County and Auburn came out in the redistricting shuffle.

Island and Snohomish Counties together make up the 10th Legislative District, though Island has more in common with Skagit County.

But to place Island and Skagit in the same district would have caused “crazy quilting” of San Juan and other neighboring counties, Morrill said.

The situation in Auburn—where three legislative districts converge—is even less satisfactory, Morrill adds.

More time to develop the plan and a 5 percent leeway in variation between district might have alleviated some of the problems, Morrill believes.

MORRILL said he and his students purposely drew their plan before looking at other plans that had been suggested and rejected by the Legislature.

“The Republican, and Democratic plans didn’t appear to be any better than ours,” he said.

Morrill found the court’s order that he not speak to the press during the job to be “most difficult.” He never had been prohibited before from describing his projects to the media. And when he granted an interview to The University Daily, he was admonished by a federal judge.

“He acknowledged that I was not used to judicial proceedings, but he admonished me to not count on people’s goodwill,” Morrill said.

The Census Bureau did not exactly lend a helping hand. Population data were revised almost daily, Morrill said,

because the Census Bureau had computer troubles during the 1970 census.

“Two years later, they were still making corrections.”

Morrill said the students who assisted him were interested in using computers for the redistricting job.

“But computer programs didn’t work,” he said. “It was mostly an adding-machine job, with the students up half the night on many occasions.”

The computer didn’t obey the Federal Court’s order that districts not straddle the Cascades or bodies of water such as Puget Sound.

But Morrill believes computers could be used successfully in the future to do adequate programming.

He also would have found it helpful to visit certain areas.

AFTER Morrill submitted his plan to the court, cries of “political gerrymandering” were heard from labor and Democratic leaders.

“The Democrats claimed — I think for public consumption — that Republicans would fare better under the plan,” Morrill said. “I think both parties lost about equally in redistricting.”

Though the Democrats hold a slight edge in the present session, Morrill predicts that they will be hurt in the Senate configuration two years from now.

“But the Republicans will be vulnerable, too,” he adds.

Since he completed the job, Morrill has had inquiries from individuals trying to draw redistricting plans in Hawaii, Mississippi and Vermont.

The geographer believes the “Legislature should not try to go through the process itself, but hire outsiders to do the job.”

Morrill believes it “is a mistake for one person to do it.”

“If I were making a proposal, I’d suggest a team of a sociologist, a geographer, a political scientist and an urban planner,” he says.

Four people would never get anywhere,” says Judge Beeks of that proposal.

Prince scores legislators for not being able to do the job.

“We send men to do a boys’ job,” says Prince.

“High-school boys could do the job with the proper maps and census figures.”

What did it cost for Morrill and four students to do the job of redistricting?

“Between \$3,700 and \$3,800,” Morrill said. “I based the charges on the hours we worked, the University’s pay scale, and our materials. The court accepted it.”

Morrill never received any irate phone calls from politicians or voters over his plan. But on primary election night last fall, he did receive three telephone calls at home.

“They were voters who had gotten my name from the public library and called to ask which district they should vote in,” Morrill said.