Handel used taxpayer money for a brand new Lexus SUV for herself

Handel Leased A Lexus SUV That “Still Has The New-Car Smell” Using Taxpayer Money. “Handel usually drives herself --- in a Lexus SUV that still has the new-car smell --- to appearances and appointments, choosing the $587-per-month allowance rather than a state car. She is quick to point out that she doesn't file for mileage reimbursement, even though she's eligible for it.” [Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 6/12/07] – See Article 3 Below

Perdue Hit Handel On The Lexus While They Were Candidates For The Senate Race. “The Lexus? That’s a reference to a set of wheels she had while secretary of state. Perdue used that against her in the U.S. Senate race. Her campaign said it was not a lease and that she owned it before she won statewide office.” [Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 4/13/17]

ARTICLE 3

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

June 12, 2007 Tuesday
Main Edition

Approachable Handel may go even higher;
Got the skill set: Now that secretary of state has proved her mettle in largely male club, she is being touted as a potential Republican candidate for governor. You can call her Karen, but don't provoke her.

BYLINE: CARLOS CAMPOS; Staff

Secretary of State Karen Handel chose a giant painting of a frontier woman holding off a handful of frightened men with a musket to hang in her Capitol office.

She picked it because it tells the courageous tale of Nancy Hart, a patriot who held off British sympathizers when they invaded her northeast Georgia cabin during the Revolutionary War. Hart shot one of the men to death before her husband arrived to help.

Handel emphatically insists it's not a metaphor for her own life --- a scrappy woman who has overcome adversity and ascended rapidly to the largely male club of political leadership. Handel, 45, is the first Republican elected secretary of state in Georgia, and she's only one of three women who hold statewide elected office outsidejudgeships.

But the symbolism is undeniable, even to her own inner circle.

"Can we do anything for you?" Handel's executive assistant asked recently as the secretary of state rushed out the door for a meeting in Macon.

"Take the painting down," Deputy Secretary of State Rob Simms --- the man who recruited Handel into politics --- responds dryly.

Handel rode to victory in November after winning a brutal Republican primary last summer that featured a runoff. Ten Democrats and Republicans had signed up to run for secretary of state, but a well-financed Handel emerged from the crowded field. She had been chairwoman of the Fulton County Commission since 2003, a job that boosted her name recognition in the metro Atlanta area.
Even before she won, Handel's name had been kicked around by pundits as a potential candidate for governor in 2010. The secretary of state's office in recent years has been viewed as a platform for a run at higher office. Former Secretary of State Max Cleland parlayed the name recognition into a seat in the U.S. Senate, though Lewis Massey and Cathy Cox ran failed bids for governor.

Handel said she's focused on being secretary of state, though she wouldn't rule out a future run at higher office.

In many ways, Handel is already acting like someone intent on building a record of accomplishment and a folksy, populist brand name.

She refuses to let anyone call her "Madam Secretary" or "Ms. Secretary," insisting on just "Karen." At a recent meeting in Macon with officials from various professional licensing boards in her agency, Handel sat on a desk at the head of the room and held an informal rap, almost like a laid-back college professor.

"She has an amazing ability to connect with people," said Massey, who held the office from 1996-1999. "I've seen her at some events where she's spoken, and people just like her. I think they feel she's very down-to-earth, approachable and open."

Handel usually drives herself --- in a Lexus SUV that still has the new-car smell --- to appearances and appointments, choosing the $587-per-month allowance rather than a state car. She is quick to point out that she doesn't file for mileage reimbursement, even though she's eligible for it.

Handel is keenly aware of how her actions will be portrayed by the media. She is accessible to reporters, and will sometimes call them after meetings to make sure they have everything needed to complete a story --- and to get a sense of how it will play out.

Handel has worked to defuse a problem her predecessor struggled with --- a hard-core group of voting activists who believe the state's electronic voting machines are susceptible to tampering with elections. The activists hounded Cox, and she eventually stopped dealing with them. Handel has so far been willing to listen to their point of view.

"Everything has changed now that the administration has changed," said Garland Favorito, founder of VoterGa.org, a group that has sued to discontinue use of the electronic voting machines in Georgia. Favorito said Handel's office "opened the information flow" that he feels can help change public opinion about electronic voting.

Demanding nature

Though her easygoing style and openness have helped disarm some of her critics, Handel also has a quick temper when provoked. She admits she has little tolerance for being told something can't be done.

"If anything, I'm not very good with a poker face --- and that would be with any emotion," she said. "Absolutely I'm tough and I do have high standards. But I wouldn't ask anybody to do anything I wouldn't do."

Part of Handel's demanding nature can be traced to a strong desire to overcome her hardscrabble upbringing.

Handel said she grew up in a "chaotic" household in Upper Marlboro, Md. Her mother --- who passed away seven years ago --- was an alcoholic who sometimes physically abused her, Handel said. The family dynamics also put her at odds with her father, so Handel left home at 17 before she finished high school.

Handel tried to go to college at night, but dropped out to earn a living. She took a series of secretarial jobs that eventually led to the Washington office of the Hallmark greeting card company. At Hallmark, she worked for an influential D.C. lobbyist, Rae Forker Evans, who was also involved in breast cancer awareness issues.

Evans would eventually recommend Handel for a job that changed the course of her professional life: Working on the staff of Marilyn Quayle, the wife of then-Vice President Dan Quayle.

"The truth is, Marilyn noticed Karen and sort of said to me, 'Would you mind?' and I said, 'Absolutely not, I think she's ready to move on,' and I think her poise and her intellectual capacity were just hard to miss," said Evans, who attended Handel's inauguration in January. "She let me know she would love to be able to take my pride and joy Miss Karen along with her, and I found it hard to object to the vice president's wife."

From there, Handel's career took off. She became the second lady's deputy chief of staff, handling her appearances and charitable work, including her work on breast cancer issues.
She and her husband, Steve, moved to Atlanta in 1993 for his job as a technology executive. She landed jobs in government affairs and corporate communications at accounting giant KPMG and contact lens maker CIBA Vision.

In 2002, she was CEO of the North Fulton Chamber of Commerce when she got a call from Fulton County Commission Chairman Mike Kenn's chief of staff, Rob Simms.

Simms and a few others urged Handel to run for an at-large post on the commission. She ran and lost. But a year later, Handel won Kenn's post when he stepped down for another job.

Steps to improvement

Since she took over as secretary of state in January, Handel has made some moves she hopes will improve the agency, including:

* Taking steps to develop a case management system to keep track of complaints that come in to the professional licensing boards. The office licenses some 400,000 professionals in the state, from cosmetologists to private investigators.

* Changed personnel policies to prohibit employees who leave the office from lobbying on behalf of a vendor before the agency for one year after resigning. That move came shortly after the elections director under Cox left to immediately work for Diebold Election Systems, the company that makes Georgia's electronic voting machines.

* Recruiting experienced executives from the private sector and from throughout the nation to head three vital divisions of the office: corporations, securities and elections.

* Ordering an independent audit of the state's electronic voting machine system.

* Consolidating all of the agency's investigators under one inspector general, former DeKalb solicitor and Fulton prosecutor Shawn LaGrua.

More flexibility needed

As secretary of state, Handel said her biggest challenge is what she believes is an entrenched bureaucracy resistant to change.

"There are very good people in the agency," Handel said. "The culture, however, has been one of status quo. You do 'A' or 'B,' no more, no less. So if 'C' comes across your desk the person is paralyzed or doesn't know what to do with it."

Randy Evans, a member of the state election board, agrees getting state employees to change their mind-set will be Handel's greatest challenge.

Evans said former secretary of state Cox excelled at thinking "outside of the box," and hopes Handel will open herself to more possibilities about the office. "I think that gap will close over time as she gains experience," Evans said.

Evans, who frequently clashed with Cox at board meetings, has also had some sharp public disagreements with Handel.

He recently refused to support a move by Handel to slow down a congressional effort to require paper trails for electronic voting machines, and felt Handel wasn't tough enough on DeKalb County when it allowed some of its voting machines to be stored in a leaky warehouse.

Handel said she supports paper trails, but says Georgia doesn't have time to change over to a complex system by the 2008 presidential election, and noted that DeKalb elections officials are being monitored by her office.

But Evans, who is the lawyer for the state Republican Party, insists he wants Handel to succeed and thinks she could make a viable candidate for governor someday.

"She's got the skill set," said Evans, who has represented former House speakers Newt Gingrich and Dennis Hastert. "She's got the organizing ability. Having represented Newt and Speaker Hastert, I get to see all the tiers, and she's in the top tier."

THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S DUTIES

The secretary of state's office has responsibility for a range of governmental functions including oversight of elections, the licensing of more than 400,000 Georgians in trades and professions from cosmetologists and psychologists to auctioneers and
geologists, the registration of corporations and nonprofit groups, the regulation of investment advisers and the issuance and sales of securities, as well as oversight of the state’s archives and Capitol museum. The office, headquartered in the Capitol and nearby office buildings, is small relative to other massive state agencies with thousands of employees and multibillion-dollar budgets. It has about 460 employees and an annual budget of $35.5 million.