

Law Powerless To Stop Quarter Election Pranks

WASHINGTON (AP)—Strange red-and-silver quarters featuring George Washington dressed as a Roman Catholic cardinal are being widely circulated in some parts of the country—and there's no law against it.

The coins are known as "Kennedy quarters" and represent an elaborate post-election prank. They are named, of course, for Sen. John F. Kennedy who on Jan. 20 will become the first Roman Catholic to serve as president.

Mint officials said today the coins are standard 25-cent pieces doctored to disguise Washington as a prelate.

The doctored is done in any of several ways. Some of the coins are painted with red enamel and some are dressed up with pieces of red plastic tape in appropriate shape.

On the "heads" side, Washington's powdered wig is covered by a red skull cap called a zucchetto (pronounced zoo-ketto). These are worn by cardinals and stem from the days when all clerics had tonsures, or shaved heads. Washington's shoulders are covered with a red cassock, a clerical garment which has an ankle-length skirt.

The mint has no evidence that "Kennedy quarters" are being mass produced by any particular group or organization. However, officials are fearful the gag might sweep the country and botch up the supply of quarters.

Leland Howard, assistant director of the Bureau of the Mint, said Treasury lawyers can find no federal law against this type of coin trickery.

"I don't know how to stop a thing like this," Howard added. "I guess you just let the people have fun and hope it doesn't go too far."

While it may not be against the law to dress up George Washington, Howard said many banks may refuse to handle the doctored quarters.

He said banks might also withdraw the quarters from circulation as they appear, then turn them in to the government to be recoined. He said this could cost the mint a lot of money and trouble.

It costs about \$2.25 to melt down and recoin 1,000 quarters, Howard reported. He said it would be cheaper to do this than to try scraping paint off quarters altered by that method.

The Secret Service, which protects the integrity of the nation's money, said it has received no official reports of the "Kennedy quarters." Agents added that there probably is little or nothing they could do about them in any case.

Treasury lawyers said there is only one law which comes close to the situation, and it misses the mark.

This statute reads: "Whoever writes, prints upon or attaches to any coin of the United States any business or professional card, notice or advertisement or any notice or advertisement whatever, shall be fined not more than \$500."

Other laws against coin-altering deal with fraud — attempts to change coins so they can be passed for a higher denomination.

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