THE TEXAS Observer

A JOURNAL OF FREE VOICES

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TIME TO STAND AND FIGHT

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We will serve no group or party but will hew hard to the truth as we find it and the right as we see it. We are dedicated to the whole truth, to human values above all interests, to the rights of human-kind as the foundation of democracy: we will take orders from none but our own conscience, and never will we overlook or misrepresent the truth to serve the interests of the powerful or cater to the ignoble in the human spirit.

Writers are responsible for their own work, but not for anything they have not themselves written, and in publishing them we do not necessarily imply that we agree with them, because this is a journal of free voices.

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DIALOGUE

No Fan of Mansfield

In lieu of the fact that Steve Mansfield's troubles have been compounded by his false and misleading statements, a reasonable person might assume that Jim Harrington ("Judicial Selection and Voter's Rights," *TO* 12/9/94) would not follow that same route. A reasonable person would be wrong.

Justice for All is not the anti-Gary Graham Coalition any more than Harrington's Texas Civil Rights Project is the pro-Gary Graham Coalition. Justice for All is a criminal justice reform organization which has worked on some 50 criminal cases since we were founded in July 1993.

Justice for All eventually withdrew our endorsement of Mansfield at our earliest legal opportunity, that being at a public membership meeting, the only venue where such a decision may be made.

Mr. Harrington may be interested to know that on two additional high-profile death penalty cases, those of Robert Drew and Aldape Guerra, Justice for All is on record as stating that Drew's fraud-based public and legal appeals would fail and that Guerra's appeals would likely succeed. These conclusions were drawn nearly a year ago and both have turned out to be accurate.

Harrington's misstatements aside, Judicial selection clearly needs some fundamental reform. Not only does Justice for All not endorse Harrington's idea of single member districts, very few judges endorse such a plan. Although Justice for All has not endorsed any plan, as yet, we are supportive of non-partisan elections separate from political elections. Although merit selection has both benefits and pitfalls, it seems unlikely, in the current climate of voter agitation, that the public would give up its right to choose.

Most of Justice for All's Democratic judicial endorsements and all of our minority judicial endorsements lost this past November. We do not believe that justice or Texans are well served by the current partisan, political nature of judicial selection.

Dudley C. Sharp III,
Political Director
Justice for All
Houston

The Observer Community

Your December 30 issue is great. The article, "The Observer Community," by Ronnie Dugger, stirred lots of memories.

I was privileged to sit in a meeting in late 1953 or early 1954 in the machinists' union office at 108 E. 9th St., Fort Worth, with a few other union members and listen to Ronnie and Frankie Randolph talk about what they wanted to do with such a publication.

I don't believe that I've missed an issue since its inception.

Steven E. Williams
Hurst

No Respect, but Hope

I am renewing my support of the *Observer*. I neither like it or respect it, but I have hope for it. I quit reading it a couple of years ago. I quit because the *Observer* never correctly chronicled anything in which I was personally involved. "God save us from the lies of honest men," is a phrase that foresaw the *Observer*.

Ronnie Dugger wrote in the *Observer* about Jim McKeithan shortly after Jim died. I hardly know Ronnie Dugger, but for that single column I will care for him always. Maybe that column is why I have hope for the *Observer*.

Arthur Gochman
Katy

Unrepentant Liberal

With the addition of my *Texas Observer* bumpersticker to my car, I'm proud to bear the banner of unrepentant liberalism through the streets and byways of the Pacific Northwest.

By the way—you *haven't* covered 40 years of only Texas politics.

Otherwise, Molly or not, I'd not continue to subscribe. You're one of the few, clear voices left on the progressive spectrum that hasn't succumbed to the evils of either defeatism or some variant of postmodernist nihilism.

I, for one, appreciate that more than words can say.

Keep it up!

Chris Faatz
Vancouver, Washington

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FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

Cover art by Kevin Kreneck

EDITORIAL

Stand and Fight

NOW THAT THE shelling is over, if we may borrow a military metaphor for the state of politics in the state and nation, it is time for the foot-soldiers to rejoin the battle.

Newt Gingrich, Dick Armey and the "New Republicans" have been getting most of the attention during the past couple months with their plans to put the world right once they took over Congress, and Governor-elect George W. Bush also claims a mandate to deal with what he considers unredeemable juvenile offenders, welfare deadbeats, greedy trial lawyers and unfeeling school bureaucrats.

The Republicans have been firing their artillery ever since the elections, when Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress and the Governor's Mansion in Texas; moderates and progressives have retreated and taken cover for the time being. But they can either wait for the Republicans to come and finish them off one by one or they can stand and fight. They need to rehabilitate the progressive principles of expanding liberty and opportunity for an electorate that increasingly has come to view the Democratic Party as a collection of special interests rather than common interests.

After four years of working to pass bills that Democratic Governor Ann Richards could sign them into law, progressive legislators this year will be hard-pressed to prevent the state House and Senate from passing bills that would help big businesses and the wealthy, usually at the expense of workers, consumers and small businesses, and Republican Governor Bush will have no problem signing those "conservative" bills. There is little change in the partisan breakdown in the House, where the roll will find 89 Democrats and 61 Republicans, give or take contested results from District 58, where Republican challenger Arlene Wohlgemuth of Burleson apparently unseated Democrat Bernard Erickson of Cleburne by 46 votes. While many of the House Democrats, including Speaker Pete Laney of Hale Center, are conservatives who will find much in common with the Republicans on legislative priorities, a base of approximately 50 progressive House Democrats at least has a shot at assembling a majority with moderates on critical bills or amendments and Laney appears inclined to let them work their will.

However, in the 31-member Senate, where the rules normally require a two-thirds majority to take up a bill, there will be a record 14 Republicans. Of the 17 Democrats, only about nine are considered more or less progressive; Republicans only need seven conservative Democrats to get a bill onto the Senate floor and only two Democratic allies to shoot down progressive amendments. GOP senators have enough votes on their own to block progressive bills.

Progressive lobbyists are under no illusions that they will have an easy time stopping what they consider bad bills, much less passing good ones, but Tom "Smitty" Smith of Public Citizen is among those who are hopeful that moderate legislators will hold the line on the more conservative members. "Traditionally we've been able to stop bad bills in the Senate, but we're going to have a hard time finding 11 progressive members in the Senate," he said.

Lieut. Gov. Bob Bullock, a pragmatic, business-oriented Democrat with occasional flashes of conscience, has put the Senate on notice that he expects bipartisan activity and he is expected to be a moderating influence there. He has Republicans heading five of the Senate's 13 committees, but those committee chairs have no illusions about who is in charge. Still, when Bullock stacked the Nominations Committee with a Republican chair and majority, he not only signaled clear sailing for Bush's appointees but possible trouble for Richards' 600 holdover appointees, who lose their seats if they are not confirmed with a two-thirds vote of the Senate by the end of the regular session. Republicans cannot afford to bust Richards appointees on a grand scale, but they certainly will be tempted to single out some of her more activist appointees. One is Rebecca Lightsey, whom Ann Richards appointed in December to serve three months as insurance commissioner. Lightsey has gone ahead with hearings on proposed new rules to prohibit discrimination by insurance companies, despite requests by Bush and Bullock to hold off until Bush's appointee, Elton Bomer, takes over on February 1.

This session will see a renewed effort by progressive House members to put up a unified front and work on building coalitions with moderate members. The new Legislative Study Group has attracted approximately 50 members and chairman Kevin Bailey, a Houston Democrat, said he expects it to top out at 55 to 60. The group has hired Gary Keith as executive director and Bailey said the group will hire researchers to follow bills during the session. "We were told that we would never get 50 people to join and we were told that we would never be able to raise money, but we've done both," Bailey said. "I think there are 55 or 60 good, fairly progressive votes in the House and the key is to bring in those 15 or 20 moderates."

Bailey acknowleged that with the rhetoric coming out of Washington, Republicans in Texas feel they have momentum on their side too, but a lot of moderate and progres-

sive legislators are tired of the conservative caucus and envy its successes in the past few sessions. While the progressive group has not set its legislative program yet, Bailey thinks it can make a difference at least in protecting education reforms.

GOVERNOR-ELECT BUSH has said he will concentrate on four issues: criminal justice, welfare, lawsuits and schools. They are good issues for a governor to concentrate on, because they involve taking money or power away from people who are despised by the general public.

So Bush called for restoring "individual responsibility," at least when it comes to people involved in criminal justice and welfare programs. On juvenile justice, some lawmakers alarmed at the 182-percent increase in violent crime by youth from 1983 to 1993 have responded by filing bills that would allow 14-year-old youths to be treated as adults, expand the list of crimes for which kids could be sent away for up to 40 years, open juvenile court records and expand Texas Youth Commission facilities. The Legislature will rewrite the Family Code after a Joint Interim Committee on the Family Code recommended changes in the state's divorce and custody laws; tougher penalties for juvenile offenders and authorizing counties to institute teen curfews. The money it will cost to lock up more juveniles for longer sentences likely will have to come from a billion-dollar wish list presented by the Texas Commission on Children and Youth, another blue-ribbon panel that found, after an exhaustive study, that thousands of Texas children were in need of basic health, nutrition, drug treatment and psychiatric services that could keep them from becoming adult criminals.

On lawsuit "reform," Bush is singing off the same page as the business interests who helped Republicans Drew Nixon, Michael Galloway and Tom Haywood upset Democrats in Senate races. With the support of Bullock, they are pushing for limits on punitive damages against corporations in civil lawsuits, an overhaul of the Deceptive Trade Practices Act, restrictions on forum shopping and reforms of "joint and several liability" and medical malpractice lawsuits. Other business groups also want to pile on with provisions to make it harder to collect damages when a plaintiff shares responsibility for the injury, limits on contributions to judicial candidates to prevent conflicts of interest and limits on contingency fees to trial lawyers, which would prevent poor people from getting lawyers, as it has in workers' compensation cases.

The Legislature also is expected to rewrite the Texas Education Code, which offers the opportunity for much mischief 10 years after the landmark education reforms of House Bill 72. Bush has stated he wants to decentralize education, increase the state's share of local education costs and he supports the efforts of some legislators to help parents pay to send their children to private schools. Some would go so far as to abolish the Texas Education Agency. When the Texas Supreme Court let the New Year arrive without ruling on the constitutionality of the current school financing plan, it was seen as a good sign for the wealthier school districts, as conservatives picked up a vote on the court with the swearing in of Priscilla Owen, a former corporate lawyer in Houston. She replaces Lloyd Doggett, who went from the progressive minority on the court to a back bench in Congress. That leaves the court with a Republican majority and a couple conservative Democratic votes to spare on most issues.

Bush is promoting a welfare overhaul that would end benefits after two years for women who can work, deny benefits for women who have more than two children and require mothers on welfare to identify the father of each child. But don't expect much savings, even from those penurious actions. The Texas Department of Human Services had a $3.2 billion budget this past year. AFDC, the main welfare program, accounts for $603 million, with $382 million of that coming from the federal government. A single Texas mother with two children (the typical Texas family on welfare) gets only $184 in AFDC and $292 worth of food stamps every month, in addition to Medicaid health insurance.

Bush also said there is some merit to the idea of placing children of unwed mothers in orphanages, although the *Dallas Morning News* on December 27 quoted an analyst with the conservative American Enterprise Institute who estimated that it would cost $72,000 annually to put the average welfare family's children in an orphanage, compared with about $15,000 in current per-family costs for cash, food stamps, Medicaid, housing and all other services.

THE NEW GOVERNOR won't have to spend much time on a bill he favors that would allow white suburban Dirty Harry wannabes to carry concealed handguns. That bill is expected to sail through the Legislature so quickly the only question is how lawmakers will manage to keep inner-city youths from legally packing heat as well. Maybe the proposed $150 registration fee and instruction costs will act as a deterrent. Meanwhile, spokespeople for Handgun Control Inc., a non-profit group lobbying for stricter handgun controls, notes that Florida, which has allowed concealed weapons since 1987, had the highest rate of violent crime of any state in 1992.

When it comes to the state budget, lawmakers will be pleased to discover that sales tax collections are up, as are motor vehicle tax collections and proceeds from the state lottery. They are expected to have an extra $4.3 billion to spend during the next two years over the $71 billion budget they appropriated for the past biennium. The only problem is that they will need $6.3 billion to pay for education, health and human services and prisons.

Bush has called for increasing the state's share of public school funding from the current 45 percent, as property taxes pick up the remaining 55 percent. He also proposes to build more prison facilities on top of the 150,000 beds that will be on line within a year. And the legislative panel studying the Family Code has recommended more than doubling the TYC from 2,100 beds now to 4,500 beds within four years; other suggestions include expanding county detention centers, boot camps for first-time and non-violent offenders, adding juvenile probation officers and strengthening drug and alcohol abuse programs.

The Legislature will have to consider ways to control the rising cost of Medicaid, which has seen a 20-percent increase in demand for services in Texas over the past year, after Congress during the adminstration of the senior George H.W. Bush expanded eligibility. State costs for the program have escalated by $8.3 billion since 1990 and accounted for 26 percent of the state's budget.

EVENTS IN CONGRESS may set the tone for what happens in the Texas Legislature. Gingrich and Armey promise votes on most, if not all, of their Contract with America during the first 100 days of the 104th Congress, so the American public will get a taste of some of the radical changes the Republicans have in store. That may produce a reaction in the Texas statehouse.

In the meantime, some progressive lobbyists will make an effort to work with the Bush Administration. Texas AFL-CIO officials plan to meet with Bush, and Ed Sills, a spokesman for the labor federation, said their attitude is that everybody deserves a chance to show good faith.

"We've been through this with administrations headed by much more venal and unsophisticated people than this one," Tom Smith of Public Citizen said. "They're pros. That's one of the hallmarks of this Bush Administration. He's brought in people who know about Texas politics and Texas government. They're not members of the radical right. They may be good ol' boys but they don't have bloody hatchets."

That was little comfort to another progressive lobbyist. "I think they'll be more sophisticated and professional in terms of doing damage, but I don't know how that does us any good." **—J.C.**

Knowing Phil Gramm

BY LOUIS DUBOSE

LAST WINTER, fundamentalist Christians forced one of his key supporters, Republican State Party Chairman Fred Meyer, to announce that he would give up the state chair after six very successful years. In the spring, he was openly rebuked by Republican National Party Chairman Haley Barbour for peddling high-priced tickets to a meaningless Republican Senate Midterm Convention. In early summer, Congressman Joe Barton, his hand-picked replacement for Meyer, was defeated by the religious right in a bitter convention fight. Then, in a presidential-candidates' straw poll at the same mid-June state convention in Fort Worth, he won only 8 percent of the vote, trailing Bill Bennett, Dan Quayle and Jack Kemp. Two weeks later, in a Republican straw poll in Iowa, he came in third, behind Bob Dole and Lamar Alexander. And one day before the new Republican Congress officially assumed power in Washington, Robert Mosbacher Jr., one of the most prominent mainstream Republicans in Texas, told *Houston Chronicle* reporter Alan Bernstein that he will be actively promoting the presidential candidacy of Lamar Alexander.

None of this matters much to Phil Gramm, who remains the best bet to lead the Republican ticket in 1996. What makes Gramm the favorite to win the Republican nomination (and probably the presidency)? Even before he switched parties in 1983, Gramm demonstrated that he understands where power lies—and that he will do whatever is required to make it serve his purposes. Gramm is a better fundraiser and has a larger fundraising database than any other potential candidate for the presidency. And he understands how to use the Congress and the media to both promote himself and keep himself at a safe distance from financial/ethical scandals of his own making.

Gramm's rapid ascent began in 1981, two years after was elected to Congress, when Jim Wright, then House Majority Leader, went to work on behalf of the Texas delegation and persuaded the Steering and Policy Committee to place two conservative Democratic Texas Congressmen on two important committees. Kent Hance, the former Democratic Congressman from West Texas who has run losing campaigns for most statewide offices in Texas, was assigned to Ways and Means. Gramm, who convinced Wright that he was tight with Ronald Reagan's Budget Director David Stockman, was named to the House Budget Committee. (There had been two committee votes before Gramm came to Wright for help and Gramm had placed last in both, Wright said in a telephone conversation.)

Writing in his diary 14 years ago, Wright seemed to be trying to convince himself that he'd done the right thing in promoting committee assignments for Hance and Gramm:

"I think these fellows represent a point of view which has fallen somewhat out of fashion in our party in recent years, but which is closer to the popular currents. I guess it pleases me to think that I'm not forgetting, in all of the national priorities, ... to look out for "our own."

But Wright couldn't quite convince himself, and his reflections in his diary were prescient about Gramm's career:

Frankly, I had mixed emotions about Phil. He is such a gadfly. He will make waves. He'll grandstand. He'll get in the papers. He is the fly in my Fort Worth soup. No victory I can achieve for moderation will be sufficient for him. He'll want to damn it publicly as "too little" while reaching for the politically attractive but practically unattainable ultimates.

Gramm gave Wright his word and wrote a letter to all the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee members, promising that "in return for your support for a seat on the Budget Committee, I will work diligently to assure that Democrats in the House are presented with budget resolutions they can enthusiastically support on the floor and in their districts."

Gramm never looked back. He secretly provided Stockman with information on the Budget Committee's Democratic Caucus closed deliberations, and on the day the resolution was to be marked up in full committee he walked into the office of the Budget Committee chair and announced that he had been working on a compromise—with David Stockman. "I'm going to offer it this morning," he told James Jones—who for days had been asking Gramm what items he wanted included in the Democrats' budget. "And I think," Gramm added, "it's going to be the Reagan program."

Even Delbert Latta, the Ohio Republican who was the ranking member of his party on budget affairs and who had been working with Gramm, got stiffed. According to Rutgers government professor Ross K. Baker, Latta was unaware of Gramm's final deal with Stockman and Gramm's decision to introduce the bill at the Budget Committee's first mark-up session. Latta left a meeting with the committee chair, found Gramm, and the two engaged in a heated argument, Ross wrote. Gramm prevailed.

"Latta thought that since he was a Republican," William Greider wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "his name should go ahead of Phil Gramm...that it should be Latta-Gramm instead of Gramm-Latta." He didn't know Phil Gramm.

In 1981, Gramm—an economist who could count—understood the delicate equilibrium of the House. With a Democratic majority of 243-192, the 47 Boll Weevils, mostly conservative, Southern representatives, could exercise power disproportionate to their number. Texicrat Charlie Stenholm might have been the Boll Weevils' leader in name, but once budget deliberations began all Stenholm could do was scratch his head and follow Gramm. In the end, all the Democrats could manage was to elevate Gramm's public profile by stripping him of his committee membership—which provided him the pretext to switch parties, resign from Congress and run again as a Republican. By the time he was telling enthusiastic crowds of constituents in the Sixth District "I had to choose between Tip O'Neill and y'all and I picked y'all," Phil Gramm had found his milieu in the media.

In 1984 Gramm prevailed in the election to fill the Senate seat vacated by Republican John Tower. In 1985, while he was 99th in seniority ranking in the Senate, Gramm sponsored the Gramm-Rudman (and let's not forget South Carolina Democrat Ernest Hollings) Bill, which promised a balanced budget by 1991. The budget is still not balanced and Warren Rudman and Fritz Hollings, like Delbert Latta, long ago soured on Phil Gramm. Gramm's manner of dealing with colleagues—of both parties—hasn't changed a great deal in 10

years. "It doesn't bother him if people don't like him," Wendy Lee Gramm told John Judis. "It's not personal, it's business."

For Phil Gramm, "business" is also fundraising. With more than $7 million that he can roll into a presidential campaign fund, Gramm leads a pack of potential Republican candidates that includes Kansas Senator Robert Dole; Lamar Alexander, who served as Governor of Tennessee and George Bush's Secretary of Education; Bill Bennett, who was Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, Dan Quayle, whose head, lungs and now appendix, make him questionable; and Jack Kemp, who served in Congress and was George Bush's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. (Kemp has suggested recently that he will not seek the nomination and there is some speculation that the prospect of a campaign against Gramm makes his decision easier. Kemp has compared Gramm's politics to Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, "where you knit together disparate groups of people who are mad about something, and then you wage war in a zero-sum contest.")

Gramm is an unabashed fundraiser. After he was elected to Congress, he boasted to several colleagues about the $40,000 he raised in one day, starting on the top floor of an office building in his district and working his way down. By 1989, Gramm, having outgrown the architecture of the Sixth Congressional District, booked the Astrodome for a fundraiser that took in more than $2 million. In 1991, Austin-based Republican political consultant Karl Rove said Gramm's list included at least 66,000 active contributors. Recently, Gramm has used his position as chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee to expand his own fundraising database. He told *Wall Street Journal* reporter John Harwood that he "has gotten to know every major financial giver in the country" and that some two-million people have sent money in response to direct mail solicitations bearing his signature. "Consistent with the committee practice," Harwood wrote, "he says he claims for his own use those names that weren't already on the committee's list." Gramm also requires a list of names in exchange for speaking to any group and on a recent Texas tour, according to Judis, who wrote a Gramm profile for *GQ*, a local contact at one stop pored over photos taken at an earlier campaign event, identifying subjects as "rich, superrich or megarich." Gramm was "like a kid perusing a toy catalogue."

PHIL GRAMM can also lay claim to one of the longest Federal Elections Commission investigations (five years) and one of the shortest Senate Ethics Commission investigations (one month). Both involved money and Gramm emerged from both relatively unsullied. In 1989 he agreed to settle a five-year-old dispute with the FEC by paying a $30,000 fine— one of the highest ever paid for finance violations at the congressional campaign level. Gramm's five-year defense was, to say the least, unorthodox. It's not often, an FEC spokesman told the AP, that the agency had to go to court during the course of an investigation. "And it's even less often that the commission is sued, and especially if the commissioners are sued in their individual capacity," FEC spokesman Scott Moxley said. At one point, the campaign committee insisted on a piece-by-piece inventory of more than 500,000 campaign documents, which would have resulted in enormous cost for the government. Even the final chapter of the investigation was written as Gramm would write it. "The Texan released the settlement to news organizations on Friday night, after the FEC had closed and before the settlement was final," AP reporter Jennifer Dixon wrote in 1989.

In 1990 Gramm wrote a $53,567 check to the Senate Ethics Committee to cover what Dallas savings and loan owner Jerry Stiles failed to charge for the $117,000 waterfront vacation home Stiles constructed for the Gramms in Maryland. Gramm initiated the investigation himself, after a Texas subcontractor informed the Senator that an FBI investigation of Stiles' failed Hallmark Savings & Loan was underway. The $53,567 was returned to Gramm after the Ethics Committee declared that he had done nothing wrong. "The taxpayers," the *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorialized, "will be picking up the $200-million tab for the [Stiles] S&Ls that later failed." It wasn't until 1992 that Gramm admitted he'd intervened with S&L regulators on behalf of Stiles, who was later indicted.

Gramm claimed the Ethics Committee's clean bill of health proved him honest. "I may be the only certified honest person in the race. As the voters get the facts, I think this episode will help me...." Gramm even laughed at Democrats, who learned about his brief, voluntary encounter with the Ethics Committee through the *New York Times*—two years after the fact. "I assumed when I did this, it would have become public," Gramm said with a chuckle, according to the *Houston Post*. In 1993, Gramm rode out another scandal, after the *Dallas Morning News* used leaked office memos to document that Gramm had routinely used taxpayer funds for political purposes.

"In an institution where self promotion is such a high art, Phil Gramm is virtuoso," Rutgers professor Ross Baker wrote in 1984. Stories of Gramm's self promotion—at the expense of other Congressmen and Senators—are commonplace. Democratic Congressman Jim Chapman tells of an East Texas project that he had worked on and Gramm had opposed for two years. After it was approved, Gramm wrote Chapman, inviting him to the groundbreaking. In 1984, shortly after he left the Democratic Party, Gramm voted against an appropriation that included a $49-million nutrition center at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. According to the *Washington Post*, the only member of Congress to attend the press briefing at which the project was announced was Gramm.

"He is loathed by other senators, thought to be a blowhard and a guy who is absolutely convinced of whatever he is convinced of, right or wrong," an aide to a conservative Republican Senator told John Judis.

Because Gramm is not running for majority leader, suggested Jim Wright in a telephone interview, the support of his colleagues might not matter. "Humphrey was preferred in 1976 by most Democratic senators. None of them preferred Jimmy Carter, but Carter was nominated," Wright said. "LBJ had the support of most of his Senate colleagues in the spring of 1960. But the voters supported Kennedy. And I do know that Taft was supported by Senate Republicans in 1952 and he didn't get to first base, because Eisenhower was nominated." Wright suspects that the Republican nomination will elude Gramm because the Senator will have a difficult time marketing himself to voters "as a personality" for national office.

Journalists are advised to report only on past and present. When ignoring that advice, it's wise to hew close to the Tom Ferguson/follow-the-money-and-bet-on-it school of prognostication. Ferguson is not alone in arguing that money drives politics. Election consultant Seth Huckaby has demonstrated that since 1976, with only one exception, the candidate who has raised the most money by December 31 of the year preceding the election has received his party's nomination.

Gramm has a lot of warts, but the $7 million he already has on hand suggests he will be able to hide most of them for long enough to allow voters to embrace him. Mosbacher, true reformer's zeal notwithstanding, and the delegates at the Republican Party's Texas convention, might have placed their money on the wrong candidates. □

The Observer *will follow Texas leaders of both parties at home, in Washington and abroad. We encourage readers to send clips from local newspapers, magazines, the* Congressional Record *and other sources. Address: Texas on the Potomac,* Texas Observer, *307 W. 7th St., Austin, Texas 78701.*

Back to the Cross of Gold

BY JAMES K. GALBRAITH

ONE THING MY OLD Yale classmate Jaime Serra Puche and I have in common, besides our names, is that we're both entitled to be sore at Alan Greenspan.

Financially, I'm a simple case. I have an Adjustable Rate Mortgage, tied to a short-term interest rate, which now costs me about $2,000 per year more than it did a year ago. I have some savings in a pension fund, partly in stocks and bonds, that have lost value this year. I have an income, too, but that hasn't changed. You get the picture.

Jaime's case is also simple. He has a country, called Mexico, that has been borrowing, at an adjustable rate, to finance roads, schools, water and power systems. He has an investment, called the peso, now worth 30 percent less than it was just last month. Oh, and Jaime doesn't have an income. Until a few weeks ago he was Finance Minister. Now he's unemployed.

There are lots more like us — not to be hurt when interest rates rise you have to be very rich, quite poor, or a hermit. Even being rich doesn't always do it. Orange County, California, one of the richest places on earth, borrowed short to invest long, got caught in the squeeze and went bankrupt. Or consider Uncle Sam himself, who cut $500 billion from his five-year deficit in 1993, only to have $150 billion or more added back in new five-year interest costs when rates rose. (In 1993, Uncle Sam also cut back on his long-term borrowing in favor of short-term bills, to take advantage of those low short-term interest rates that then didn't stay low. Tough luck, taxpayers.)

Speaking of bankrupts, the chief political victims of all this are President Clinton and the Democratic Party. They were the ones who promised, back in 1992, that we would be better off by now. Some of us are: Employment is up, thank you, and profits are up by over a third. But most of us aren't better off: Average wages haven't risen one bit in two years and wages are what most of us earn. Low interest rates were supposed to make up for this, to be the great benefit of deficit reduction, or so we were told. Remember? It might have worked too, if interest rates had stayed down. But they didn't.

It would be nice to think that in raising rates, Alan Greenspan and the Federal Reserve Board were serving some higher public purpose—such as fighting inflation. But no. Greenspan and company haven't offered any serious argument that raising rates was necessary to fight off inflation. Inflation was low before rates started rising, remains low today, was and is forecast to remain low in the future. Except for the fact that deficit reduction passed, circumstances did not change between 1993 and 1994. And that should have brought stable rates, not increases. It was a bait-and-switch, pure and simple.

Greenspan and company wanted, among other things, to scare middle-income folks out of stock and bond mutual funds and back into liquid assets (like money market funds and, you guessed it, bank deposits)—for the benefit of our friends the commercial bankers. Greenspan actually said this, more or less, to the Senate Banking Committee last May (I was there and heard him). But only recently has the watchdog press woke up. The *New York Times* had a piece in December, charting the rise in rates and the fall in the stock market. Guess what? Week by week, they track pretty well.

Why then aren't interest rates a political issue? One reason is that we seem to lack a political leader with the nerve to make them one. The President won't do it. Newt Gingrich, for his part, actually did say that he thought high interest rates were a problem. But someone got to him quickly, and he retracted. As H.L. Mencken once cracked about some surgery on Randolph Churchill: "The doctors found the one part of his body that was not malignant, and removed it."

CUTTING MIDDLE-CLASS taxes is now the agenda—to be paid for, in Clinton's proposal, by cuts in public housing for the poor and in transportation spending. (Thanks, but at that price I'll pass on my share.) The Republicans are, as ever, worse but more authentic: they'll cut capital gains taxes for the rich, add another $12 billion or so to the military, and take it all out of welfare.

The points to remember here are (1) yes, Virginia, the Federal Reserve really does control the (short-term) rate of interest; (2) the point of deficit reduction in 1993 and now of "paying" for tax cuts by screwing the poor was supposedly to raise (or maintain) "national savings" and so to drive down the (long-term) rate of interest, thereby stimulating investment and productivity growth; and (3) the Federal Reserve has spoiled that game, by driving up the short-term rate until the effects spill over into long-term markets and the benefits of deficit reduction (if any) are lost.

So why bother with holding the deficit down?

The true Democrats might begin their comeback by proposing to cut working-class taxes big-time, say by knocking two full points off the Social Security payroll tax and thereby eliminating the surplus in those funds, which presently is not used for Social Security but is rather lent back to the rest of the government and spent on everything else the government does. If doing this means breaking the budget rules, well then, break 'em. It's a better deal for the middle class than the Republican plan of cutting capital gains taxes (also not paid for). Democrats should offer the deal and say so.

But if the budget rules hold and can't be broken, the other tack would be to go after the Federal Reserve. I notice that my friend Jaime Serra's successor, a Stanford economist of similar vintage, has turned the NAFTA card into $18 billion of new loans to stabilize Mexico in this moment of crisis (something I predicted, by the way, back in '93). Why not have Greenspan or his successor do this to create jobs in, say, California, New York, New Jersey, even Texas? For that matter, why not do it for the whole American middle class, by the simple device of reversing the course of the past year and bringing interest rates back down? Congress wrote the Federal Reserve Act, and it can change it—if and as it chooses. Let the Democrats propose, say, a rollback order on interest rates and a full sunset review of the Federal Reserve System. And let the Republicans oppose it.

The Federal Reserve Act of 1913 had one great success. It removed the subjects of interest rates and banking from politics for over eight decades. But if we can't have a real fiscal politics anymore, a politics of working-class tax cuts and jobs programs and universal health care, then by all means let's go back to the 1890s, and have a politics of money and interest rates once again. Anyone care for a crown of thorns? □

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The Newt Dealers

BY JAMES RIDGEWAY

Washington, D.C.

MOVING QUICKLY to reorganize the U.S. House of Representatives, the Republican Right has set about concentrating power in the hands of the new speaker, Newt Gingrich.

Immediately, Gingrich set about abolishing the powerful liberal committee fiefdoms of the past and revamping the makeup of some others. He ignored seniority in appointing committee chairs, is limiting committee heads' tenure to six years, and is ending the use of the proxy vote—a device by which a chairman could extend his power by offering colleagues perks in exchange for votes.

All of these moves will consolidate his own position and make it easier for the Republicans to push through plans for dramatically reducing taxes—including the eventual elimination of the income tax—as well as making drastic cuts in spending.

These proposed cuts spell the end of the social welfare system as we know it, and will be executed either by cutting out programs like welfare, or bundling them together in block grants and sending them back to the states for use at their own discretion. To speed up this process, the Heritage Foundation, the brain behind much of the Republican thinking on congressional reform, is circulating a plan to make Congress work part-time. According to the conservative think tank, this would deter Congress from passing too many laws, and would ensure that representatives keep in touch with their constituents.

Under a weak speaker like Tom Foley, Democratic committee leaders such as John Dingell or Dan Rostenkowski wielded a great deal of power. In the new Congress, while committee chairs will still hold authority as pillars of the Republican right, they owe their allegiance to a far more formidable speaker. With this in mind, three new committee chairs demand special attention.

Ways and Means

Taking over from Sam Gibbons of Florida will be Bill Archer, a well-to-do businessman from Houston, who has been in Congress ever since he won George Bush's old seat in 1970. An attorney who began politics as a Democrat, Archer doesn't take PAC money, and was among the most conservative ideological members of the backbench right, lining up with people like Dick Armey as an ardent supporter of Jack Kemp's supply-side economics.

Archer takes over one of the top House committees—Ways and Means determines who gets taxed and by how much—that for years was dominated by Dan Rostenkowski. Ways and Means will now preside over Republican plans to help the rich through a reduction in the capital gains tax, by providing favorable treatment for corporations, and by further stimulating the health insurance industry by allowing middle-class tax write-offs for its health insurance policies.

And Archer doesn't believe in the income tax. "I would hope down the road that we could find an alternative to income taxes so we can eliminate them," Archer told the *Los Angeles Times* after the election in November. "I know it is not something we can do in this term, but we have to begin to think creatively."

Archer is working on proposals for a broad-based consumption or sales tax, which he would introduce only in conjunction with a sharp reduction in the capital gains and income taxes.

And as an ardent supply-sider, Archer likes the idea of the flat tax, which would reduce income tax rates across the board while eliminating loopholes. As for those economists who argue that consumption taxes would simply place a greater burden on the poor and middle classes, Archer dismisses them as kneejerk liberals. "We've got to overcome this mind-set in which we argue about everything in terms of rich against poor," he told the *L.A. Times*. "People will argue that a consumption tax is regressive, but if it allows you to eliminate obstacles to savings and investment, then you are looking at something that lifts all boats."

At Ways and Means, Archer will play an important role in welfare reform. "I'm looking forward to real welfare reform," Archer said, indicating that "we can pick up budget savings (for tax cuts) in the welfare area."

Archer is anxious to shift social programs to private voluntary agencies, citing his own experience as a board member of the Open Door Mission on Houston's East Side. According to the *Houston Press*, "he explained that while using business principles to operate a social agency allows the mission to feed, clothe, and shelter the homeless for $2.50 per head per day, the cheapest comparable federal program provides the same service for over $40 per day."

Commerce

John Dingell's powerful Energy and Commerce Committee, renamed simply Commerce, will now be headed by the Virginia congressman whose district boasts the largest cigarette-making plant in the country, and whose unstinting efforts on behalf of the tobacco industry have won him the affectionate title of "Marlboro Man." Thomas Bliley takes more money from the tobacco industry than any other member.

One of the most important men in the House, Bliley will now act as gatekeeper to any sort of regulation that deals with interstate commerce. Bliley, whether it be on pollution, the Superfund, or regulating the tobacco industry, can determine whether an issue gets a hearing, and whether and when it comes to a vote.

An undertaker by training, Bliley has represented Richmond since 1980. In 1990 he led a successful battle against a bill that would have limited tobacco advertising, banned sales to minors, and restricted underage access to cigarette machines. Bliley also temporarily managed to get a scientist removed from an EPA panel because he was supposedly biased against cigarette smoking. The man was later reinstated.

This past year, as the ranking Republican on the health and environment subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee, Bliley opposed a proposed national ban on smoking in public buildings, arguing the measure was too sweeping. As his spokesperson argued, "It's one step before you go into people's houses." Bliley also disputed EPA statistics that 5,000 to 9,000 lives could be saved each year by reducing the risks of secondhand smoke inhalation, saying the agency "politically manipulated" its data and ignored a recent study that downgraded the risk of passive smoking. At one point, he implied that passive smoking was no more dangerous than drinking pasteurized milk.

In its study of influence peddling by the tobacco industry, the Public Interest Research Group found that Bliley was the leading recipient of contributions from the 12

James Ridgeway is a writer for the Village Voice, *in which this originally appeared. Valerie Burgher of the Center for Responsive Politics helped research this article.*

largest tobacco PACs, receiving $98,540.

But Bliley isn't just influenced by the tobacco companies. He is also a big recipient of other business PAC money. From the beginning of 1993 to June 1994, the Center for Responsive Politics reports that Bliley had received contributions from political action committees amounting to $356,561, with contributions of $62,000 from agriculture, including tobacco, food processing, and timber interests. He also received substantial sums from oil, gas, and insurance, as well as banks. The single biggest category was the health care industry. Bliley was a vigorous opponent of Clinton's health insurance reform. In PIRG's listing of contributions from "dirty-water" PACs—political action committees that fought against strengthening the clean water law—Bliley received $224,000 between 1987 and 1993.

In general, Bliley is against government regulation while in favor of letting corporations take their own regulatory actions. "Voluntary programs will show the most promise in meeting the president's goals in a cost-effective way," he said in 1993, referring to the Clinton administration's proposed plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions, back to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

Appropriations

The chair of the powerful House Appropriations Committee would have gone to Joseph M. McDade had he not come down with a nasty case of the Rostenkowskis. Presently under indictment on corruption charges, McDade was looked over in favor of Robert Livingston, the well-to-do representative from suburban New Orleans, Louisiana, who can trace his lineage back to the founding fathers.

Livingston replaces the liberal David Obey of Wisconsin, with whom he has forged a protracted adversarial relationship. Obey never patronized the right minority, and Livingston is not apt to forget that. "We have had some very strong differences about how we ought to be proceeding in the foreign operations area, but we always managed to reach bipartisan consensus," Obey recently told *Congressional Quarterly*. "I think Bob is a strong political adversary, but he also is a man who recognizes that the institution has to work." The Appropriations Committee is at the crux of the Republican effort to revamp Congress as it votes the money for federal programs. And with the drive to remove such entitlements as food stamps and welfare, and place them within the appropriations process, that means the committee chair will have even more power than before.

Livingston is only fifth in seniority among Republicans on the panel, and, as a consequence, he owes his job entirely to Gingrich's planning and largess. As such, Livingston can be counted on to do pretty much as he is told. "I'm in a position to direct the ability of the government to comply with significant cutbacks," he told *CQ* recently. "All Americans should expect less from the federal government. That was the mandate from this election. I think people are prepared to expect less from the federal government if they know they are getting more freedom and that control of spending will be returned to cities and state capitals."

An attorney who specialized in organized crime cases as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Nixon years, Livingston first came to Congress in a special election in 1977 after the Democratic incumbent was forced to resign for vote fraud. He has had no trouble getting reelected, consistently pulling down 70 percent of the vote. He was ranking Republican on the select intelligence committee, where he was a staunch backer of the

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Nicaraguan contras and a strong supporter of the covert war. He was deeply involved in the planning of the secret contra supply network that Oliver North ran from the White House basement during the mid-80s in the face of congressional opposition. During the 1980s Louisiana was a center for recruiting mercenaries to fight with the contras, and a staging point for shipping war materials—the so-called "humanitarian aid" that slipped past congressional prohibitions—to the contras.

Livingston's PAC contributions from 1993 through June 1994 were about $88,000, with some $32,000 coming from defense industries. The energy industry is also a major contributor.

Despite the zealotry of this new group of congressional powerbrokers, ideology will not deliver the Contract with America all by itself. It's simply not that easy to streamline the House behind a powerful speaker, because the people who hold the real reins of power are not to be found on Capitol Hill. They are the major corporations whose money the politicians chase, and their fixers, the lawyer lobbyists, who serve as an interface between government and industry, arguing the case for business, making compromises, and arranging deals.

Under the Democratic regime, the firm of Patton, Boggs & Blow was a key deal maker in the city, and in recent years lobbying has become a conglomerate industry with the likes of Hill & Knowlton, one of the biggest companies, owning several specialized subsidiary lobby firms, while being entirely owned by the WPP Group, a British conglomerate.

With the Republicans controlling Congress, influence will shift to lobbyists with more experience in handling conservative causes. Suddenly, former Senate minority leader and presidential candidate Howard Baker comes back into play through Baker, Donelson, Bearman, & Caldwell, as does Timmons & Co., with its longstanding ties to the Republican Party through past presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Timmons is especially close to majority leader Bob Dole. Then there's Norman Lent, a former congressman from Long Island who was a key Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee with Thomas Bliley. He too is now a lobbyist and, one would imagine, very much in demand.

According to Common Cause's most recent report, major corporations invested millions of dollars helping to elect the new Republican Congress. Financial interests, energy companies, tobacco companies, the telecommunications industry, and the insurance industry were among the leading donors of soft money to the Republican campaign committees from January 1, 1993, through October 19, 1994.

And despite his cries of congressional revolution, the new speaker also gets his dough from business PACs, with finance, insurance, and real estate heading the list at $274,247 in 1992. That year, Gingrich also received $114,000 from the health-care industry. Though big on principle, there's another side to this new powerhouse. Gingrich rails against the lawyer lobbyists, but played a key role in defeating the lobby-campaign-finance-reform acts of 1994. "This month in a private meeting with special-interest lobbyists in Washington," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote on October 19, "Gingrich told his audience that it owed him big-time. He and his fellow Republicans, he reminded the audience, had blocked passage of a reform bill that lobbyists had fought bitterly."

Gingrich then made clear to the lobbyists what he expected as a reward: campaign funds for Republican congressional candidates. "For anybody not on board now," the speaker told the lobbyists, "it's going to be

Armey of the Night

BY TOM CARSON

Arlington, Virginia

NEWT GINGRICH has said that he thinks his own name's weird, but I think it's beautiful. In his first name, the new grows a tail that turns it beastly; nesting in his second, as so many op-ed cartoonists have discovered, is the Grinch. This is our greatest novelist, Caprice, in fine form. Then again, naming Republicans has often been a task Caprice tackles with special artistic relish. Jesse Helms: an outlaw at the tiller. Bob Dole: sometimes the simplest effects are the best.

Still, even Caprice's publishers (Random House, who else?) must have hesitated, and privately wondered if even the most brilliant authors can go too far with the symbolic-monickers bit, when they were first confronted with the name Dick Armey. "Look here, Chevy," they probably said, tapping the manuscript, *"nobody's* going to buy that one." But remembering how previous successes had gainsaid earlier naysayers (and to me, actually naming Ollie North "Ollie North," which in just three syllables put half of Laurel and Hardy in charge of *el Norte*, had seemed pretty unbeatable so far as novelistic chutzpah goes), Caprice held firm.

Dick Armey it is.

Representative Richard K. Armey of Texas, as he's more formally known, is the new majority leader of the House. In the advance hype for the incoming Congress, he's sometimes been called Gingrich's Gingrich, but that's just the sort of quickie formula that journalists resort to when they don't have a handle on somebody yet. If the tag is useful at all, it's in pointing to a difference rather than a similarity, since in his own days as the House GOP's putative second-in-command Newt himself was nobody's Gingrich but his own.

It was Armey who traded barbs with Hillary Clinton during her otherwise triumphant debut on the Hill as the administration's health-care reform advocate—a scene whose heroine's lyrical ignorance of the wrath to come has left it looking in retrospect less like Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station than like Scarlett O'Hara among her prewar beaux. She'd called Armey the Dr. Kevorkian of the health-care debate (such a quipster, Hillary). His reply was the much-quoted thigh-slapper, "The reports of your charm are overstated, and the reports of your wit are understated."

Stylistically, this was classic Washington Kabuki—two humorless people pretending to be amusing. But Armey got the last laugh, or wheeze.

Still, from his press, it's plain he has a knack for making himself likable, which Gingrich doesn't. (Reading between the lines of the endless good copy he inspires, the press's attitude toward Gingrich smacks more of the can't-take-your-eyes-off-him fascination once felt by the citizens of Tokyo toward Godzilla.) "Armey is an original," gushed *U.S. News & World Report*, "a funny micro-economist, a folksy supply-side commando." That he's a funny microeconomist we can readily grant. As for the folksy part, Armey first drew attention by sleeping on a cot in the House gym during his freshman term to save money, so he said. When the urge to play manly, maudlin cowboy seizes him, he can kick shtick with the best, or maybe I mean worst. One oft-repeated story from Armey's first campaign has our hero rallying his gloomy staff by throwing a pair of spurs down on a desk, saying, "No man should ever lose his daddy's spurs. Now let's get it done." He still goes fishing a lot, most often these days with his pal Clarence Thomas (although having to force a randy grin every time Thomas says "Smell my fingers, heh, heh, heh" must, I imagine, make for wearying afternoons on the river).

Like Gingrich, Armey's a former professor, of economics in Armey's case, at what was then North Texas State University. But unlike Gingrich, whose precocious, little-engine-that-should ambitions have already become folkloric, Armey presents himself as the counter-cliché of the thoughtful ordinary fellow, just like you and me except more modest, the guy who never considered a political career until another's promptings to pursue his destiny sent him dutifully lumbering greasy-poleward. Admittedly, the scene we're given falls short pageantry-wise of Paul on the road to Damascus. "Honey, these people sound like a bunch of darn fools," ordinary-fellow Dick grumbles while watching Congress on C-SPAN one fateful night in 1984. In more red-blooded versions, Dick says "damn fools," but either way "Yeah, you could do that," wife Susan responds. Having spoken her crucial walk-on line in the fable, Mrs. Armey—the *first* Mrs. Armey—departs our story shortly thereafter. Just possibly, ordinary-fellow Dick, who since becoming Congressman Armey has remarried, never forgave her for the double meaning in her answer.

But during his years as a thoughtful ordinary fellow, it turned out, Professor Armey hadn't done much ordinary thinking, as that process is commonly understood. Instead, he'd had Ideas, which are of the sort that deserve to get named Rover. Making a splash in his first campaign, Armey proposed phasing out Social Security. He's since conceded that doing so might cause problems (presumably, dead grannies in the streets, meaning more work for municipal cleanup crews—uh-oh, that's bigger government), but has yet to relinquish the dream. He's also determined to get the graduated income tax abolished in favor of a flat 17-percent levy, a notion lately in vogue among the kind of right-wing intellectuals whose think tanks seemingly come equipped with treads and gun turrets. Its pernicious beauty is that it combines the appearance of fairness Americans like with the guaranteed inequities rich Americans demand, and the new majority leader's target date for enacting it is 1997.

If even the lesser bees in Armey's bonnet produce honey, life will turn very simple: All Americans without pull will be in lots of trouble all the time until they die. At various times, he's called for abolishing both the Department of Education—ending all federal education aid—and the Legal Services Corporation. He's an anti-choicer who opposed including abortion coverage in any health-care reform package, making the charming argument that the government shouldn't condone the "self-indulgent" practices of women who'd been "damned careless" (no "darns" for Dick this time) with their bodies to begin with. However, the millions of unwanted children soon to join us in Armeyland will be well advised to make acquiring a flak jacket their first priority, since he also wants to repeal both the assault-rifle ban and the Brady bill's five-day waiting period on handgun purchases. The good news is that, in the miserably underfunded public schools they'll briefly attend before getting shot, they will be allowed, according to the constitutional amendment Armey favors, to pray.

In Armey's early days in Congress, his more extreme Rovers could still get a legislator branded a crank if not a kook, and those were the days; he's just another dog-lover

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Tom Carson is a staff writer for the Village Voice, *in which this originally appeared.*

now. (Yes, it's finally happened: I've grown nostalgic for the relative good sense of the Reagan years.) But after a spell of playing kamikaze, he learned to modulate his tactics if not moderate his views. More importantly, he also hitched his wagon to Gingrich's rising star. Opposing Bush's 1990 budget deal—the one that kissed off "Read my lips" and ultimately Bush himself—seems to have been the key turning point for both men; their "revolution" was an oedipal revolt within the Republican Party long before it became a war against the Democrats.

It strikes me as unlikely that Armey could have risen to anything like his current prominence except as Gingrich's henchman, even in our changed political landscape, although, since Gingrich himself is also the one who's done the most to engineer said change in our political landscape, that can turn into a chicken-and-egg argument very quickly. Yet Armey's (temporary?) willingness to settle for the henchman's role doesn't make him any less unnerving in his own right. Rather, it suggests he knows his limitations, which is a sign of uncommon canniness in an ideologue.

The weekend before Christmas, he was a team player, appearing on the tube along with other GOP congressional leaders to tout the party's cautious new line that spending cuts will have to precede any new tax cuts. (After a convenient bout of campaign amnesia, they must have just remembered that when Reagan gaily did it the other way around, the spending cuts never got made and apparently, even they don't believe the country can afford to add a *second* trillion dollars to its deficit.) Before the election, when Armey undertook assembling the "Contract With America," he promised beforehand to omit any mention of his favorite Rover, the flat tax, from the package. Naturally, that didn't stop him from springing it all over again on an unsuspecting public ("Sic 'em, boy!") right after election day, just as Newt sprang school prayer on us without warning. It's incredibly tedious to have to point out that this is exactly the kind of Trojan-horse politics the Republicans used to accuse Clinton of practicing, back when—RIP, Joycelyn Elders—what was inside the Trojan horse was a Trojan.

The obvious thing to say is that the dottiness of Armey's Rovers shouldn't blind us to their dangers. But let me issue this counter-advisory: Their dangers shouldn't blind us to their dottiness, either. Especially in the rather fustian way he expresses them, they sound like the constructs—prized for the pains he took over them—of a man who's spent too much time in empty rooms telling himself he's brainy, and too much time in full ones conning the hapless Economics 101 students of North Texas State University into believing the same. Clearly, Armey's most treasured self-image is of Armey the great thinker, strewing plums of jaw-dropping wisdom, coruscatingly brilliant polemical comebacks, and hearty drolleries as he strolls through history's salon. With a terrible combination of ego and wistfulness, he's fond of labeling every other remark that comes out of his mouth "Armey's Axiom," a habit carried over from his teaching days—and the ex-undergrads among you will remember just which sad-sack mediocrities among the profs used to indulge in that sort of wan vanity. (A sample Axiom, which Armey actually did use in classrooms: "The market's rational, the government's dumb." And getting dumber.)

Yet the ex-profs now riding high in the GOP—Phil Gramm's another, of course—remind me less of a college faculty than they do of my old high-school teachers. Not the good ones, either. No doubt you too can effortlessly summon up your own variants

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on the type—the blowhard fantasists, unable to resist the Walter Mitty allure of parading their masterful secret selves before a captive audience, savoring their garbled aphorisms and bogus *savoir-faire*, striking peculiarly uncontextualized notes of zesty, furtively grandiose private sublimation in those drab, dim, chromosome-filled voids. From the safety of hindsight, they seem a somewhat poignant bunch; there's a particular melancholy to the intellectual life's also-rans. But to imagine the also-rans running the country, as we now must, reduces the pathos. And improves the comedy, however tinged with hysteria the laughs may be.

I'd hardly care to suggest that they're stupid. Gingrich's scuttling shrewdness is obviously terrifically quick, and if Armey's a fool he's the luckiest fool this side of Ringo Starr. But as thinkers, they're gimcrack—and thinkers, strangely enough, is precisely what they're most insistent they are. One reason that's strange is that the old GOP never had much use for theorists. Typically, the party cast itself as the embodiment of the kind of values that made thinking unnecessary, and that were expressed by means of manners and attitudes rather than intellectual folderol. But the Jewish neocons changed all that. When the likes of Norman Podhoretz switched their allegiance to the right, they went right on thinking and conceptualizing as they'd always done, partly for the traditional reason that they couldn't have made their influence felt otherwise (not with *those* chowderheaded goyim). They gave Reagan Republicanism a rationale of an intellectual caliber, if not an intellectual validity, that it had hardly earned—but it was predictable that the chowderheaded goyim, thinking they'd learned how the trick was done, would begin attempting to fly solo with all the crackpot enthusiasm of drunken airline passengers grabbing at the joystick. What has William Kristol wrought?

Whatever their other talents, as intellectuals our new leaders have the style that instantly denotes mediocrity in the full flush of unwarranted self-seriousness. There's Gingrich, with his hobby-horse lecture on "The Five Pillars of American Civilization"—the civilization-by-the-numbers bit is always a tip-off. (Anyway, he's leaving out the sixth pillar—you know, the salt one.) There's Gramm, always getting that dank gleam in his eye like he's about to say something terrifically shrewd and funny, right before he doesn't. And there's Armey, with the elephantine, hand-me-down wit of his riposte to Hillary as a fair index to his panache. One story about Armey oddly haunts me. A trio of GOP strategists was seated on his office couch, and Armey, so *U.S. News & World Report* says, just "couldn't resist" cracking: "There hasn't been so much brainpower assembled on that couch since I used to sleep there alone." That's John Kennedy's old joke, at a White House dinner for Nobel Prize winners, about Thomas Jefferson—and I imagine Armey relishing the opportunity to put a tidbit he'd culled from his reading to such nifty use, the way Trekkies get all giddy at a chance to say "Not logical" in conversation.

In short, Cliff the mailman has come to power. What we're witnessing is the triumph of the village explainers—the half-bright intellectual blatherers of whom Gertrude Stein, applying the term to Ezra Pound, remarked that they were excellent if you were a village, but if not, not. God knows what it takes to be denied tenure at West Georgia College, but Gingrich managed it; well, he's got tenure now.

This isn't the lunatics taking over the asylum, because Congress never did have keepers. It's more like the town cranks preparing to give everyone who ever doubted them the shaft. □

A Liberal Cure for Capitalism's Ills

By Bernard Rapoport

Robert Skidelsky writes in his biography of John Maynard Keynes thusly: "After the First World War, Keynes set out to save a capitalistic system he did not admire. He found himself in a world emptied by war of its old faiths and certainties; one in which monsters prowled, ready to devour what remained of Europe's civilization. The collapse of the American economy in 1929 closed, so it seemed, the circle of despair. In 1939, the European war, suspected in 1918, broke out again. 'We can regard what is now happening,' Keynes wrote in June 1940, 'as the final destruction of the optimistic liberalism which Locke inaugurated... For the first time for more than two centuries Hobbes has more message for us than Locke...'"

This quote is to help us remember Locke for his optimism and Hobbes for his pessimism, the former emphasizing man's capacity for love, the latter the inclination for acquisitiveness.

What follows is not an attempt to prove via syllogistic reasoning a given point but rather to express intuitively my view of why we cannot live without hope but that we must recognize time is running short so far as for turning things around. We must, however, recognize that it is within our power to do this!

I proudly bear the label "liberal." I was! I am! I define a liberal as one who is not adamant about protecting "what is" if a better society is possible through change. On the other hand, there is no virtue in change just for the sake of change. I used to associate liberal with being a do-gooder. I think "dogoodism" was conceived centuries ago by the power groups within the society. They thought welfare would be a means of quieting the masses. This was the beginning of institutionalizing ghettoism and poverty. All of us are, indeed, minorities whether in terms of race, religion, ethnic, social or economic groups. Too often the leaders of these various groups, instead of emphasizing responsibilities, demand increasing entitlements for their particular group.

This thinking emphasizes virtue in wanting more and giving less, plus consoles the so-called leader as insuring preservation of his leadership role. I submit this is the primary contributor to the malaise condition that is so evident today. We seemingly have too many so-called leaders but too few who really want to take charge! This is why we continue to be cursed with the problems of poverty. If we substituted for welfare payments, starting right now, a guarantee that everyone would have a right to a job, entitlement costs would be reduced to a small percentage of what we now spend. That one commitment to a failing society is the greatest crime prevention piece of legislation that could ever be enacted. The dignity of our populace would rise to a height that it has never heretofore achieved.

We need to ask the question once again so eloquently posed by the late President John Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

My father was a social radical and, for him, the dichotomy wasn't all that difficult. He recognized that too often leaders talk with strength, but weakly go about the task of leading. I remember some 69 years ago when I was about 8 years old, he took me outside and said, "Bernard, I want to tell you something. You are the child of a Russian-Jewish revolutionist, so you are going to have to be twice as good to get half as far. Enjoy the challenge!" I thought that was enough, but he didn't. He was not particularly religious, but he was very ethnically concerned and he adjured me with these words, "Being Jewish, you have a tremendous responsibility. Each of us who are should and must conduct themselves in an exemplary manner, one in which you feel that the fate of our people rests on your personal conduct. Therefore, you must be a well-rounded, educated and contributing person." That was his charge to me, the most important aspect of it being that one must have a sense of responsibility.

Because of his radicalism, he had a special hatred of poverty, a condition from which he really never extricated himself. He, however, wasn't aware of his economic condition, nor was our family, because there were always books and records and the understanding that the cultured mind should always be the continued objective. He thought because he came out of a czarist prison in Siberia that American citizenship involved not entitlement, but responsibility.

Let's take a look at the world in which we live, with special emphasis on our own nation. I was talking with a teacher in the Waco system who affirmed to me that under state law it was illegal to retain a child in class after one or two semesters. There was no reference as to whether the child was qualified to be promoted to the next grade, but simply that the law said, "This must be." Do you want to know why we have so many poor people? There is an answer. In this world or any world of the past, illiteracy is the contributing reason of poverty.

To change requires a commitment to an educational system that begins with a "head start program" for all children, continues with a comprehensive K-12 curriculum and from that point moves on to higher education whether it be in colleges, universities or technical or vocational schools. Instead of spending money for hand-outs, welfare that is, through which we sweep people under the rug to get them out of the way, we need a drastic change in attitude. When there is no alternative, people will do for themselves. The alternative is jobs for those that want to work and a society that puts education first.

Funds for remedial training so children can be brought up to speed in the educational process is not spending money; rather it is investing it. Meals for kids at school is another investment that must be made. Good nutrition is going to prepare that child to be receptive and ready to learn. In addition we must recognize that in our society, in the majority of households, both parents are working and the school hours should be from 8 to 5. Housing programs—how people live—are all important. The indisputable understanding is that children raised in conventional families have greater opportunities for happiness and success than those who are not.

I remember in my early years, I never heard anything about divorces. It seemed that the one thing families knew better in those days than we know today is that the strength of a relationship is not how well you get along, but how much stress and strain a relationship can take. It is apparent that relationships do not have much strength in this day and time. The inability of families to stay together produces a problem that is increasingly difficult and therefore achieving a solution requires total dedication. I am no psychologist, but I believe any fair observer can come to no other conclusion but that poverty is the single greatest contributor to the break-up of families!

As I re-read what I have written, I anticipate the response, "We cannot afford to do these things." A more accurate analysis will reveal that the acceptance of this conclusion is stupid! Intelligence demands that we recognize if a society wants more it must produce more! Palpably, to accomplish this, it must know more. Incontrovertibly, today the "haves" are experiencing increasing income and the reverse is true for the "lesser haves" plus the percentage of "lesser haves" is also on the increase. That's true! But why? It is not so much the disparity in income as the inequities in the knowledge factor among our populace. Spread education, which increases opportunity and self-reliance, and the amelioration within our society will increase exponentially!

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tal regulations, complained that the tests are unfair to the general public. "We certainly want to see the environment clean," said Aubre Vaughan. "But more tests on tailpipes are not cost-effective." Whitmire apparently agrees. As does a chorus of Republicans who have been whining about the air-quality measures. Republican U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison in late January called for a moratorium on the tests, and Rep. Joe Barton, R-Ennis, new chairman of a House Energy and Commerce oversight subcommittee, promised hearings on the new air standards.

✔ **WORKING FOR LABOR.** Labor Party Advocates, a group that is exploring the possibility of forming a worker-oriented party in the United States, will meet January 21 in St. Louis to decide what to do next in light of the Republican takeover of Congress and the rightward drift of Democratic Party leaders. For more information, call 202-319-1932 or write LPA, P.O. Box 53177, Washington, D.C. 20009-3177. Membership costs $20 (or $100 to join the Eugene V. Debs Club).

✔ **NUCLEAR FAMILY.** Lee Hogan, president and CEO of Houston Industries Energy, which owns Houston Lighting & Power, got a little carried away in his announcement that his company had acquired an Argentine power plant. Hogan told the *Houston Chronicle* that the acquisition of a second plant in Argentina provides the company with a "critical mass" that will help it operate more efficiently in the country. Houston Lighting & Power is the managing partner in the South Texas Project, a nuclear-powered electric plant often cited by federal regulators as one of the worst plants in the nation. The *Chronicle* story did not specify if the second Argentine plant acquired, at Santiago de Estero, is a conventional or nuclear plant. And perhaps Hogan meant "economy of scale." HI Energy announced plans to acquire more foreign power plants as Argentina, like other cash-starved South American countries, auctions its national patrimony in an attempt to pay off foreign debt.

✔ **ARCHER'S AGENDA.** It does not include eliminating tax breaks for the wealthy, Houston Republican Congressman Bill Archer told the *Wall Street Journal* in December, because the wealthy don't get tax breaks. Asked if there might be provisions in the tax code that only benefit narrow special interests and ought to be eliminated, Archer responded as God intended him to: "Since 1982, 'the tax code has been swabbed and swabbed again' to eliminate special-interest tax breaks,' Mr. Archer argued. 'I really don't think there are any significant factors in the code today that would save you any revenue that you could do away with." *Journal* reporter Alan Murray had to disagree, writing: "... Mr. Archer's contention that the tax code has been cleared of such debris is novel to say the least. Narrow tax breaks shower billions in benefits on the oil-and-gas, timber, cattle-breeding and real-estate industries and others." Archer, after years of relative obscurity representing the congressional district that once elected George Bush, is now chair of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee.

✔ **WAR ON THE POOR.** Before Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, in 1965, 33.2 million Americans—17 percent of the population—lived in poverty. By 1973, writes Bob Herbert in his *New York Times* column, both the absolute numbers and the rate of poverty had declined, to 23 million and 11 percent, respectively. "And then came the reversal. By 1988, after eight years of Reagan revolution and its cruel assault on social services, the number of people in poverty had risen to 31.9 million, or 13.1 percent of the population, and the numbers are still rising."

✔ **PEMEX IN DEER PARK.** Mexico will stop short of selling its nationally owned oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), according to Paul B. Carroll of the *Wall Street Journal*'s Mexico City bureau. But the company, nationalized in the 1930s by President Lázaro Cárdenas, is going to change under its new director, Adrian Lajous Vagas. Lajous, an economist appointed in the shuffle of technocrats that followed the Christmas collapse of the peso, will open Pemex's downstream operations to foreign investors—possibly allowing investments in petrochemical plants or pipelines. As corporate director of operations in 1992, Lajous was largely responsible for a $1-billion joint venture with Shell Oil Co. The agreement provides Pemex access to Shell's Deer Park refinery, where according to the *Journal*, Pemex "can observe the technology Shell uses and see just how far below world standards Pemex has been in the refining of unleaded gasoline." The *Journal* touts Lajous as a smart guy, so there's more to this than shared technology, which could have been achieved through a bidding war for one of Shell's design engineers.

✔ **ORPHAN COMMISSIONER?** "It's possible, you bet," Governor-elect George Bush said of placing some children of unwed welfare mothers in orphanages in Texas. "Whether or not it needs to be expanded to the state of Texas, I'm not prepared to say at this point...Boys Town in the Panhandle of Texas has worked. Now whether or not that needs to be expanded, I'm open for suggestions." The boys' town Bush referred to is Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, near Amarillo, a privately funded, non-profit home for troubled youth. The only alumnus of Farley's Boys Ranch ever elected to Congress, Bill Sarpalius, was defeated in November and has said he is looking for work.

✔ **NO TO COMPOUND 1080.** Environmentalists scored a victory when the federal EPA decided to deny the Texas Department of Agriculture's request to use a highly toxic poison in an attempt to control rabies. The TDA asked for permission to use Compound 1080, an extremely toxic, water soluble, poison that was developed during World War II as a chemical warfare agent and was banned in 1972 because of its persistence in the environment, the carnage of non-targeted wildlife and threats to humans. The Texas Department of Health and the federal Centers for Disease Control promote vaccination rather than poisoned bait for rabies control.

✔ **RADIOACTIVE SURPRISE.** The Army Corps of Engineers has found low levels of radioactive cesium in three landfills at the government's Pantex weapons plant near Amarillo, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reported. Cesium 1377, a product of nuclear fission, emits harmful gamma rays that penetrate skin and bones. It usually is associated with nuclear reactors or bomb factories, not assembly plants like Pantex. "The levels are not a significantly huge number. It's just something that's not expected there," said Joe Martillotti, an official with the state Bureau of Radiation Control. The corps also confirmed that high explosives and other contaminants had leached from a Pantex lake into the Ogallala Aquifer, the underground water source for the Panhandle, but of course added there was no cause for alarm.

✔ **DRUG OF CHOICE.** Federal Drug Czar Lee Brown and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala expressed alarm at a recent report that marijuana use was up among youth, as 25 percent of 10th graders said they had smoked marijuana in the last year. But the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws continued to argue that the focus on marijuana is way out of proportion. NORML noted that over 20 percent of 10th graders said they had been drunk in the last month. According to the government's own statistics, alcohol killed over 100,000 Americans in 1993 while marijuana killed a reported 300; NORML noted that drug-related emergency-room admissions amounted to 0.57 percent of all visits, while alcohol accounted for 15-25 percent of admissions were related to alcohol. □

MOLLY IVINS

Dancing Lessons From Congress

Happy New Year! And now it's time to take down the Christmas tree, throw out the fruitcake, add up the bills and step on the scale. Here comes January, February, Rye Krisp and cottage cheese. 'Tis the season to get real, so let's go right back to political basics. The first law of politics is: You Got to Dance With Them What Brung You.

So let's take a look at who brung our new leaders. Senator Bob Dole's largest contributor clump is in finance, insurance and real estate, for a total of $537,356, about 60 percent from political action committees and the rest from individuals. His second biggest interest group is agriculture—perfectly understandable in a farm state senator—for $320,731, almost all of it from PACs. Rep. Newt Gingrich also owes most to finance, insurance and real estate, a total of $360,208, with miscellaneous business a close second, $318,584, again with PACs predominating easily.

Senator Alfonse D'Amato of New York, new chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, got a whopping $1,331,695 from finance, insurance and real estate, with miscellaneous business a poor second at $456,775. On the other hand, Rep. Robert Livingstone, new chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, owes his reelection primarily to defense industries ($89,500) and energy and natural resources ($50,250), virtually all from PACs.

Rep. Pat Roberts, new chairman of House Agriculture, unsurprisingly had agriculture as far and away his biggest contributor; everything else is minuscule. But Rep. Thomas Bliley Jr., new chairman of the House Commerce Committee, has a far more nicely balanced spread. Finance, insurance and real estate lead again with $170,222, closely followed by health interests with $161,638. Also right up there is agriculture with $151,226, which is only unusual if you don't know that the last committee chairman, Henry Waxman, led the crusade against tobacco interests.

My thanks to the newsletter *Capital Eye, a Close-Up Look at Money in Politics* for the numbers.

Now what do our new leaders think about campaign finance reform, the root of the rot, the system of legalized bribery with which they buy office? Why, those li'l ol' reformers, just listen: Senator Phil Gramm said, "I am eager to reform our campaign process, just as the Democrats were when they were in the majority." Ho, ho, ho; hee, hee, hee; that Phil Gramm—what a card. Senator Mitch McConnell, the Kentucky Republican, was up front: "Campaign finance will not be on the agenda. There is no groundswell for it. We won't waste any time on it."

Thanks, Mitch. According to national polls, 78 percent of Americans think that most members of Congress are more interested in serving special interest groups than in serving the people they represent. Which goes to show that you can't fool 78 percent of the American people. But that's no groundswell.

As we listen to the Republicans talk about "reforming Congress" and "reforming government" and "reforming welfare," just remember: The Congress that is on the teat of corporate donations is the same Congress that hands out corporate welfare. The total costs of this election cycle are expected to go over $1 billion. There are no congressional or electoral reforms—not term limits, not cutting congressional committees and staff, not ethics reforms, not lobby disclosure—that will make one iota of difference unless and until we change the way campaigns are financed. Our pols will continue to dance with them what brung 'em.

Watch the "reform" Republicans legislate amazing new telecommunications law. Watch General Electric lobbyists again draft corporate tax law that reduces the company's tax to below zero. Watch "reform" Republicans decide that regulating derivatives would violate sacred free-market standards. Watch Archer-Daniels-Midland ($1.1 million in soft money to Republicans and a quarter-million to President Clinton, too) keep that ethanol subsidy.

We'll be hearing about "reform" until it comes out of our ears. Beloveds, until they reform the way campaigns are financed, "reform" is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

SO THE DRAFT-DODGING, dope-smoking, deadbeat-dad Newt Gingrich (I find that when one first stoops to the level of Rush Limbaugh, one feels slimy, but it gets easier as you go along) wants to cut the federal program for severely disabled poor children. Supplemental Security Income provides monthly stipends for poor children with cerebral palsy, spina bifida and mental retardation. The money can be spent for food, clothing, shelter or a range of medical and social services. The draft-dodging, dope-smoking, deadbeat-dad Newt Gingrich wants to cut it back to vouchers that could be spent only for a limited program of medical care.

Normally, picking on handicapped poor children is not a real popular thing to do, but the new Republicans, who have hearts like caraway seeds, assure us that the money is sometimes paid to poor children with common problems and that—pay attention now—some parents coach children to fake disabilities. Ahem. Do you know any children with spina bifida, cerebral palsy or severe retardation? On the whole, it is not actually easy to fake these conditions, especially as doctors are usually called in on these cases quite early. Assuming that we have somehow sprouted a whole generation of tiny Method actors who can successfully fake spina bifida (a sick, cruel joke), would it not be rather simpler and fairer to require an accurate diagnosis of the condition than to cut off the program entirely?

My favorite poor kid with spina bifida is Kristy Reyna of Austin, some of whose SSI money is being spent to build a shower stall that she can use herself. Kristy is 16 now, so it's awfully hard to lift her into the bathtub, and she'll be able to wheel her chair into the new shower stall, boost herself onto a stool and turn the handles at her level. Kristy has had more than 15 operations, and we're fairly sure she isn't faking it. Putting her in an institution would, of course, cost tens of thousands of dollars a year. The cost of the new shower stall is in the very low three figures.

According to Kristy's mom, none of Kristy's SSI money can be spent without a doctor's certification that Kristy needs it—her braces, her wheelchair, the shower stall, all required orthopedic certification. Informed of the Republican proposal, Kristy's mom stopped dead for a long minute and then said: "Tell them I will be happy to give up any amount of money in the whole world if she could just walk." □

Molly Ivins, a former Observer *editor, is a columnist with the* Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

JIM HIGHTOWER

Saying No to Corruption

The experts say there's no way to pass real campaign-finance reform to stop Big Money from corrupting our political process—since Big Money also controls the legislative process that has to enact the reform.

But as Yogi Berra once said: "Even Napoleon had his Watergate."

Well, Watergate, Waterloo, or whatever you call it, Big Money has met its match in a political force it can't corrupt: the people themselves!

As the old political joke puts it: The people are revolting! Indeed they are: fed up with Business As Usual, ordinary folks are leading the charge against the corrupting power of fat-cat contributors. Their weapon? The citizen's initiative process.

Though the establishment media gave it barely a whisper of coverage, the biggest progressive victory of the November elections was the fact that not one, not two, but three states enacted heavy-duty limits on how much money the special interests can stuff in the pockets of politicians.

In Missouri, Montana and Oregon, voters said that henceforth no political contributor can give more than $100 to state legislative candidates and no more than $500 to candidates for governor and other statewide offices.

In each state, this astonishing reform initiative was put together by a coalition of Ralph Nader's student groups, Ross Perot's organization, League of Women Voters, Common Cause and other civic groups.

Despite being opposed by political leaders, lobbyists and most media, and despite having almost no money, the citizens ran high-energy, grassroots campaigns that simply overran The Powers That Be, winning 63 percent in Montana, 72 percent in Oregon and 77 percent in Missouri.

Working people won't get good policies from government until we get Big Money out of government—but that's a clean-up job we can do ourselves, as the good folks of Missouri, Montana and Oregon have just shown.

Trouble Brewing

I'm an exercise buff. No, none of that jogging, swimming or bicycling stuff.

I do the full, rigorous regimen of daily "beer exercises." You know: repetitive walking, stretching, lifting, and bending—*walk* from the La-Z-Boy to the refrigerator; *stretch* waaaay back to the back of the fridge and grab a brewski; *lift* it out in one fluid motion, employing your leg muscles, lower back and arm; and then that up-lifting series of 12-ounce elbow *bends*.

But instead of hoisting just another Bud or Miller, make mine a Shiner Bock, a Sierra Nevada Porter, a Genesee 12-Horse Ale or any of the other heartier brews of the small, local breweries popping up all across America today. Ten years ago, there were only 29 small breweries; today, there are nearly 500 of them, each with its own unique, local taste.

But beware, beer lovers! The industry giants are now moving in on the microbreweries, trying to tap into their success. Some are marketing their own, fake microbeers with catchy-sounding names to make them seem like local products, such as Elk Mountain Amber Ale and Red Wolf Lager—both made by Budweiser.

They're also buying out the genuine locals: Miller has already swallowed Wisconsin's venerable Leinenkugle and Milwaukee's Augsburger, and Anheiser-Busch is quaffing Seattle's Redhook Ale.

It's a case of sheer market muscle trying to squeeze the locals off the shelf. The Big Four, which already control 85 percent of all beer sales, want it all. So they're using their market clout to pressure beer distributors and retailers to carry only their "imitation" brands of microbrews, and leave the real ones out in the cold.

This is Jim Hightower saying to you lovers of local beer: Heads up! Demand the real thing—the brew you lose could be your own.

Smoke Out the Tobacco Companies

James Johnson, top dog of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, was recently asked how many smokers die each year from cancer. "I do not know how many," he snapped, adding that estimates of such deaths are "generated by computers and are only statistical."

Yeah, statistics like Bob, Nora, Charlotte, Larry and a good 400,000 other flesh-and-blood Americans who die each year thanks to being hooked on the tobacco industry's coffin nails.

To recruit "replacement smokers" for those who quit or die, tobacco companies spend $11 million *every day* on advertising and promotional gimmicks—much of it targeting our children. Why? Because children are their profitable future.

After all, the vast majority of smokers don't get hooked as adults, but as teens, or younger. Every day, another 3,000 U.S. minors—children as young as 10 or 11—take their first puffs. Half of them will become addicted and ultimately die, nastily and prematurely, of cancer, emphysema or other illness brought on by "smoke-smoke-smoking those cigarettes." Each of them another of Mr. Johnson's statistics.

American children are not alone as tobacco targets:

- In Eastern Europe, young women in "cowgirl" outfits hand out Marlboros to teens at rock concerts, giving free Marlboro sunglasses to those who light up on the spot;
- Outside Brazilian high schools, young women in safari gear hand out free Camels to 15- and 16-year-olds on their lunch break;
- In Taiwan, RJR Nabisco sponsored a concert by a teen rock idol; to get in, each kid presented five empty packs of RJR's Winston cigarettes.

Millions of Americans try to quit smoking every year as part of the "Great American Smokeout." That's a good thing, but if you really want to smoke out the tobacco companies—and make them quit trying to hook the world's children on their addictive drug—contact the consumer group INFACT on 617-742-4583. □

Jim Hightower, a former Observer *editor and Texas agriculture commissioner, does daily radio commentary and a weekend call-in talk show on the ABC Radio Network.*

Tecun Uman to Texas

BY LEON LAZAROFF

Tecun Uman, Guatemala

AXEL OROZCO GOT AS far as Brownsville. After U.S. immigration officials handed the young Honduran to their Mexican counterparts, he was robbed of all his money, about $85, forced to lie on the ground at gunpoint and then tossed in a Matamoros jail for three days without food.

In the hands of the Mexican immigration police, says Orozco, 24, beating and extortion are common practice. "They're terrible people," he cried, dressed in a dirty shirt and cut-off jeans. "They beat you, rob you and call you names. I would kill them if I could."

Ultimately, Orozco, bruised, bewildered and broke, was bused back to the shabby, teeming Guatemalan border town of Tecum Uman. It's the same story many Mexicans recite when tossed from one Laredo to another, or from San Diego to Tijuana.

But Orozco's story comes at a time when Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León is vigorously protesting California's Proposition 187 and calling for improved treatment of undocumented immigrants in the United States. At the same time, though, Central and South Americans are complaining just as angrily about what they say are routine beatings and extortion at the hands of Mexican police, as well as degrading workplace discrimination and cheated paychecks.

Along the country's densely forested and often-forgotten southern border, Bishop Jorge Arizmendi of Tapachula, Mexico, a city of some 300,000 just 15 miles north of Tecun Uman, says that human rights violations against undocumented Central and South Americans are as common as the immigrants themselves.

"Just as our government is demanding the protection of human rights for the Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States, we must do the same here," says Arizmendi, sitting outside his unsightly concrete church. "It simply must be said: The undocumented have no rights under Mexican law."

Leon Lazaroff is a freelance writer based in Mexico City.

BACK IN TECUN UMAN, Orozco sits in a small beat-up park with other poor Hondurans, all vowing to try the long journey again. Like hundreds of other Guatemalans, Peruvians and even the occasional Chinese and Egyptian who have fled corrupt, top-heavy economies, the immigrants gathered here said they want only to reach the United States and a chance at job on a construction site or restaurant. For those who make it, and more so for those who fail, a frightening brush with Mexico's immigration police is customary.

"The Central Americans who are caught are in for a very difficult time," says a woman who works with a Mexico City advocacy group for Guatemalan refugees. "The Mexican government doesn't want to talk about the Central Americans; they prefer to keep the focus on their northern border."

Ironically, Mexico has long enjoyed a heroic reputation as a haven for wayward immigrants. Refugees from the Spanish Civil War came to Mexico as did those fleeing dictatorship in Latin America, principally from Pinochet's Chile. But those immigrants were white and well-educated, and offered great things to a developing country. Conversely, the new immigrants from Nicaragua, Peru and Ecuador are mostly, poor, dark-skinned and unskilled young men with little to offer but the strength of their backs and their rights are not so readily guaranteed.

On paper, Mexican law provides generous protection for immigrants, while guaranteeing education and medical services. But human rights advocates say those services are rarely delivered. And even when dealing with applicants for refugee status or attempting to process the rare human-rights complaint, police and government authorities rarely comply with statutes on the books. In practice, current policy boils down to deporting anyone who is apprehended. Deportations have increased from less than 90,000 in 1990 to more than 143,000 in 1993, according to the National Migration Institute, Mexico's immigration agency.

"There is often a gap between what is written in the law and what the reality is on the ground—particularly in far-flung places like Chiapas," says Bill Frelick, director of the Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Committee for Refugees. "Protection of immigrants' human rights leaves much to be desired."

Education is a good example. While Mexico's 1991 General Population Act mandates a public education for every child regardless of citizenship, public schools in Mexico routinely require a birth certificate or a passport and visa. But few immigrants hold such documents. So, they're turned away. In the United States, children of undocumented workers are guaranteed an education by the Supreme Court's 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* decision, although Proposition 187 aims to skirt that judgement.

For undocumented immigrants entering Mexico, the situation is equally onerous when they attempt to seek medical help. Because most hospitals require proof of social security, undocumented workers, lacking such papers, are commonly asked to leave. More distressing, hospitals and health clinics are required to notify immigration officials when an alien comes looking for assistance. Therefore, many Central Americans say they prefer to use church medical services, which are scarce—or nothing at all. "They're afraid of being turned in, so they'll find other ways," says Oswaldo Valdemar Cuevas, the Guatemalan Consul in Tapachula.

And then there is life on the farm. While Mexico claims it must aggressively police its southern border to protect jobs for nationals (sound familiar?), the owners of Chiapas' huge coffee and fruit plantations are conveniently allowed to pick up Guatemalans at border checkpoints and take them back at night. Farms in the northern states of Sonora and Sinaloa also use cheap Central American labor.

But like Mexicans entering Texas, Guatemalan and Honduran farmhands can triple their wages by wading across a river that serves as an international border, in this case the Suchiate River. Once in Mexico, though, Central Americans complain of having to endure excessive hours, indecent housing and short-changed wages. Child labor laws are routinely violated. "This is a terrible injustice that must change," adds Valdemar.

With straight faces, Mexican human rights officials say that incidents of cruel treatment are few. But the low numbers

they cite are very much the result of a system that discourages the reporting of human rights. The director of the Chiapas State Human Rights Commission dryly recited that since March she has received no formal complaints about the mistreatment of undocumented workers. "There may be problems, but we haven't received any declarations, so there's nothing we can do," says Emma López Solarzano, sitting behind her desk in Tapachula. As a result, no formal actions have been taken to discipline immigration or judicial police. A U.S. government official did say that since 1989, many immigration police have been fired or transferred because of corruption or rough treatment of detainees. But for the poor immigrants who gather in Tecun Uman, avoiding the immigration police is a lot more important than filing reports of human rights violations.

AND THERE are few, if any, human rights activists in Tecun Uman. Commonly referred to as "Poquito Tijuana," in deference to its much larger cousin some 2,500 miles to the north, Tecun Uman is a place that everyone would like to leave but few can figure out how to do it. It is hot and humid. Terribly hot and humid. The palmy banana trees ooze sweat and nearly everything is dirty and run-down. Women are whistled at for sport. Prostitution is commonplace.

To reach the U.S. border, many enlist the help of guides called *polleros*, the Spanish word for a poulterer. [On the northern border, Mexicans call them *coyotes*.] Piling as many as 100 people into train cars or banana trucks, polleros charge Central Americans as much as $2,000 for the trip from the Guatemalan border to points in Texas or California. Refugees from faraway places such as China, India or Bangladesh—whose numbers are increasing—are forced to pay as much as $4,000 to $8,000. But most polleros don't dare make the trip without first paying a bribe to immigration or judicial police, say many people familiar with the immigrants' journey.

At a dirty, wooden-planked corner restaurant called La Buena, a Honduran pollero who called himself Carlos explained that in order to make the trip, he and three partners pay Mexican police $200 per passenger at checkpoints just north of Tapachula, in Mexico City and finally in Nuevo Laredo at the Texas border. Many of the tired stowaways, he says, end up in San Antonio or Houston. "Those are the rules, if you don't want any problems," says Carlos, 28, a thick fellow, dressed in a blue tank top, jeans and a fresh pair of cowboy boots. "We know many people on that route."

Quite often, Mexican federal judicial police also want a cut, and additional stopovers and payments must be made. Carlos says he does about two trips a month, usually lasting around eight days. He travels in a large truck, although train is another option. "Every time is different," he boasted.

Whether Carlos actually takes his customers to the U.S. border is hard to tell. Many polleros conspire with Mexican police or gangs to trick immigrants into paying large sums of money, only to be arrested at a roadblock and deported back to Tecun Uman, claimed Bishop Arizmendi. On November 24, 162 people, principally from Central America, along with three Egyptians and six from Bangladesh, were discovered by federal judicial agents tucked away under a double platform covered with boxes of bananas on their way to Mexico City. All were immediately deported.

"Most polleros are frauds," says Celso López Amores, editor of the *Diario del Sur*, the largest newspaper in Tapachula. "They have no intention of taking people to the United States, just in stealing their money."

A migration official in Ciudad Hidalgo, a border town across the Rio Suchiate from Tecun Uman, didn't deny that police have taken bribes to allow immigrants to pass a roadblock. But he quickly countered that such transgressions have also occurred in the United States. "It's always a few who act that way, but not the vast majority," he said.

GUATEMALAN REFUGEES in the early 1980s were among the first to claim otherwise. In those days, abuses by police and the Mexican border patrol were out of control until human rights activists, and the United Nations, began to pay attention to the region. The Mexican government created camps in the state of Campeche, which today are still home to some 40,000 refugees.

In the past year, the Zapatista peasant uprising in Chiapas has heightened military surveillance along the Guatemalan border, making the situation more difficult for undocumented immigrants trying to reach the United States, or refugees looking for safety in Mexico.

President Zedillo has made opposition to Proposition 187 a high priority, raising the issue at the recent Americas Summit in Miami, while he ignored Mexico's own deficiencies. And attention to those deficiencies within Mexico is unlikely as long as Mexico wants to show the Clinton Administration it is serious about plugging its own border against undocumented workers as well as drug smugglers.

As long as that is the case, Central and South Americans can expect more immigration police, more polleros and the same old problems.

"People say that with [Proposition 187,] Mexicans in California will be denied basic services and discrimination will be rampant," says the newspaperman López. "But that's what's been happening here for years." □

Pragmatic Realism

A Low-Calorie Serving of a Latin American Literary Genre

BY SARA STEVENSON

BODY OF KNOWLEDGE.
By Carol Dawson.
476 pp. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin. $22.95.

CAROL DAWSON'S multi-generational family saga, *Body of Knowledge*, might be described as an Anglo-American attempt to import the magical realism of contemporary Latin-American writers, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel—whose *Like Water for Chocolate* succeeded as both a novel and a film. Dawson's 600-pound narrator, Victoria Ransom, the last heiress a rich family in a fictitious Texas town, tells the tale of her family's clandestine feud with the Macafees. She has some help; were it not for the observant and faithful eye of the Ransoms' black servant Viola, the tragedies suffered by the family might appear to be bad luck rather than the orchestrated, serial revenge of an archenemy. Grant Macafee's revenge is so fierce and relentless that it fosters a kind of agoraphobic withdrawal among the Ransoms. Then again, Victoria's weight problem doesn't exactly encourage her to get out often.

Most of Book One is told through Viola's voice. Her perspective, insights, almost visceral loyalty, homespun dialect, and omnipresence make her an engaging narrator.

> *'But my Mr. William, he was the soft one,' said Viola. 'It ain't no fault of his that Mr. Grant got born with a hole where his stomach ought to have been. You listen to me, child, it's the stomach from where we get the juice of human love. Most people think it's the heart, but it ain't. You look at Mr. Grant Macafee. His pieces all stuck together like a scarecrow. He's so dried out that if you blow on him, he fly away.' She turned to me. 'That's why I'm glad my lamb here is so nice and round. It means you busting with good juice."*

Sara Stevenson teaches English at St. Michael's Academy in Austin.

Viola, in a sense, creates Victoria by feeding to her family mysteries —disparate, out-of-sequence patches of innuendo and intimation that Victoria and the reader must gradually assemble into a whole cloth. Victoria narrates almost all of Book Two, and as she begins to dominate the narrative, the reader's interest is likely to wane. Unlike Viola, whose colloquialisms, common sense and suspicions, serve to keep the reader engaged, Victoria is basically humorless. Still worse, she's boring. The most interesting of the Ransoms, Sarah, who is Grant Macafee's lover, and Victoria's wild Uncle Bert, escape and then die, leaving the passive recluses to support the family saga. It is the visits from the Macafees' maid that arouse my interest; I want clues to Grant's character, the unappeasable "hole" where his stomach should be.

The fantastic events in Dawson's novel lack the humor and caprice that is characteristic of the Latin-American magical realists. Even her hints to the reader are too obvious. Several times, for example, Victoria recognizes the familiar shape of the back of the head of Nyla, the new servant. The reader knows that Nyla will be revealed to be Sarah and Grant's illegitimate child, but Victoria doesn't—until it's so late that the reader has lost interest. The narrative also leaves several threads hanging. Aunt Mavis calls the twins, Willie and Bert, "half-breeds," but we never discover their mother's identity, race, or name. In another unsolved mystery, Victoria's mother, Anabelle, disappears for seven years and mysteriously returns, under a never-removed black veil, to a passionate sex life with her now one-armed husband. We never discover why she leaves, where she goes, what she does, or why she returns. And although I was hoping the black veil would signify some secret sin, as in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," it merely serves to conceal a discoloring skin disease. Uncle Bert's murder by fire poker, too, is unresolved.

At times, however, Dawson teases us with something better. A short chapter, "How Willie and Bert Were Born," is well-paced and moving.

> *At last, when the mother was drained, she collapsed, too spent to ask what had happened to her, her face turning white and then yellowing into the pillow.*
>
> *'Twins!' William muttered over and over. 'Twins, by God!' He shook Doctor Middleton by the shoulder, thumping Viola's back as she balanced the two babies in the crooks of her arms. But by the time he turned back to his wife, she had already performed her last act: to lick her parched lips and close her eyes. Doctor Middleton could not staunch the blood, or retrieve the broken pieces of placenta, before she slipped away, back into unremarkability, effaced by the vital presences she had carried into the house.*

I found myself haunted by this mystery mother throughout the story.

Book Two begins promisingly, with Victoria's takeover of the narration.

> *From the earliest moments outside the cradle, from the season in which I began to disentangle the sounds that issued forth when adults worked their mouths, and measure them into words, so that their meaning became, in a sense, fuel, informing my tissues, saturating my brain and organs with feelings and reasons and life itself: then I began to grow interested in history. For history was what I heard, every day: vivid as the color of the sky over my head, rich as the odors of milk and my own excrement and the breakfast bacon; sharp as the dawn screech of my grandfather's peacock, when it perched on the gallery roof outside my bedroom window, thrusting high its serpentine little blue head, and I looked out to see it swoop down, down off the roof onto the lawn below in an iridescent flash of color, the grass beginning to seep with emerald as the sunrise flowed over it.*

But this is as sensorial as Victoria gets. If Victoria's a glutton, why doesn't she describe her food in rich, aromatic, tactile, sensuous detail? Her weight or "body of knowledge" serves as a potentially interesting metaphor, but in contrast to the full,

rich descriptions of recipes and meal preparations in *Like Water for Chocolate,* the few links between Victoria's appetite and her hunger for the family history are lowfat. By the end of Book Two, Nyla is serving Victoria wrapped hostess cupcakes for dessert. The prose, too, becomes processed and sensory details evaporate; the breakfast bacon is our last whiff.

Dawson is a skillful enough stylist, yet she too frequently uses the technique of focusing on an image linked to a character's introspection to end either a scene or a chapter. For example, when Viola learns of the rumor that Sophie Macafee and William Ransom's illegitimate baby is dead, Dawson closes the scene: "As [Viola] turned to go, she heard a whippoorwill ask its silly question, and then answer it, out in the woods." She ends another chapter: "The only note that Viola heard when she bolted down the hall away from the quiet bedroom was the baby, repeating over and over his thin hungry complaint." Again, "The easy silence surrounded them, counterpointed here and there with the whir of crickets and the owl's questioning note." In isolation, there's nothing wrong with these musings, but as conclusions for most chapters and many scenes, they become monotonous.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO say why Dawson doesn't succeed in smuggling magical realism into Anglo America. Perhaps there's something in our culture that discourages it. When Gertrudis—in *Like Water for Chocolate*—consumes her sister Tita's repressed passion through her cooking, sets the shower stall on fire with her body heat, and runs naked into the arms of a galloping soldier; or when Tita is so sensitive to chopped onions that her prenatal crying induces her own mother's labor and her tears flood the kitchen, we accept these miracles. In contrast, when Ms. Dawson has Victoria weighing in at 600 pounds and communing with the conservatory plants, William Sr. sticking his head in a front of a circular-saw blade, or Anabelle wearing a black veil over her face for two years, something is missing. When Dawson, who was born in Corsicana and lives at Mt. Calm, approaches the boundary of plausibility, I find myself holding back. When I'm led to that same boundary by a Latin-American writer, I readily cross over. Maybe for Anglo Texans—and Dawson is at least writing from the geographical perspective of an Anglo Texan—who are not immersed in a quotidian stew of Catholic miracles and appearances of the Virgin, it's difficult to swallow this fantasy-spiked reality. Or maybe it's Dawson who's holding back, not being outlandish or miraculous enough, still hanging on to her pragmatic realism. □

Manufacturing Dissent

BY STEVEN G. KELLMAN

MANUFACTURING CONSENT: Noam Chomsky and the Media
Directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick

"CONSENT OF THE governed" is the phrase that launched this republic, a nation whose true emblem is the smiley button more than a scowling bald eagle. Despite a luminous lineage of cranky naysayers, splendid scolds such as Thomas Paine, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Ingersoll, H. L. Mencken and I. F. Stone, consensus, along with personal wealth, is the great American goal. It is why, among indigenous political fauna, donkeys and elephants are so often indistinguishable, why the quality of public rhetoric is so often undistinguished. "I prefer not to," declares Melville's Bartleby, the homeless drone who refuses the commands of his Wall Street employer and ends his days in a dead letter office.

Noam Chomsky is a lively man of letters. A professor at MIT, he is one of the principal figures in contemporary linguistic theory. But, in a parallel career that he himself finds unconnected to his academic work, he has become the leading intellectual dissident in a consensus culture that denies or coopts dissidence. Chomsky is, according to an analysis in *The New York Times Book Review*, "arguably the most important intellectual alive." In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky even argues over that with the national paper of record. However, Chomsky is the most cited living author, and it is not for double-parking.

At 167 minutes, *Manufacturing Consent* provides a detailed portrait of Chomsky and an extensive presentation of his views on how public attitudes in the United States are constructed. The first part of the film, *Thought Control in a Democratic Society*, exposes the problem, while the second, *Activating Dissent*, suggests solutions. Regarding himself as a prophet ignored within his own country, Chomsky notes that he receives more attention outside the United States, perhaps because foreigners savor his assaults on American public policy while neither Washington nor Wall Street is amused. *Manufacturing Consent* was created by two Canadians, Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick, both novices at feature documentaries.

Unlikely to be aired on CBS or screened at a shopping-mall multiplex, the film has been turning up sporadically at alternative cinemas and was a highlight of San Antonio's recent Other American Film Festival. Though Zeitgeist Films has just released it on video, *Manufacturing Consent* is apt to be absent from your branch Blockbuster. The man who rails against sports as "a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority" and "training in irrational jingoism," is not a popular subject among those who peddle entertainment. "If the Nuremberg Laws were applied," claims Chomsky, "every postwar American president would be hanged." If the First Amendment were not applied, Chomsky would be hanged.

Chomsky notes the concentration of control over publishing and broadcasting within a small group of corporations that are themselves units of vast conglomerates. But that is not exactly the same as alleging a media conspiracy, a deliberate scheme by a cabal of opinion-makers to enforce a particular perception. He insists, instead, that his "institutional analysis" reveals that the system of gathering, framing and communicating information within the context of capitalist activities determines the kinds of messages we receive. In a detailed case study, he explains why American journalism sensationalized the Cambodian genocide, committed by Khmer Rouge Communists, but virtually ignored the mass murders in East Timor, committed by Indonesian allies of the United States. The news we receive reflects and advances the economic interests of the news services.

Chomsky's thesis is not exactly astounding to faithful readers of *The Texas Observer*, and his delivery is not especially cinematic, even for a professor. But Achbar and Wintonick enliven the proceedings by offering a montage of his pronouncements—in lectures, debates and interviews and in varied locales including Laramie, Kyoto, London, Seattle, Amsterdam, Toronto, Rochester and Washington. "I'm against the whole notion of developing public personalities who are treated as stars," insists Chomsky, even while attracting adoring throngs throughout the world. Though he insists that he is marginalized by the corporate media, he is one of the few American academics, other than lapsed pro-

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fessors Newt Gingrich and Phil Gramm, who arouse crowds not dependent on their grace for a final grade. Though scornful of reading history or ideas as the product of extraordinary individuals, he is inordinately concerned about how few times he has been invited onto *Nightline*. On film, in rumpled wool and flannel, Chomsky comes across, even when provoked, as a kind of Woody Allen cast as Siddhartha.

Born in Philadelphia in 1928, Chomsky is portrayed as the gifted child of working-class Jewish leftists. His father was a noted Hebrew scholar who bequeathed a fascination for languages, and his uncle operated a busy newsstand on Manhattan's West Side that provided an early education in political polemic. A memory of his failure to defend a fat classmate against schoolyard bullies still haunts Chomsky and inspires him toward solidarity with the underdog. He emerged from the anonymity of academe in 1964, as a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, and he honorably earned his position on Richard Nixon's notorious Enemies List.

John Silber, the renegade Texan who runs Boston University, calls Chomsky "a systematic liar," and Tom Wolfe dismisses his ideas as "rubbish." Though Achbar and Wintonick include these defamations in their film, *Manufacturing Consent* is highbrow hagiography. Interpolated campy clips of media promotions and reflexive reminders of how this film itself was put together relieve the directors of some bad faith. But it cannot be denied that *Manufacturing Consent* is itself designed to manufacture consent. *Any* arrangement of words or images is a plot to persuade. Chomsky's quarrel ought not to be with the inevitable—and banal—fact that consent is manufactured, but with who controls the factory and what their reasons are for turning out their product. And are other products available?

"What remarkable creativity ordinary people have," proclaims Chomsky, who, from his privileged perch at MIT, projects himself as a populist. Dubbing himself alternately an anarcho-syndicalist and a libertarian socialist, he insists that he would not prescribe for others except that they learn to think for themselves. The problem is that we learn to think through others' thoughts. Not even the *Times* ever sets its own agenda. Instead of *Time* and ABC, Chomsky finds hope in alternative media; he mentions South End Press, *Z* Magazine and Boulder public radio, but he might have also listed thousands of other obstinate operations, including this publication. Like Achbar and Wintonick and like Chomsky, they resist the blandishments of Mammon and serve the truth by manufacturing dissent. □

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Politics With a Pulse

Vital Signs in Arlington (Massachusetts)

BY DAVE DENISON

FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS, I have been a spectator in the life and politics of one ordinary Massachusetts town. During this time national politics has come to seem a distant and unreal thing, and I have lost my grasp on how, exactly, it can be said to have anything to do with democracy.

State politics isn't much better, even in this supposed bastion of good government. Just last month, the Massachusetts House and Senate voted themselves a swift 55-percent pay hike, which the Republican governor agreed to sign in exchange for a cut in the capital gains tax rate. The problem was, House members didn't favor the capital gains cut, so the leadership had to sneak on an amendment and have it approved as uncontroversial business, when legislators were busy making dinner engagements, squash-court reservations and elaborate plans to avoid reporters' and constituents' calls about the pay raise.

It may seem hard to believe, but for flagrant arrogance in legislating, the events rivaled anything I observed in five years of generally befuddled study of the Texas Legislature.

And yet, I am here to report that democracy in America is not dead and that all is not lost. Democratic action has not been extinguished. Politics is not in all places a meaningless farce. At least that's how it looks from our corner of the world in Arlington, Mass., a suburban town about 44,000 strong. All in all, "Ollington," as I've come to know it, is a place of lively politics, with a not entirely somnolent community life and a tradition of deliberate, constructive decision-making.

Having recently completed a stint as editor of the local weekly, the *Arlington Advocate*, I have had an up-close view of politics at the level where it can be seen to have something to do with reality. I have found little of the anger and futility we hear so much about in the national media. What I have seen has made me less pessimistic than the average Washington journalist chronicling the deterioration of representative government.

One advantage of covering town politics is that it affords a chance to observe politics without all the deformities we've become accustomed to on the national scene. In local politics there is no need to amass piles of money to run for office, and no swirl of fancy-shoe lobbyists influencing every move government tries to make. Ideology and partisanship are less important. And best of all, television plays no role, other than to provide undiluted cable-access coverage.

Local politics, it seems to me, is the antidote for one of the most debilitating notions plaguing the republic: that politics is something that comes through the media, as if it were just another bad sitcom. Politics becomes real, and useful, when it is experienced firsthand. Newt Gingrich's big show of political reform in Washington notwithstanding, a renaissance of political action probably can only start at the local level.

ARLINGTON IS A middle-class 'burb—the sort of place, it is said, the majority of American voters now inhabit. The average household income is about $50,000 a year. Violent crime is infrequent (the only murder last year occurred when a man killed his former wife). The schools are above average in most rankings, though they are not as highly regarded as those in more affluent suburbs nearby.

I should say up front that nothing much that happened in Arlington in my time as editor would qualify as "newsworthy" to an audience outside the town. In fact, the only story in my tenure that made national news was about a cat named Garfield, who was alleged to be so mean-spirited that he attacked the neighbors. The *Wall Street Journal* featured Garfield in an article about the aggressive-pet problem, and from there the story was pursued by a number of supermarket tabloids.

I would like to report that among the non-pet population a peaceful civility carries the day, but that was not always the case. The Arlington School Committee, like school boards everywhere, provided the newspaper with more than enough material on how pettiness and division can get in the way of effective government. It didn't smooth things along when one committee member publicly referred to his colleagues as "a bunch of goons."

School Committee politics can be mysterious—in a way that local politics often is. A seasoned reporter covering Congress or a state legislature learns to understand political behavior by following the money trail, or by knowing the ideological or partisan motives of a given representative. But money and philosophy have less influence over local officials—which makes it sometimes more challenging to understand the pitched battles that take place.

Lines are drawn because of personality conflicts, or bad blood going back further than anybody but the aggrieved party remembers. The Arlington School Committee, for example, has long been divided. But about what? Not usually over identifiable issues, such as the need for more education funding, or less. For quite a while, it seemed to me the division was more social than political. A member of one bloc once told me that a member of the other had not even graduated from high school. As it turned out, a great battle erupted over whether to force the longtime superintendent into early retirement, and the camps divided into those who were loyal to him and those who wanted him replaced.

The superintendent was, in fact, replaced and the committee is now in general agreement that the new one is a good choice. But while the issue was being fought out, it was not an occasion that made one swell with sentimental pride about the virtues of self-government. Parents complained about the "squabbling" on the committee and worried it was harming the schools. But something else happened that, I think, said just as much about the usefulness of an elected board of citizens running the school system.

Off and on for months, the idea had been floated that one and perhaps two of the

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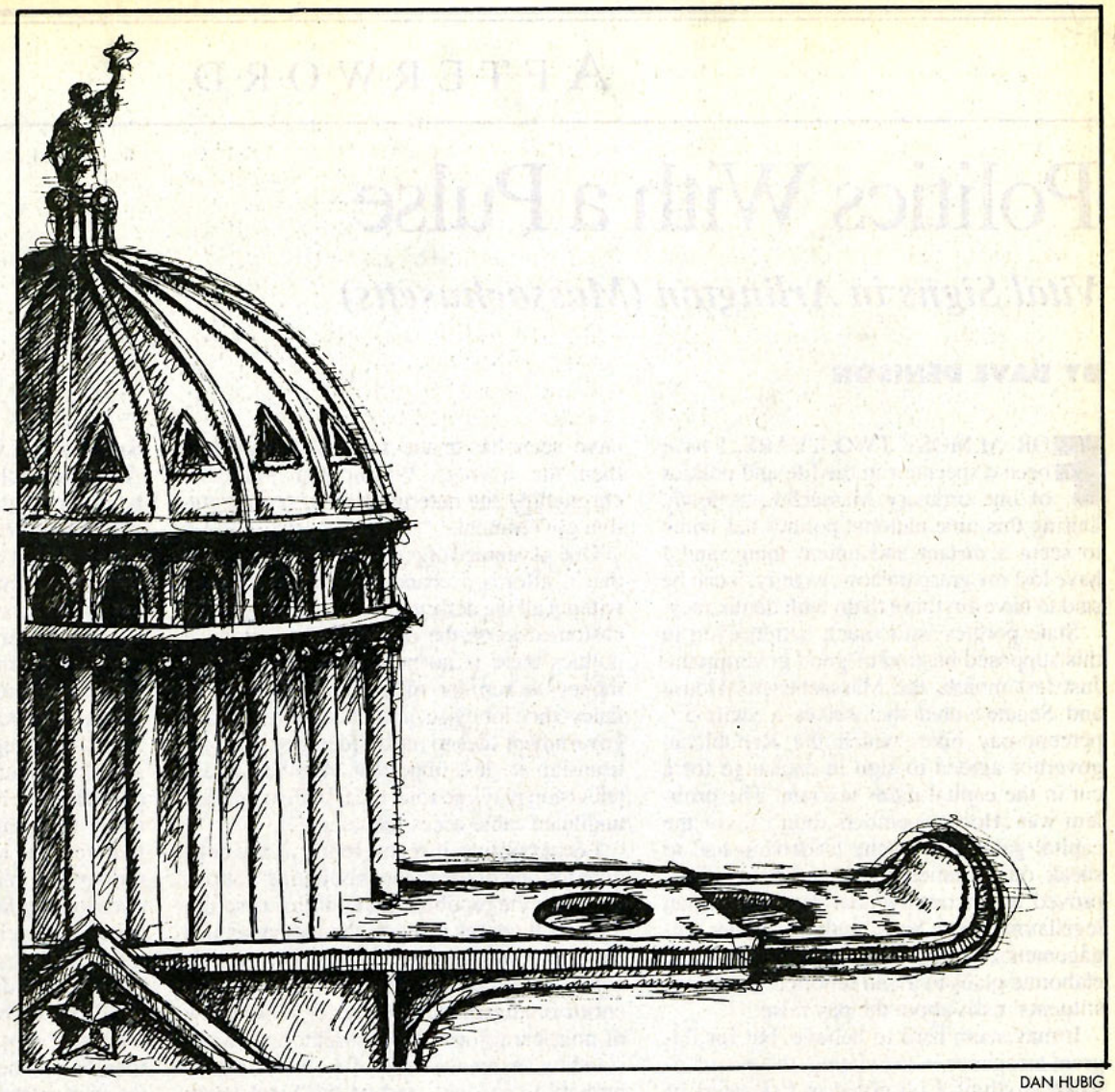
Dave Denison is a former editor of The Texas Observer. *A version of this piece originally appeared in the* Boston Globe.

town's seven elementary schools might have to be closed. Neighborhood schools have been an important feature of Arlington life, but with budgets growing tighter and the schools in need of renovation, there was a case to be made that seven schools were too many to maintain.

I am convinced that at a certain point there was a majority on the School Committee prepared to vote to close a school. But an active group of parents demanded that the case be argued on its merits. The *Advocate* published several columns and numerous letters from parents that spelled out reasons to keep all seven schools open. Self-interest was a factor, of course, but there was more than that. A sophisticated argument emerged that addressed the long-range financial and educational interests of the town, and that noted, relevantly, that enrollments were on the increase.

At the same time, no one on the School Committee came forward with a rationale for closing schools. Public hearings drew hundreds of people, and it became clear that at least that part of the community that was participating in the decision was solidly opposed to closures. When it came time to decide, the committee wisely brought itself in harmony with the public consensus.



DAN HUBIG

It's a homely vignette, and it's not meant to suggest that the people always triumph. The point is that a decision that was of vital concern to some citizens was not greeted with the sense of futility that is so often inspired by decisions at the state and national level. Nor was it argued in the kind of simplistic terms one finds so often when well-financed interests take to the airwaves in big-stakes battles. People were not left with that sour taste of frustration that has become part of national politics.

ARLINGTON HAS a 252-member representative Town Meeting that meets every spring for two nights a week. In an earlier generation, it was mostly elderly gentlemen who gathered in Arlington's stately town hall auditorium to approve the town's budgets. Now a mix of men and women, with more young family members, participates.

Still, watching Town Meeting operate, one can't help being struck by how anachronistic it is. Who in this day and age would conceive that 252 people could get together to decide how a town should spend its money? It is time-consuming, inefficient and often preoccupied with budgetary complexity that only a few can comprehend.

Each season one can detect worry that the machinery of Town Meeting grinds too slowly—and that a few cranks can bring it near breakdown. It's true that the process suffers in direct relation to how many oddballs and windbags take the floor. I tried to bolster confidence in the institution editorially, once stating (and with no one taking issue) that the ratio of solid citizens to jackasses in Town Meeting appeared to be about 20 to 1, no worse than in the general population, and certainly a better proportion than you would find in Congress or the state legislature.

The more important point is that a citizen has less cause to complain about government spending or other action when he has the opportunity to take part in key decisions on the Town Meeting floor. Because the representative body is not a captive of monied interests at the local level, town government is not a target of contempt the way big government is.

In addition to Town Meeting, Arlington has a somewhat more unusual organization that attempts to include the citizen in decision-making. Four years ago, a group of local officials founded a group called Vision 2020 that is designed to get residents thinking about what kind of town Arlington should become over the next three decades. Several task groups now meet regularly, with dozens of consistent participants and hundreds more who plug into the work in at least a small way. Local officials, the thinking goes, get so caught up in the week-to-week crises of town affairs that long-range planning is almost always on the back burner. Vision 2020 attempts to give citizens some of the responsibility for planning.

Of course, the heart and soul of local politics has to do with immediate concerns. Nothing gets a person out of the living room and into a meeting hall as quickly as a perceived threat in her own back yard. Last year in the east end of Arlington, a sizeable contingent took up a quixotic battle to keep a McDonald's from locating in an abandoned used car lot. The site is near a congested intersection and nearby residents worried about traffic tie-ups and general disruption. From the start, handicappers weren't giving the neighborhood group much of a chance.

But this was not just any neighborhood group. Well-organized and vociferous, the East Arlington Good Neighbor Committee took the debate beyond the usual NIMBY terms and asserted the community's right to help shape the commercial landscape. This does not often happen in American suburbs, and endless car-choked strip malls have been the result. In Arlington, the Redevelopment Board and the Board of Selectmen must, by necessity, take a cautious approach to new development: The town is already densely populated and there is not much open space for commercial projects. Consequently, town residents tend to have as much political weight in these matters as business interests.

McDonald's must have concluded as much. With an apparent majority on the Board of Selectmen willing to side with the neighborhood group, the company quietly withdrew its offer to develop the controversial site. Less auto-intensive uses—a drug store and a video store—are now in the works.

TO A CYNIC, self-interest is 90 percent of politics—and the other 10 percent is cloaking self-interest in rhetorical finery.

At its worst, local politics can seem that way. A School Committee member votes to cut funds from elementary education in just the year his daughter enters seventh grade. A prominent citizen wins a tax abatement from his friends on the Board of Assessors. An angry resident wants the Board of Selectmen to rein in his neighbor's cat.

In the fight against McDonald's some of the neighbors, no doubt, joined the cause out of fear their property values would be adversely affected. Self-interest of that sort is a great motivator, it's true. But what of it? Every once in a while self-interest gives us a glimpse of what politics is at its best, too. These are the times when groups of people are pulled into the experience of politics, when they engage in public conversation, plan political strategy and assert their right to negotiate with powerful interests.

I don't mean to suggest that this happens all the time in Arlington—that the town is some sort of Shangri-la of citizen activism. The threats to this community are not alarming, and most people are content to live lives of quiet uninvolvement. Out of the 44,000 people in town, the number of people who take an active role is not likely to be more than a few hundred. When a tax question or controversial ballot proposition comes up during local elections, there may be a 60 or 70-percent voter turnout. But when it's a matter of voting for a batch of local politicians, the turnout drops to 20 or 30 percent.

There is, even in local politics, a sometimes alarming lack of basic citizen competence. As editor of the local paper, I would hear occasionally from people with anonymous gripes. Every town has a collection of such sorts, angry and conspiratorial, who refuse to sign their name to a letter or to stand up at a public meeting. I came to think of such people as willing inhabitants of their own little police state, imagining themselves in grave danger if they were to voice a critical opinion. They might as well be living in China.

"In local politics there is no need to amass piles of money to run for office..."

Yet for those who are not cowed or complacent there is an enticement that is often missing in the national arena: In local causes it isn't so hard to win. It makes a huge difference that money is not the mother's milk of local politics. It is relatively easy for people to get organized in their own neighborhood or town. And it is instructive to see how even the most entrenched local officials sit up and take notice when a dozen citizens show up—and speak up—at a public meeting.

Today's great frustration among the populace has to do with the belief that effective citizen action is no longer possible at the state house or in Congress. We are plagued by the feeling that the one surviving realm where democracy can still work is also the one where the root causes of national decline cannot be addressed. The business of local government begins to seem mostly about coping with larger forces set in motion in distant centers of power.

Americans used to have ways of participating in state and national politics. This was one of the great functions of the two parties: to allow people to organize at the precinct level and feel a connection, through the party, to national decision-making. The voices of the rank and file were heard when their party leaders spoke. But now everyone knows the two parties are captive to the political professionals and fat-cat donors. Active membership, especially of the Democratic Party, has fallen off and more people than ever consider themselves independents.

The feeling among citizens that they have lost influence over their elected representatives fuels the drive for term limits and the proliferation of ballot propositions and referenda. It leads to a misplaced anger at "government" or at politics itself. And yet when you watch people attempt to sort out public problems at the local level, you see them forced to make essential connections. Government is not necessarily an evil; politics is not by definition an odious activity.

Taking part in local politics is the starting point to restoring meaning to the national discussion. It is also probably the only way for citizens to begin regaining their confidence in democratic governance. Seeing that active politics can make government work in your own town points the way to how it could be made to work elsewhere. □

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POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE

✔ **BOMER SOONER?** Incoming Governor George W. Bush on Jan. 3 announced conservative Democrat Elton Bomer, a Montalba banker and former lobbyist, as his new insurance commissioner to lead the 900-employee Texas Department of Insurance, which regulates the $37 billion Texas insurance industry. Bomer, 59, had to stretch to meet the "five years in the field of insurance or insurance regulation" requirement, but from 1957 to 1963, Bomer was a keypunch operator and then manager of data processing for Commercial and Industrial Life Insurance Co. in Houston and from 1965-1974 Bomer sold IBM computers to insurance companies. "Let me put a positive spin on it," Bomer told the *Wall Street Journal*. "I haven't made a living in it [insurance] for the last few years [read: 20 years], so I haven't got an agenda."

Bomer, who will take over the agency Feb. 1, said he will concentrate on eliminating fraud by companies and consumers, a week after a Travis County grand jury issued a letter criticizing the agency for lax enforcement. Former Insurance Commissioner Robert Hunter said the district attorney's office only pursued four of the more than 60 cases the agency referred. Current Insurance Commissioner Rebecca Lightsey cited four major enforcement actions that resulted in record fines against insurance companies in the past year but she ordered an investigation of the grand jury allegation. Rep. Kim Brimer, a Fort Worth Republican insurance agent who sits on the House Insurance Committee, suggested that the grand jury report was a ploy by Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earl to get the Legislature to renew a $1.4 million appropriation for his insurance fraud unit.

Robert Saunders of LaGrange is said to be in line for the three-member Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission, the *Houston Post* reported Dec. 30, citing unnamed Capitol sources, in the same report that named Bomer as the insurance nominee. TNRCC member Pam Reed's term expires in August and Peggy Garner, who has four years remaining on her term, has not been confirmed by the Senate.

✔ **AGENTS OF CHANGE.** Steve Stockman, the Friendswood Republican who upset veteran U.S. Rep. Jack Brooks of Beaumont in November, got interested in running for Congress in 1990 when he answered a newspaper ad placed by an Ohio businessman who was angry with Brooks for trying to force mail-order businesses to collect state sales taxes. The businessman bankrolled Stockman's unsuccessful 1990 primary campaign but later complained to the Federal Election Commission that Stockman failed to repay a $82,138 debt, the *Houston Chronicle* reported. Stockman also padded his resume in 1990, claiming at various times to have been a consultant for the University of Houston and an IBM employee, the *Chronicle* reported. Stockman also claimed he was a UH-Clear Lake graduate although UH records indicate he did not receive his degree until December 1990, several months after the primary loss. Stockman told the *Galveston Daily News* the allegations were old news and the Brooks campaign had tried to depict him as uneducated, unemployed and homosexual, but he was being more guarded in his comments to the media. For example, he said, ceramics is one of his hobbies. "But don't say that or they'll think I'm a fag for sure," he said. Then: "Oh no! Don't print that!"

✔ **MURDER BY TEXAS.** That was the headline on a *New York Times* editorial Jan. 5 after Texas, having admitted that a man did not commit the murder for which he was condemned to death, proceeded with his execution Jan. 4. The U.S. Supreme Court refused to delay the execution of Jesse Dewayne Jacobs, who in 1987 was convicted of capital murder in the killing of Etta Urdiales of Conroe, although prosecutors later convicted Jacobs' sister, Bobbie Hogan, for the same killing. The prosecutor who had handled Jacobs' case also prosecuted Hogan and told the jury that he believed the sister had pulled the trigger and that Jacobs had not even known his sister had a gun, although he helped dispose of the body. The sister, whose boyfriend was Urdiales' estranged husband, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The Supreme Court on Jan. 2 voted 6-3 to allow Jacobs' execution to proceed, with Justices John Paul Stevens, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen G. Breyer dissenting. Stevens wrote, "It would be fundamentally unfair to execute a person on the basis of a factual determination that the state has fundamentally disavowed. I find this course of events deeply troubling." Without clemency from Gov. Ann Richards or the courts, Jacob became the 85th inmate executed since the state resumed the death penalty in 1982.

✔ **HAZARDOUS SETTLEMENT.** Neighbors are unhappy with a $1.15 million settlement between the state and Gibraltar Chemical Resources Inc. of Winona for repeated violation of Texas air quality and hazardous waste statutes. The state found the company, which blends wastes for incineration, recycles solvents and injects untreated, hazardous liquids into a mile-deep well, had 709 environmental violations in the past year, including at least 11 illegal chemical releases since 1990. Mothers Organized to Stop Environmental Sins (MOSES), which had submitted numerous health complaints from Winona residents, asked the court to reject the settlement between Attorney General Dan Morales and the company. Phyllis Glazer, a spokeswoman for MOSES, said the settlement will expedite the pending sale of Gibraltar to American Ecology Corp. of Houston, which specializes in the handling of low-level radioactive waste. "Morales just made us sitting ducks for a powerful company who we fear will bring nuclear/low-level radioactive wastes to our community," she said, noting that residents cannot sell their homes because of the proximity to the hazardous waste site.

✔ **ANY WAY THE WIND BLOWS.** Houston Democratic Sen. John Whitmire will file emergency legislation to suspend tests of tailpipe emissions of passenger vehicles in heavily polluted communities such as Dallas, Harris, El Paso and Jefferson counties. The new vehicle emissions tests, mandated by 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act, began January 1 and are designed to reduce smog in urban areas. Whitmire is apparently betting on the Republican Congress to dismantle the clean-air provisions. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, a spokesman for "Houston for a Healthy Society," a group opposing the new environmen-

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