

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE

BUSH-BASHING

by Aram Bakshian, Jr.

One of the most disappointing things about that sometimes puzzling phenomenon called the conservative movement is the jellyfish way it has of breaking up into sticky, disagreeable bits of astringent gunk just when it seems on the verge of forming an effective, cohesive mass. As the Reagan Administration fights the undertow of Irangate, and as the fishing fleet for the 1988 GOP nomination gets under way, many of my fellow conservatives are again indulging this lamentably coelenterate tendency toward stinging fragmentation. To add to the aquatic analogy, the behavior of some of them also bears a morbid resemblance to that of Siamese fighting fish, those colorful, scrappy little creatures who reserve their best efforts for killing or maiming each other, rather than taking on enemy species. Today, more than ever, too many conservatives who ought to know better have fallen victim to what, for brevity's sake, might be called the Siamese Jellyfish Syndrome.

In an uncharacteristically bilious piece, published in this magazine last month ("Conservative Bird, Liberal Bush"), Tom Bethell, a usually reasoned and articulate advocate of conservative principles, dived into the Siamese Jellyfish tank with a resounding bellyflop. After dismissing President Ronald Reagan as an amiable but mindless dupe in the hands of the American business community, the Republican "country club set," and the liberal media establishment, he proceeded to savage the President's heir presumptive, Vice President George Bush, branding him a feeble pawn incapable of being elected. Then, for good measure, Mr. Bethell denounced the only other contender for the Republican presidential nomination with more than minuscule popular support, Senate Republican leader Robert Dole, as a man with no ideological compass who "cannot be trusted."

Having vented his spleen and, in the process, having written off the two men whose combined support represents an overwhelming majority within GOP grassroots ranks, Mr. Bethell waxed

poetic about Rep. Jack Kemp. Mr. Kemp, he told us, is a candidate "brimming over with ideas" who "alone among the Republican candidates would bring about the long-delayed realignment of the party." The fact that Jack Kemp, who has been in hot pursuit of the 1988 nomination for nearly eight years now, still has trouble winning much more than single-digit support among Republican voters (even General Haig, whom hardly anyone takes seriously, does better than Jack Kemp) fails to dampen his ardor. Nor does the fact that Rep. Kemp performs dismally when matched against potential Democratic rivals in polls of the general electorate reduce Mr. Bethell's rather touching faith that "Kemp would defeat any Democrat in the general election . . ."

As a conservative Republican myself, I see no ideal candidate on the horizon. Dream candidates, after all, are the stuff that political pipe dreams, not real-life political realignments, are made of. There are a number of pluses and minuses to all of the current contenders for the GOP nomination. Expecting a perfect ideo-

logical fit (which usually means a politically crippling straitjacket) when it comes to party nominees makes about as much sense as waiting for Mr. Goodbar at a sleazy singles bar. You're usually better off if your dream doesn't come true.

My own view, and I suspect it is shared by most Republicans, many independents, and probably a majority of American conservatives, is that Messrs. Bush and Dole (as well as several minor candidates including Jack Kemp) could all be supported in good conscience against anyone the Democratic party is likely to throw at us in 1988. The bottom line question, and answering it need not involve bad-mouthing any of the credible GOP contenders, is which among them is most likely to carry on the far from finished business of the Reagan-GOP agenda. This, in turn, can only be done by the candidate or candidates capable of holding together enough of the fluid coalition of regular GOP voters, Southern and Southwestern Democrats, and blue-collar and independent moderates and conservatives that swept Ronald Reagan into office in 1980 and again in 1984. It would also be a nice *souçon* if the candidate we ultimate-

ly choose is strongly qualified on the basis of experience, judgment, maturity, and a reasoned sense of national priorities, with a minimum of crank notions either unacceptable to, or of little interest to, the electorate (e.g., a return to the gold standard, empty blustering against South Africa, rhetorical courting of hostile blocs of the electorate without any prospect of winning their votes, or generally preaching to a small choir over the heads of the general electorate).

So far, George Bush and Bob Dole have demonstrated the best potential for doing this. Jack Kemp, for all of his repeated pounding of pet themes (only the late, unlamented Gary Hart-pence had a larger larder of "new ideas," and he has long since vanished from the political scene in a cloud of cheesecake), seems no closer to the nomination today than he was eight years ago. To borrow a phrase from Mr. Bethell, it is the Kemp candidacy, far more than the Bush or Dole candidacies, that is an "inside the Beltway" phenomenon, the parochial preserve of a small band of professional ideologues, most of them based in Washington, which has yet to generate any substantial support at the grassroots level.

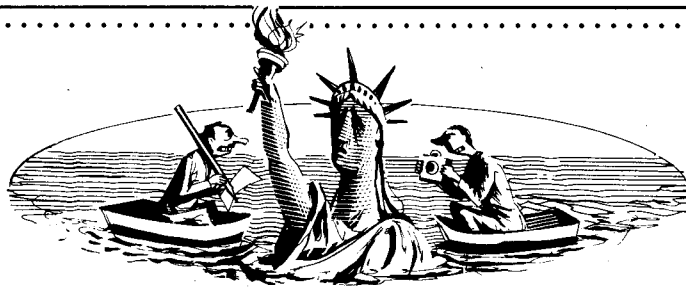
This is *not* grounds for writing off Jack Kemp. He has many ideas, some of which are good and all of which deserve a serious hearing. It is grounds for Mr. Bethell and the rest of the relatively small band of Kemp partisans to concentrate on selling their candidate to a so-far unresponsive electorate (something they have shown little aptitude for), instead of engaging in vitriolic attacks on more successful rivals. This is especially true of those who, like Vice President Bush, have loyally supported the Reagan agenda and demonstrated their ability to attract continued support for it, as well as their own candidacies.

Come out of the Siamese Jellyfish tank, Tom Bethell, and get back into the political mainstream. The water may not be fine, but it's the only navigable route to the presidency and the political realignment to which you, like the rest of us in the conservative movement, are passionately committed. □



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PRESSWATCH



SPIKES AND INOUYENDOES

by Michael Ledeen

Sometimes it's the small acts of nastiness that tell us the most about a person. Eight years ago, when I was interviewing people for a book I co-wrote about Carter and the fall of the Shah of Iran, I spent some time with a European businessman who had been one of the lucky guests at the Shah's orgies. Girls were flown in by chartered Concorde for the occasions, and at one of these affairs the Shah had given a lovely Parisian woman a spectacular emerald, which she wore for the entire weekend. He kissed her goodbye as she left for the airport, and when she went to board the Concorde for the return flight, the customs agent removed the jewel. My European laughed heartily as he told me the story. He had intended to tell me something about the Shah (and he had), but he also told me a great deal about himself.

So it is with the *Washington Post*, a newspaper that in recent months has given up all pretense of being respectable, and has instead revealed itself as a vulgar political sheet. I expect that years from now people will look back at the spring and summer of 1987 as the beginning of the end for this publication, which once inspired an entire generation of American journalists.

On June 19, the *Post* ran two stories—one on top of the other—that related to Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams. The top one was headlined "Iran Probers Say 3 Didn't Tell Full Truth; Testimony of Secord, Abrams, Hall Faulted." It is the usual *Post* special by two experts in innuendo (Dan Morgan and Walter Pincus): a totally undocumented claim, citing unnamed sources. Just underneath this bit of fluff we find a UPI story with a little headline: "Abrams Misses Hill Appearance, Cites Schedule." In this five-paragraph tale we learn that Abrams sent a deputy to George Crockett's House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Af-

fairs, and the UPI story pointed out that Abrams "would have been put under oath by a Democratic Chairman who questions his veracity."

Although Abrams had a perfectly good excuse (a meeting with Oscar Arias, the president of Costa Rica), the clear implication was that Abrams didn't want to testify. Abrams didn't care for that, and he complained to the *Post's* ombudsman, Joe Laitin, who replied dryly that it wasn't the *Post's* fault; he should complain to UPI. Laitin probably didn't realize that the *Post's* spikers had been at work. They had neatly snipped a one-sentence paragraph from the UPI original that read: "Abrams appeared before two congressional panels Wednesday, his first congressional appearances since his testimony to the Iran-Contra panel." So whatever else one wanted to say about the event, it was clearly wrong to leave the implication that Abrams was reluctant to testify before Congress. But the *Post* wanted that implication to remain, and hence removed the offending words.

Bigger and Better Spikes

These little spikelets show the sort of reflexes that journalists and editors develop when they work for the *Post*,



something that will not surprise those who have followed the coverage of the Iran-contra hearings. At times the *Post's* "reportage" was so bad that one had to wonder if there weren't actually two separate events broadcast, so different was the coverage from what one saw on television. Take, for example, the descriptions of two successive days of questioning of Ollie North provided by the *Post's* main "news analyst" of the hearings, Mr. Haynes Johnson. Of the questioning of North by John W. Nields, Jr. on Wednesday, July 8, Johnson wrote:

Oliver L. North was on the offensive yesterday, and for much of the extraordinarily emotional Iran-contra hearing day proved to be the best lawyer in his own defense. It was his day in court. . . .

In the morning, he was combative and indignant as he sought to disprove charges that he had profited personally from Iran-contra deals. . . .

But as the day wore on, the tone of the hearings shifted. North's repeated assertions of absolute assurance and of always acting for a higher cause clearly began to wear on the committees. The day concluded with a stern catalog of North's actions in participating in lies to Congress and the public from chief counsel John W. Nields Jr. of the House select committee.

The next day, July 9, North was questioned by Arthur Liman, and Johnson's "analysis" was strikingly similar to his evaluation of the preceding day:

The morning was all his, and Oliver L. North knew it. So, it seems, did the country. Even as North continued his strong self-defense of his Iran-contra role, a room in the Senate Russell Office Building was filling with flowers . . . and citizen supporters were literally [?] offering checks for his defense to Capitol guards. . . .

Then it changed. As the morning was North's, the afternoon belonged to Arthur Liman, the litigator from New York who is chief counsel of the Senate select committee. After three hours answering Liman's questions, North's demeanor was transformed. The bravado had become hesitancy; the assured Marine suddenly seemed very alone.

Johnson was seeing what he wished to see, not what had transpired. On both days, the counsels for the joint

committee had set out to destroy North, and on both days they failed. Nields played the bad cop, Liman the good cop, but neither stratagem succeeded. Nields's failure was so manifest that within 24 hours even members of the committees were criticizing him; Liman so antagonized the public that he received some of the most vicious hate mail (and calls) in recent memory. And North, although admitting shredding, lying, and otherwise deceiving scores of people around the world, had effectively made his case. As polls would show a few days later, he had done what Ronald Reagan had not: rallied public support for the contras.

To get an accurate picture of North's effectiveness, one had to read the analyses of the *Post's* television columnists. And even when it was over, Haynes Johnson wanted to pretend that the result would be other than what it clearly was. On Bastille Day, July 14, Johnson finally admitted that North's impact on American public opinion was the greatest any military leader had made since General MacArthur's great performance in 1951. But instead of recognizing that North's testimony had fundamentally changed the nature of the hearings, and threatened to provoke a backlash against the more outspoken members of the committees, Johnson wrote:

The drama was distracting, as Sen William S. Cohen (R-Maine) suggested. But Cohen added:

"Long after the sheer force of your personality has faded from this room . . . I think the American people are going to be left to deal with the policy implications of what has occurred and what's been said in this room."

Fair enough. But the drama was hardly "distracting": it was the main event.

The Inouye Misdirection

Senator Daniel Inouye came to the hearings with a remarkable reputation. A World War II hero, widely considered a highly moral and fair-minded man, he seemed to be the perfect chairman of the Senate Select Committee.

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