

Reality Check

(Or, can we afford another childless governor?)

by Cynthia
H. Craft



"Hurry boys, get to the car. The new governor's talking about education. He's giving his State of the State speech."

"State of the what?" Shoulders slump. Feet take on great weight. Backpacks drag as we cross the school parking lot. "Mom, do we have to watch it on C-SPAN?"

"No, no, no. It's on the radio. Come on now, into the car. I rushed here from work so we could hear it together."

Back-seat Dialogue: "Mom, can we go to Steve's Pizza? I'm hungry and we don't have anything at home that I like."

"Shhhh! Let's listen."

"I am proposing \$444 million ... for measures to improve reading skills of children. I call this program READ: Raising Expectations, Achievement and ..."

BD: "READ? No duh."

"... This will help us ensure that every child ... is a competent reader by the end of the third grade."

BD: "Third grade?! Mrs. Washburn says we should be reading by first grade."

"I know, honey. But not every kid has a Mrs. Washburn."

BD: "I mean, look at Ben. He's in first grade and he's reading Roald Dahl books."

"I know, dear. Several kids in his classroom are."

"So I'm challenging ... the teaching community to help me elevate the profession of teaching."

BD: "Lots of kids want to be teachers when they grow up."

"Just as we challenge students, teachers and principals to hold higher expectations, so too we must ask more of parents."

"That reminds me, Ben. Did you remember to give Mrs. Reeves your clothespin?"

BD: (In a tone of high exasperation) "Maam. It's not a clothespin. It's an old-fashioned doll from a country of our heritage."

"Oh, all right. Well, did you?"

BD: "Ye-es."

BD: "It's a good thing we have an aunt who's an artist — who remembers what a Laplander looks like."

"And a Mom who's willing to drive all the way

to Oakland to take her a wooden clothespin, I might add."

"... to require parents to sign a contract with their schools."

"Kyle, how's your science fair project? When do you have to turn something in?"

BD: "Pretty soon. I need to find out if a pickle generates or conducts electricity. If it generates, I can run electrical current from the pickle through the potato. Or compare it to how much electricity a lemon generates."

"I see. Let's get to work on it early. Last year we were up 'til midnight painting your presentation board."

BD: "Mom, all I have to do is find out about the pickle. Then it'll just take about an hour to set it up."

"Yes, dear. You're forgetting about all the stuff we have to run around to get. Wires, batteries, produce. God knows what else."

"By giving their word to ... assist on homework, to engage the process of learning, parents can set an example...."

"Say, Ben, did you find out when Mrs. Reeves wants me to come in Scandinavian folk costume to talk about Finland?"

BD: "No."

"She still wants parents to come in costume?"

BD: "I don't know."

"Do you want me to? I'm not going to do it unless you want me to. My mother never did. Kyle, you don't think Mrs. Mote will mind if I do the art docent thing while in costume?"

BD: "Uh, Mom, it's fifth grade. ... I don't know if you should show up like that...."

"So in my plan, no one gets a free ride. Students will be tested. Teachers will be reviewed. Principals will be held to account. And parents will be urged to assume greater responsibility."

BD: "Did you vote for this guy, Mom?"

"I'm going to have to plead the Fifth on that one, dear."

BD: "Mom, can we go to Steve's Pizza if I get an 'A' on my spelling test?" 🏠



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Impeachment

Less than 24 hours after she was sworn in to a second term, Barbara Boxer sat down with a group of reporters and listed no fewer than 20 legislative priorities ranging from HMO reform and after-school care, to offshore oil bans and new regulations on handguns.

Reporters scribbled furiously in their note pads, and dutifully waited approximately one nanosecond before pressing Boxer on the only issue that they knew would generate any ink.

"Senator, regarding impeachment ..."

The trial of William Jefferson Clinton has overshadowed everything else in the nation's capital. Forget Social Security, education or health-care reform. As the trial opened it became abundantly clear that until it ends — and as this column is being written it was not clear it ever will — Washington will focus on nothing else.

"We'll all try to do our work, but this is very grave," said Boxer, whose flu-induced dizzy spell on the first day of the proceedings led to false reports that she had been taken away by ambulance.

For nearly a year, the White House has boasted of Clinton's capacity to manage affairs of state despite the scandal, due to the president's ability to "compartmentalize." The early weeks of 1999 suggest that the Senate and the news media — and in all likelihood the White House, as well — have no such talent.

"There are important [policy] things that we should be doing ... I don't see how both can go on," said Senator Dianne Feinstein. "I think the Senate during the time of the impeachment will be consumed by the matter of impeachment."

These are momentous times in Washington. Filled with history and occasion. But not legislation.

As the trial opened, California's two jurors were in the same position as almost every other Democratic senator — angry with House Republicans, annoyed with their president and frustrated that their time as members of the "world's most deliberative club" would be distracted by such tawdriness. "The question comes up whether this is in the nation's interest," said Feinstein.

Their positions have evolved roughly in tandem. A year ago, Feinstein and Boxer were both in the White House's Roosevelt Room when Clinton made his now famous, finger-wagging declaration: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, [Monica] Lewinsky."

Seven months later, Feinstein exploded in anger when Clinton finally admitted his relation-

ship with Lewinsky, saying "my faith in his credibility has been badly shattered."

Boxer, whose daughter is married to the First Lady's brother and who had remained quiet on the matter for months, took to the Senate floor in early September to condemn the president's behavior as "immoral" and "indefensible."

Though the intensity of their reactions and their enthusiasm to talk about it has been varied, overall their positions are indistinguishable. Both deplore the president's behavior as "reprehensible." Yet neither believe it warrants his removal from office, and it is almost inconceivable that either would vote for his conviction.

"Assume that every word is true in the Starr report, and I don't think it necessarily is," Boxer said. "Does it all rise to the level of high crimes and misdemeanors? ... I don't see this rising to that level."

Feinstein agrees. "The president will always have the stigma of being impeached," she said. "I don't know how much blood, so to speak, one feels you have to get out of the situation."

Feinstein said that the subject at the source of Clinton's alleged perjury and obstruction of justice "his sexual proclivities," as she put it, diminished the seriousness of his actions. "My view is that we ought to keep [the trial] short ... so we can get on with the nation's business."

For Feinstein, who faces voters again in less than two years, that means money to build more schools, tighter regulations on domestic and international gun sales, a "bill of rights" for crime victims and a crackdown on gangs.

Neither senator's political fortunes appear closely tied to the trial's outcome, although the Republican majority's willingness to work with any Democratic members may depend on the comity shown during the coming months.

Yet even for those not known for their bipartisan tendencies, the pause in legislative activity is a source of frustration. Boxer's irritability was evident when a reporter questioned whether a six-week delay would really endanger any important priorities. "This isn't easy," she snapped, referring to the legislative process. "It takes votes, test votes, press conferences. ... Six weeks is a long time in my working life." 🏠

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