

Rallying the Troops



Steve Frank's Lonely Crusade to take CRA national

By James Bemis

AT 7:00 A.M. on May 26, 1998, as he opened his morning paper, Steve Frank saw something he never expected to see: his face on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. Frank, who lives in Simi Valley, California, has spent the last 16 months traveling around the United States organizing fellow conservatives into the National Federation of Republican Assemblies (NFRA). The national group springs from the success of the California Republican Assembly, once headed by Frank. CRA is an official California Republican Party volunteer organization that remains steadfastly conservative.

Frank's efforts came to the *Wall Street Journal's* attention when reporter Jeanne Cummings heard about his organizing activities from South Dakota conservatives as she covered Republican presidential politics. Traveling from state to state, Cummings repeatedly ran into enthused activists lauding Frank's efforts to charter state NFRA chapters, teaching them how to recruit candidates, organize volunteers and raise campaign funds for conservative causes. Intrigued, she spent several hours interviewing Frank about his unusual quest, eventually producing the cover story. So, for one day at least, Simi Valley was the home of the nation's most prominently featured conservative.

Frank figures he's flown more than 200,000 miles to achieve his goal of establishing Republican Assemblies in every state. He's now launched organizations in 43 states and at least two more states are on the way.

On an average of two Friday nights a month, Frank, after working his regular job all week, kisses his wife Leslie good-bye, heading to LAX for a red-eye flight to Anywhere, U.S.A. On the plane, he reads or revises the next day's presentation. Arriving early Saturday morning between 7 and 9 a.m., he breakfasts with a small

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group of local conservative leaders. Frank then makes his main speech to a larger group, where he outlines the principles and goals of the NFRA, requesting their help in stemming the liberal tide. After lunching with another small group, he retreats to a hotel to make phone calls and catch up on paperwork. Following a dinner meeting with still more activists, he retires to his room, waking early to catch a morning flight back to Los Angeles. Most Sundays, he's home by 1 p.m., in time to greet his wife returning from church. For this, he receives no pay or stipends. NFRA pays only his travel expenses.

STEVE FRANK, 51, was born in the Bronx, moving to Southern California at age 11 with his family. After attending local public schools and completing two years at L.A. City College, Frank joined the army, where his service included a tour of duty in Vietnam with the 1st Infantry Division — the legendary "Big Red One." After completing his military service, he graduated from the University of Redlands with a degree in Business.

Conservative politics first beckoned during the mid-1960s when he became active in supporting the troops still serving in Vietnam. With Bob Dornan, he developed the famous POW/MIA bracelets eventually worn by thousands as a reminder of those soldiers missing or imprisoned. He also became an active speaker at college campus forums, opposing Tom Hayden, Jane Fonda, and other radical activists regarding America's role in the Vietnam War. Later, he was asked by the families of POWs to negotiate on their behalf directly with the Viet Cong, North Vietnamese, and Khmer Rouge. He also served on the Proposition 13 speaker's bureau and was Ventura County coordinator for Propositions 187, 209, and 227. He's run twice unsuccessfully for political office.

In the late 1970s, Frank served as a California Re-

publican Assembly statewide officer, and eventually as president. With 115 chapters and roughly 10,000 members, CRA is one of the state's most potent political organizations. Its annual convention served as launching pad for the gubernatorial campaigns of Ronald Reagan in 1966 and Ron Unz in 1994. Currently, according to CRA, its members dominate "the Republican Caucus leadership of both houses of the state Legislature."

CRA PROMOTES conservative candidates and causes through a vigorous grass roots network. Putting into practice its stated belief that "only small government truly serves the needs of the people," local CRA units have taken the lead on issues that might seem small potatoes to other groups, including fighting porn shops in Simi Valley, school bond taxes in Torrance, and public safety personnel reductions in Vallejo. While often overlooked by Party bigwigs and country club types, these local conflicts loom large in the lives of an important CRA constituency: the working rank and file in the affected communities, those whom Pat Buchanan calls "the conservatives of the heart." By making the hometown common folks' fight *its* fight, CRA has cultivated a geographically dispersed core of loyal, dedicated members: CRA's secret weapons.

In 1979, then-CRA president Mike Evans, a woman, and Frank came up with an idea. Given its effectiveness, CRA ought to work in other states. The seed of the National Federation of Republican Assemblies was sown. Frank and Evans found that no other state had organizations similar in scope to the CRA. While there were small pockets of local conservative groups with names like "The Main Street Republicans" and "The Republican Coffee Club," no organized, statewide conservative groups existed whose members understood how to acquire and use the apparatus of state and local political power. Clearly, they quickly realized, organizing these groups would entail spending lots of time and money on travel, meetings, communication, and more. The task seemed Herculean.

Nevertheless, by 1983, five states — Texas, Illinois, Vermont, Iowa, and Washington — had signed up. But just as things began to jell, Frank found the activist fever ebbing away, losing its vitality, strangely, because of conservative success. Reagan was president, the Senate was Republican, *National Review* was the toast of Washington. So, slowly, grass roots conservatives put away their muskets, hung up their uniforms, bid farewell to the officers, and went home. Only California main-

tained an active Republican Assembly organization.

And so it stayed until the 1992 Republican National Convention when delegates from Arizona approached CRA for help in forming their own Republican Assembly. The following May, Frank and Evans drove to Phoenix to charter the Arizona Republican Assembly.

Hoping for the best but expecting the worst, they found an organized group of high-level conservatives, including Governor Evan Mecham, present to greet them. When they left, the number of Republican Assemblies in the United States had doubled. To two.

And the number remained two until December 1996. Angered by the Dole campaign's repeated stiffing of conservatives — who were "rolled, doled, and maligned" according to Frank — a meeting was scheduled in Las Vegas for the California and Arizona Republican Assemblies to dis-

cuss forming a national organization. Interest proved so high and the need so immediate that representatives from nine other states also showed up, including such nationally-known activists as Eagle Forum's Phyllis Schlafly and Michael Farris from the Home School Legal Defense Association.

The meeting elected Frank as National Coordinator, with the job of organizing assemblies in each state and finding and cultivating the leadership to make them grow. In August 1997, to no one's surprise, Frank was unanimously elected NFRA's first president. The organization sought and received endorsements from several nationally-known conservatives, including Schlafly, Pat Buchanan, Gary Bauer, Paul Weyrich, Tim LaHaye, and Morton Blackwell. The endorsements provided instant credibility. Also, these conservative leaders also gave Frank names to call in each state of people who knew the lay of the local political landscape.

Before going into a state, Frank reads local newspapers over the Internet and talks to local Republicans. Phone interviews are conducted with prospective chapter leaders to find committed conservatives who understand their state's politics and, more importantly, its political system. He often talks to a dozen people or more before finding the right combination of conviction, determination, and savvy.

Rapid improvements in technology have now made creating a national organization of Republican Assemblies, so daunting a task in 1979, manageable. Via the Internet, Frank reads several newspapers and hundreds of e-mail messages daily, sending a president's message or "issues update" to the membership several times a week. From his living room, he recently at-

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tended a NFRA technology subcommittee meeting with members from Michigan, Georgia, Tennessee, and other states using an online chat room.

The NFRA held its first national convention this year in Dallas from August 7 to 9, featuring presentations from such conservative luminaries as Missouri Senator John Ashcroft, Arizona Congressman Matt Salmon, former Texas Congressman Steve Stockman, Schlafly, and author David Barton. With more than 100 people attending from 20 states, the convention adopted principles, set objectives, established committees, and assigned responsibilities. The conference, says Frank, “moved NFRA to the next level.”

The conference defined the organization’s guiding principles and adopted basic operating rules. It pledged to seek divine guidance and blessing for the country and sharply criticized moral relativism. The group supports adherence to the Constitution, preservation of national sovereignty, maintenance of strong national defense, and a call for men-only in combat. It promotes religious freedom, property rights, the right to bear arms, economic freedom, parental rights, and the unborn’s right to life. In short: a conservative manifesto. But many groups — even the state and national Republican Parties — have similar statements of principle. What makes CRA and NFRA different? Why do they succeed in maintaining and actually advancing their principles where others fail?

THE ANSWER lies in the NFRA’s fundamental tenet “that all political power and influence should flow from the grass roots up.” While all state Republican Assemblies subscribe to the same general principles, they’re free to adopt organizational changes or emphasize or address specific issues as they choose. As Frank says, what’s important in California may mean nothing in New York or Wyoming. One size can’t fit all. Thus, each chapter delegates a certain limited amount of authority to the national organization, retaining broad autonomy for itself to deal with local and state issues. Sound familiar? It should. It’s what used to be known in this country as “federalism.” James Madison is smiling. The approach taken by the NFRA may represent the best opportunity yet for Middle American conservatives to re-take control from the liberals and socialists of both parties, first of their communities and then their country. Like a modern Baron von Steuben — who turned George Washington’s raw Continental Army recruits into a well-trained army — Frank’s job is to rally the troops, teach the fighting skills, lay out the roadmap to victory, and then leave the rest to the natives. “By getting people involved at the grass roots, statewide level,” he says, “NFRA has already convinced many who are fed

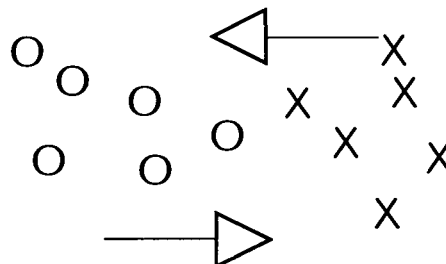
up with the Republican leadership in Washington to stay in the Party, which will help Republicans in these states in their local and state elections.”

NFRA has already carved several notches on its belt. Both the *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times* credit NFRA, working with social conservatives like James Dobson and Gary Bauer, with moving GOP leaders Trent Lott and Newt Gingrich in a more conservative direction. At the August Michigan Republican nominating convention, Governor John Engler urged the nomination of liberal Scott Romney — son of former Governor George Romney — for attorney general. But after a furious lobbying campaign led by Michigan Republican Assembly President Mark Forton and NFRA Board member Violet Vestevich, the GOP nomination went instead to the candidate backed by prolife groups, John Smietanka, on a close 52 to 48 percent vote.

In Arizona, ARA is collecting signatures in support of a tax limitation measure. An ARA-endorsed candidate, Barbara Blewster, won the September Republican primary for District 1 state representative — by 15 votes out of more than 27,000 cast — following a vigorous Republican Assembly-led grass roots effort. Blewster’s primary victory in this largely Republican district virtually assures her election in November. The *Prescott Valley Daily Courier* reported that losing GOP candidate David Spence blamed the ARA for his defeat, calling them “so far to the right it comes up left — it’s really more fascist, a conspiracy theory organization.” Hell hath no fury like a liberal scorned.

NFRA leaders plan to build on victories at the level of local school boards, city councils, county supervisors, and state elective offices as a foundation to take on what Frank calls the GOP’s “power wing.” They want its leadership to reflect a conservative majority drawn from what Frank calls the “Republican wing of the Republican Party.” If it takes a while, so be it. Steve Frank’s a patient man: “Yes, 1998 and 2000 are important to us, but we’re not going home on January 1, 2001,” he says. “We’re planning to be around for many election cycles.”

One of history’s most successful grass roots organizers, Mao Tse-tung, said if you win the countryside, eventually the capital will fall. Steve Frank disagrees with Mao’s politics; but he can’t argue with his logic. CRA





Smog Check Jungle

by Denis J. Norrington

IN THE 1998 legislative session's closing moments, the state Assembly dealt a death blow to repeal of that increasingly arcane and byzantine set of regulations called Smog Check II. That repeal passed in the Senate by a lopsided 21-9 vote, that Governor Pete Wilson dropped his planned intention to veto the repeal, and that Assembly Democrats had to resort to procedural subterfuge to keep the bill in the Transportation Committee through the end of session demonstrates the rapidly increasing frustration with and opposition to this vastly complex law affecting every Californian who owns a car.

Eight days after the end of the legislative session, new tighter testing rules kicked in, adding emissions examinations for nitrous oxides ("NOX") to the tests in designated "High Smog Areas." It's hard to tell whether the Air Resources Board (ARB) bureaucrats deliberately delayed the introduction of Smog Check II's next stage until after the adjournment. However it certainly robbed the program's opponents of additional pressure to kill it.

Like a Stealth Bomber, unseen and unheard, this slowly ballooning set of regulations has snuck up on most Californians. State residents are accustomed to the far easier to understand and much less rigorous world of the original Smog Check. That program's first stage passed in 1947 in response to the then-choking clouds of auto emissions that identified Los Angeles and Southern California as the nation's bad air capital. Fifty years later, an *L.A. Times* editorial of November 11, 1997, proclaimed the unqualified success of the original Smog Check program, reminding its readers



that, whereas 20 years earlier the South Coast had endured 121 "stage one" smog alerts, that year there had been just one, and that "the average New Car today creates only about 1/10th the pollution of its 1977 counterpart." Given this success, why was a vastly more rigorous set of rules required?

The roots of Smog Check II can be found in the 1990 Federal Clean Air Act. Passed by the Democrat Congress and signed by George Bush, it mandated that all states lower pollution levels still further from the already drastically reduced levels of the 1980s. States failing to undertake what the Feds judged "effective enough" efforts would lose federal highway funds. The Act, largely a child of the late '80s ozone scare, mandates that Los Angeles will have to reduce its already low pollution levels an additional 65 percent before 2010.

CALIFORNIA RESPONDED with Smog Check II, which Wilson signed into law in 1994. Under the new program, the state is divided into three areas: 1) rural areas of minimal or no pollution where cars are only smog tested upon resale; 2) "median" areas where the old program is essentially continued unchanged except for tightened-up standards for "older" (1984 and before) cars; 3) "smog enhanced" areas where tests for nitrous oxides ("NOX") are, as of September 8, 1998, added to much tougher standards. The third area includes the heavily-populated Southern California coastal areas, parts of western San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, and large areas of the urbanized sectors of the Central Valley, mainly Bakersfield, Fresno, and Sacramento. In the

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