

Renewing the Faith

Awful spring gives way to hopeful June: Mayor Brown uno (Jerry) helps deflate CTA; Mayor Brown duo (Willie) hears boos as re-election time approaches.

T I M W . F E R G U S O N

CALIFORNIA'S NEWSPAPERS renewed their faith in gun laws and litigation during the awful spring.

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The papers also got around to covering AB 842, the teacher union's attempt to smother charter schools with a closed shop. Exposed to the light of day, and to the vociferous objections of charter parents (and Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown, their ally), the bill was deep-sixed in favor of less onerous legislation. In Silicon Valley, where discontent with the quality of public-school instruction seems most acute, even the free weekly *Metro* was performing yeoman's service, smoking out local Assembly Democrats on the issue. It found John Dutra and Elaine Alquist voting to pass the bill out of committee and then offering excuses why they didn't really mean it. Ted Lempert was similarly equivocal. But give reliable union hand Mike Honda credit for consistency: he was with the closed shop all the way. Come 2000, might a technology entrepreneur think even a — gasp! — religious conservative a better vote in the Legislature than this CTA slave?

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AB 842's author, the doctrinaire Carole Migden, was on to bigger things, toying with a run for San Francisco mayor. Perhaps as Willie Brown's re-election bid kicks in this fall, readers beyond the Bay will learn how stunningly unpopular Da Mayor is among his constituents. The local press noted how he was booed during the annual Carnival parade — which, granted, takes place in some of the working class areas where his act is least well received these days. But all around town, there are beefs about the lousy Muni train service and about the resurgent homeless presence. Seems Willie has had a tough time serving all his interest groups at one time: the big developers and corporate execs, the public-employee unions, the lefty lobbies

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and the neighborhood preservationists. Pretty soon the *San Francisco Chronicle* will be the only friend the guy's got, outside of his haberdasher. Even with barbs coming from all sides, however, his fund-raising prowess promises to make any challenge to him difficult. But at least the flak keeps him hunkered down and less of a "national figure."

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Much ink was spilled over Gray Davis' punt on the appeal of Proposition 187's constitutionality, but the issue of welfare and public services for immigrants legal and otherwise seems to have been settled regardless. Gray Davis and other Democrats decided to spend the money. The press has duly reported this, and there's been little uproar. The conventional wisdom is that, with the economy booming, reluctance to subsidize noncitizens has largely evaporated. This is a ripe subject for serious surveying. The curious thing — also adequately reported — is that the U.S. government is devoting increased resources to keeping illegals from crossing the Mexican border even as public benefits are liberalized for those already here.

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Fannie Mae, the federal government-guaranteed mortgage lender, is now also supporting qualified, struggling immigrants. To much press fanfare, it announced a \$16 billion push to bring home ownership to low-income residents of the insanely expensive Bay Area. Such programs at the bottom end of the housing chain of course undergird the incredible prices at the high end, as existing owners move up. But there's one good thing to say about the general level of that region's home sales and costs: they're fostering the advertisements that back a rarity in the U.S., the free *Palo Alto Daily News*. It's got a smidgen of real local news in it. In fact, it is just the biggest step toward what looks increasingly to be the future of the general-interest press: it will cost nothing (or next to that) to read. That's already the norm on the Web, and among the

vibrant urban weeklies, and the big dailies in California have gravitated back down to 25 cents. Maybe this will encourage more people to read what's in print. This might occasionally be a good thing.

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Knight-Ridder, owners of the *San Jose Mercury News*, belittles Dean Singleton's East Bay papers that compete with others there that K-R acquired. Singleton's operation is accused of lacking integrity in separating editorial from advertising. But Knight may have use for Demon Dean. If it succeeds in getting its hands on the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which is being put up for sale, it may need to show federal trust busters that it is not wiping out competition in the Bay Area.

Oh, yeah. The feisty *Examiner* is still around, for now. Edited by Mr. Sharon Stone, no less.

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When the state Department of Education finally acknowledged that its dropout statistics were bogus — and have been, going back to Bill Honig's reign — lazy mainstream media caught up with a fact that conservative critics had long asserted (see *CPR*, January/February 1999, "The Front Line"). Reporters were still slow to examine the breakdown of the numbers to discover that Asian-heritage students (including Filipinos) have decidedly higher high-school graduation rates than other ethnic groups, including "whites." So, yes, the schools are failing, but a lot of kids succeed regardless.

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If Pete Wilson really believes the views he voiced

from 1993 on, why does George Skelton keep writing columns in the *Los Angeles Times* saying the following: But for the recession at the beginning of Wilson's governorship and the tax increases that put him on the outs with the right, Pete wouldn't have spent the next six years making like he was a conservative. He would have been free to govern as the moderate progressive he really is. And the second question is: Given that Skelton keeps writing this — in effect, confirming that Wilson is the opportunist that his critics (left and right) have long accused him of being — why does Pete keep talking to the columnist?

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Last time, we noted that the *Times* local columnists were oblivious to Mayor Richard Riordan's remarkable reform-slate move to take over the Los Angeles city school board. Now that the reformers have won the pivotal seat in a runoff — defeating Maxine Waters' soulmate on the board, Barbara Boudreaux — the devil must be given its due. The columnists hardly improved their act, but the *Times'* editorials were direct and hard-hitting all along: Boudreaux and the other status-quo incumbents must go. And they have gone.

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What Sacramento needs is a good gossip columnist (apologies to the *CPR's Spectator*). Most of the press corps probably knows the constant romantic intrigue in the Capitol, but is above reporting it. But when a state constitutional officer and a leading legislator are involved both professionally and personally, might this border on legitimate news?

CPR

THE MIDNIGHT ECONOMIST

Economics and the College Generation

Besieged in the UCLA economics department, our mild-mannered professor insists education requires more than training and training means more than performing tricks.

W I L L I A M R . A L L E N

The class will come to order. Listen carefully. First, we will review the essence of "the economic problem," fondly referred to as price-and-allocation analysis. Then, there will be a brief but shrewd examination to see if you have been paying attention. Finally, we will have a bit of reflection on the academic situation.

WE STUDY economics because of the fiasco in the Garden of Eden. Ever since the indiscretion of Eve and her friend with the resident serpent, we have confronted *scarcity*. We cannot produce enough to satisfy fully all the wants of all the people all the time.

Scarcity carries with it several fundamental implica-