

By David Volpendesta

# Veteran writer Heinemann bringing the war back home

**A**N HOUR AFTER CHICAGO WRITER Larry Heinemann, winner of the 1987 National Book Award in fiction for his novel *Paco's Story*, arrived in his San Francisco hotel room he was laughing, almost uncontrollably, on the phone. "In These Times," he intoned in a voice that intimated familiarity with the Chicago-based weekly, "I have to come from Chicago to San Francisco to be interviewed by *In These Times*?"

The next night, just prior to his appearance at the Bay Area's most prestigious literary venue, Black Oak Books, Heinemann was still savoring the irony. Devoid of literary pretense and affectation, Heinemann exudes a down-to-earth, no-nonsense aura. In fact, he's so modest about his success as a writer, it has to be dragged out of him that in addition to receiving the National Book Award, *Paco's Story* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) was also given the Carl Sandburg Medal (Chicago's premiere literary award), the Fiction Prize from the Society of Midland Authors, the Chicago Fiction Award by the Friends of Literature, and was also one of the recipients of an award from the Vietnam Veterans of America.

Despite his calm exterior, Heinemann began to speak intensely about his experiences as an Army grunt when the subject of Vietnam came up. "I went overseas in March of 1967 and came back in March of 1968," he said. "My MOS (military occupation specialty) was 11-Delta. I was an armored intelligence specialist. I was in recon. A hundred years ago I would have been in the horse cavalry. I would have been the poor jerk with the funny hat who would ride out in front of the battalion to find the Indians."

**Being there:** Heinemann paused for a long second before he continued: "I was drafted in '66 and submitted to conscription with what could only be called a soul-deadening dread. I was 23 and somewhat older than everyone else...everybody else was 18...I knew the war was fucked before I went over, that there was no reason for it. And being over there certainly didn't change my mind. As a matter of fact, when I came back in '68 I was radicalized. I was just plain radicalized."

Unlike some others who were radicalized by the Vietnam war and have subsequently found careers prostrating themselves before the icons of neo-conservatism, Heinemann hasn't been screaming *mea culpa* for his political insights. In his acceptance speech at the National Book Awards banquet, Heinemann made a point of emphasizing exactly where he stood in relationship to the current historical revisionism of Vietnam and the war being conducted by the Reagan administration in Central America.

As he puffed slowly on a cigar, he recalled the last remarks he made in that speech. "There's just one



Award-winning author Larry Heinemann at home in Chicago.

more thing I want to say. Somehow there's a notion going around that we could have won the war. I don't know where this came from because I don't know any grunt who thinks that way. To say that we could have won the war is to say that we didn't hate them enough. Or we didn't strafe or bomb them enough. We didn't turn enough of their women into whores. Or we didn't zip enough hootches. Or we didn't bomb them far enough back into the Stone Age...If we allow the same thing to happen in Central America it will be the shame of our lives..."

"Then I sat down and Richard Rhodes, who was given the National Book Award for non-fiction, got up and gave quite a lengthy lecture on nuclear weapons. It was quite something. There was a very political cast to the whole evening which I don't apologize for at all. Those kinds of cultural decisions are crucial."

**Street-wise sensibility:** Just as crucial for Heinemann is the translation of words into action. In that spirit he and his wife Edie (to whom he's been married for 20 years and with whom he has two children) are

active members of Neighbor to Neighbor, a nationwide, grass-roots group involved in lobbying Congress and the administration to stop contra aid. Given his working-class background (both he and his father were drivers for the Chicago Transit Authority) and the fact that he both lives in a working-class neighborhood and identifies himself as a working-class writer, Heinemann feels comfortable organizing on the street.

Heinemann's street-wise sensibility also informs his blowtorch prose. His novel *Paco's Story* essentially traces the return odyssey of Paco Sullivan, the sole surviving member of Alpha Company. Heinemann masterfully captures the power, rhythms, and nuances of the spoken American language with such precision and lack of literary self-consciousness that it invites favorable comparison with another brilliant Chicago writer, playwright David Mamet.

Unlike Mamet, however, the musicality of Heinemann's language is more akin to blues than jazz.

**Paco's blues:** In *Paco's Story*, no

one is having a good time. Narrated by ghosts who are deceased members of Paco's company, the novel plunges into the phantoms of Vietnam that haunt Paco's mind while graphically describing his alienation and intense physical pain. Able to walk only with the aid of a black

## VIETNAM

hickory cane, Paco's body is a mosaic of scars. Nevertheless, he survives with an inspiring sense of dignity, which is all the more poignant as he becomes a symbol of those grunts who endured the horrors of Vietnam only to return home to another labyrinth of nightmares.

In the book Heinemann's currently writing, which focuses on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Vietnam veterans, Heinemann is still dealing with those nightmares. Mentioning that he's been working on the book since 1984 when he went out to the Olympic Peninsula on an assignment for *Harper's Magazine*, he described it as an extended essay that he hopes to complete this spring.

"To me," he commented, "this book is the final story. *Close Quarters* (Heinemann's first novel) is a war story. It really deals with what happened overseas. *Paco's Story* has much more to do with the reverberations since the war...The book about delayed stress is mainly about healing and how Vietnam veterans (I suppose anyone who has lived through that type of ghastly trauma) have come out of that..."

According to Heinemann, about 900,000 of the 2.5 million Vietnam veterans suffer enough from PTSD to require some type of treatment. Among Vietnam veterans, PTSD is

**In *Paco's Story*, winner of the National Book Award, Vietnam Veteran Larry Heinemann masterfully captures the power, rhythms and nuances of spoken American English.**

as urgent a topic of discussion as is Agent Orange, and it affects more people. Explaining that all the veterans he knew were now either approaching or had passed middle age, Heinemann commented that the main themes of the book are

now Vietnam veterans see themselves as men, husbands, fathers, and a generation of soldiers.

**General disregard:** The book begins with the 1986 Veterans parade in Chicago, which occurred on Father's Day weekend, and examines it as a celebration while exploring the contradictions inherent in that notion, one of which was the presence of the Parade Marshall, General William Westmoreland.

"When I heard that General Westmoreland was going to be the Parade Marshall," Heinemann said, "I was dead-set against having anything to do with it because I felt, and I feel now (probably even more strongly than before) that General Westmoreland is responsible to a large extent for the conduct of the war...I wouldn't get in line behind him if he was only going to a shithouse. I wasn't going to march in that fucking parade. I wasn't going to pass by the reviewing stand and salute that cocksucker. He gave the orders that dropped Agent Orange, dioxin. He's the guy who welcomed *Bob Hope*, this jerk. He's the guy who just loved every minute of it. He's the guy who killed friends of mine."

Nevertheless, Heinemann was persuaded to go see the parade and is grateful that he did. "People like to call it a healing thing," he said. "I don't know about that. I do know it was the first time, except for the parade in New York and the parade at the Memorial in 1982, that veterans got to see themselves as a group. And it was the first time in that way that we got to share any kind of fellowship. And I mean fellowship with a small 'f.' It was a real demonstration of brotherhood."

Although he describes himself as a slow writer who works on only one book at a time, he's already decided that when he finishes the book on PTSD he'll write another novel. "I prefer fiction to non-fiction...I'm a much better b.s. artist than a researcher," he laughed. "It's easier to imagine imagery than it is to get imagery from other people...When I finish the book on delayed stress, I'm going to start on my Chicago novel. I have a title already. It's called *Cooler by the Lake*."

Smiling, Heinemann explained that the novel's title is taken from a phrase commonly used by Chicago meteorologists in the summer, and the tone of his voice assumed the same ironic delight I'd heard on the phone the night before. "It's cooler as in *hip*," he laughed. "Cooler as in the temperature is cooler. But also cooler as in *cooler of beer down on the beach*. And it's going to be about Chicago working people and some of the characters who live in my neck of the woods."

**David Volpendesta** is co-editor of the forthcoming *City Lights* collection of Central American short stories, *Clamor of Innocence*.



# Olympics

Continued from page 24

We're IBM—monopoly that's all heart.

**MUSIC:** "Ain't No Mountain High Enough"

Mom: What's the matter, Billy?

Billy: Oh Mom, I don't feel like going for the gold today. It's my... my...

Mom: I know, Billy. No one can dig deep inside themselves and do their best when hemorrhoids flare up. Here, use Preparation H, proud sponsors of the U.S. Olympics.

LATER...

Billy: Gee, Mom, you were right. When it comes to Preparation H, there "ain't no mountain high enough."

Bob: And we're back. All the eyes of the entire world are on Dan Jansen, who's come back

to try again in men's speed skating. Dan is skating as Jane wanted him to. And there's his family in the stands, cheering him on. And they're off. He's doing great! Look at him go! This is fabulous—an American might win something. Can he do it? Oh no, Oh no! He fell again.

Bill: What torture for the Jansen family. Here's a close-up shot of his family's reaction when he fell. Here's a close-up of his sister crying. And here's a close-up of Dan's face to see how he's taking it.

Bob: The next skaters are about to take off, Bill.

Bill: But they're from Japan—let's keep these cameras on Dan's face here. Can we see a replay of his family's reaction in slow motion? Kinda looks like Christa McAuliffe's parents during the Challenger crash, doesn't it? Hey, can we get that footage and run it

next to this?

Bob: And here's Dr. Joyce Brothers to analyze what the Jansen family must be going through.

Dr. Brothers: Bob, this will be a time of deep grief and mourning for the Jansen family, and, indeed, for the entire nation. But then the healing process will begin. I would urge schools to hire therapists to help our nation's schoolchildren work through their own grief about the Jansens.

Bob: Thank you, Dr. Brothers. And we'll be right back.

**MUSIC:** "My Girl"

Sally: Mom, I've got my qualifying meet today and, well, I'm a little nervous about, you know...

Mom: I know, honey. If you want to feel confident enough to excel, you need the extra edge. You need Massengill douche.

Sally: Oh Mom, you're great.

Mom: You can trust Massengill, the official douche of the U.S. Olympics.

Bill: And now, let's get up close and personal with ski champ Peter Mueller.

Bob: Here's Peter off the slopes. He's studying English because he knows it's the best language in the whole world. And here he is in the kitchen, cooking! He sure looks out of place here, doesn't he—a big, strong athlete in the kitchen? Well, Bill, he marches to a different drummer. But he sure can ski.

Bill: You know, Bob, we've been covering a lot of ice hockey, but we are covering other sports, too. We're covering everything here. So, for right now, let's go to...ice hockey.

Bob: Well, bad news, Bill, the U.S. lost again. What's your take on this, Mr. Abrams?

Abrams: They make you so mad, just like little boys do when they're bad. They're so naughty, you just want to pull their pants down and spank them on their little bottoms.

Bob: And we'll be right back.

**MUSIC:** "You've Got a Friend"

Janitor: Say, boss, you going to watch the Olympics?

Joe: Yeah, Mac, I'm on my way to The Fern Bar to watch The Game with The Guys on the giant video screen.

Janitor: Gee, boss, sounds great. I've gotta stay here and scrub the Executive Urinals and, well, I hope I can hear The Game on this sputtering, beat up old transistor.

LATER, in The Fern Bar

Joe: You know, guys, I just had a Bud, and it made me realize how deeply I wanted to eradicate class differences and work to promote social justice. I'm taking a six pack and a portable TV back to the office, to Mac, my brother, my comrade.

Janitor: Gee, boss it's great the way the Olympics and Bud bring us together as a nation.

Bob: And now, to men's figure skating and the two Brians, the American Brian and the other one.

Bill: And our Brian is putting on a great show. Look at him! Look at those scores! We finally won something! How do you feel, Brian?

Brian: Pant..gasp..Well, Bill..pant..gasp.. I..I..pant..feel great.

Bill: And you won this for all Americans, didn't you? You did it for us, right? I love the way these athletes, at least the Americans, are so selfless.

Bob: Me too, Bill. And now for a final recap from Frank and Twinkie Lee Gifford.

Frank: So, Twinkie Lee, what's the message of all this?

Twinkie Lee: Oh Frankie, weren't the two Brians cute? All us girls at the salon had our eyes glued to the TV. But to get to your question, I think our coverage has been totally awesome. There's just no TV like American TV. And the message is, of course, that win or lose, America is the most generous country in the whole wide world and our corporations are so selfless. And all Americans, in their everyday lives, dig deep, go for the gold, give it their best shot and run their hearts out for their fellow man and their country.

Frank: And now to the closing ceremony, "We Are The World" sung by the Blind and Crippled Children's Choir of America as conducted by Lee Iacocca.

Bob: And that's our coverage. God bless us each and every one. Night night.

Susan Douglas teaches media studies at Hampshire College.

## Domestic Policy

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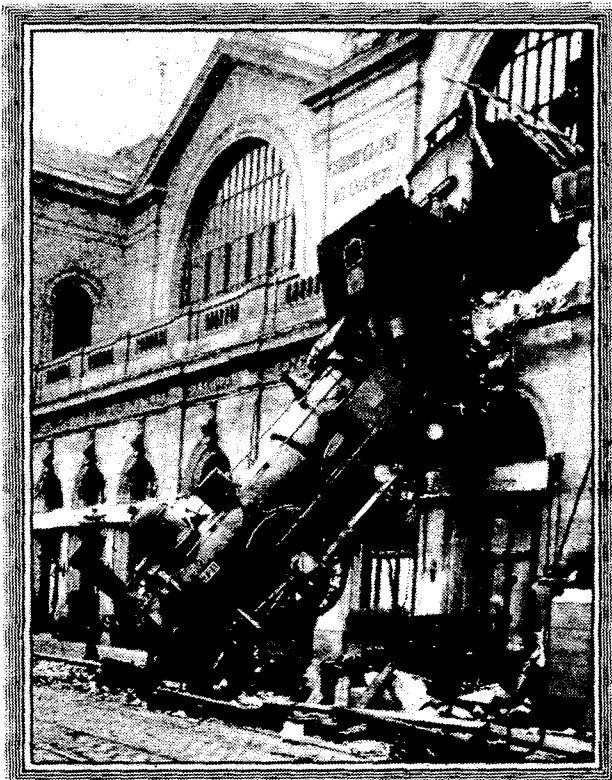
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## Election Year 1988

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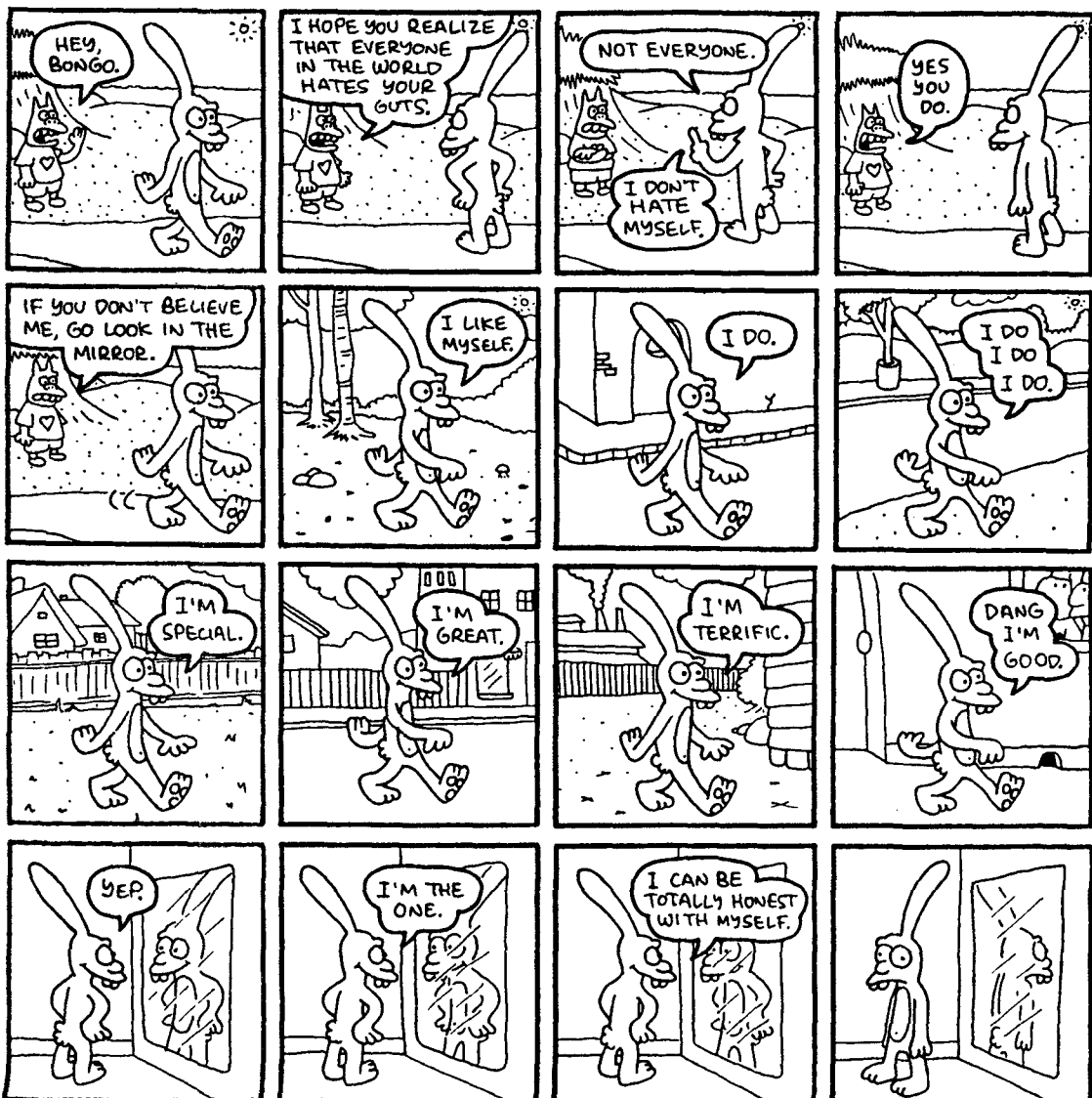
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By Susan J. Douglas

I KNOW SOME OF YOU HAVE BEEN BUSY WORKING (I) late at night, or off doing research for consumer activist groups on the relative merits of competing malted beverages, so you weren't able to catch all of the thrilling coverage of the Olympics. Lucky for you, I took extensive notes and can recap the highlights so you won't feel left out. Here's a nearly verbatim transcript.

Bill: Say, Bob, let's go to the luge competition.  
Bob: Hey, Bill, no American has a chance of even placing in that; let's go to speed skating.  
Bill: Oh, and what a day it was. Young Dan Jansen, so tough and determined, and yet so overwhelmed by the early morning death of his sister. That's one of the truly great things about TV in this great land of ours, Bob, the way one young man's personal torment and anguish can be turned into entertainment for billions of viewers around the world. And we'll be right back after this message.

MUSIC: "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother"  
Young woman: Gee, Dad, it sure is good to come home and see you again.  
Dad: It's great to see you too, Alice. You know, honey, I don't know how to tell you this, but your mom and I, well, we may lose the farm.  
Young woman: Oh Dad, don't you worry, I work for Dow, and our agricultural research means that no one will ever be hungry again, and you'll always have the farm. Dow means always being able to say I Love You.  
Dad: Oh honey, you're the greatest—and so is Dow.

Bill: Say, Bob, let's go to figure skating.  
Bob: And here come those youngsters from East Germany. A nice crisp start too; too bad they didn't get the applause the Americans did. Uh oh—oops! She fell on that double helix back flip. Well, we can stop watching their performance, Bill, they haven't got a prayer. Oh, and look at her, too—on the verge of tears. Can we get a camera in on that?

Bill: Here's the instant replay of the fall, and in slow motion, too, so you can see her limbs flying around and watch her bounce excruciatingly on the ice.

Bob: And now we have the fourth-ranked pair from the Soviet Union. What do you think, Peggy?

Peggy: Oh, I don't think their music has a good beat. The Russians always pick such icky music. The audience is practically asleep. And we'll be back after these messages.

MUSIC: "You're Having My Baby"  
Voice-over: Three years ago Scott had a heart attack.

Scott: Push, honey. Push. I said PUSH. HARDER!

Voice-over: Then he started taking Bayer Aspirin.

Scott: Would you show a little exertion here and PUSH? I haven't got all day.

Voice-over: He started living again, loving again.

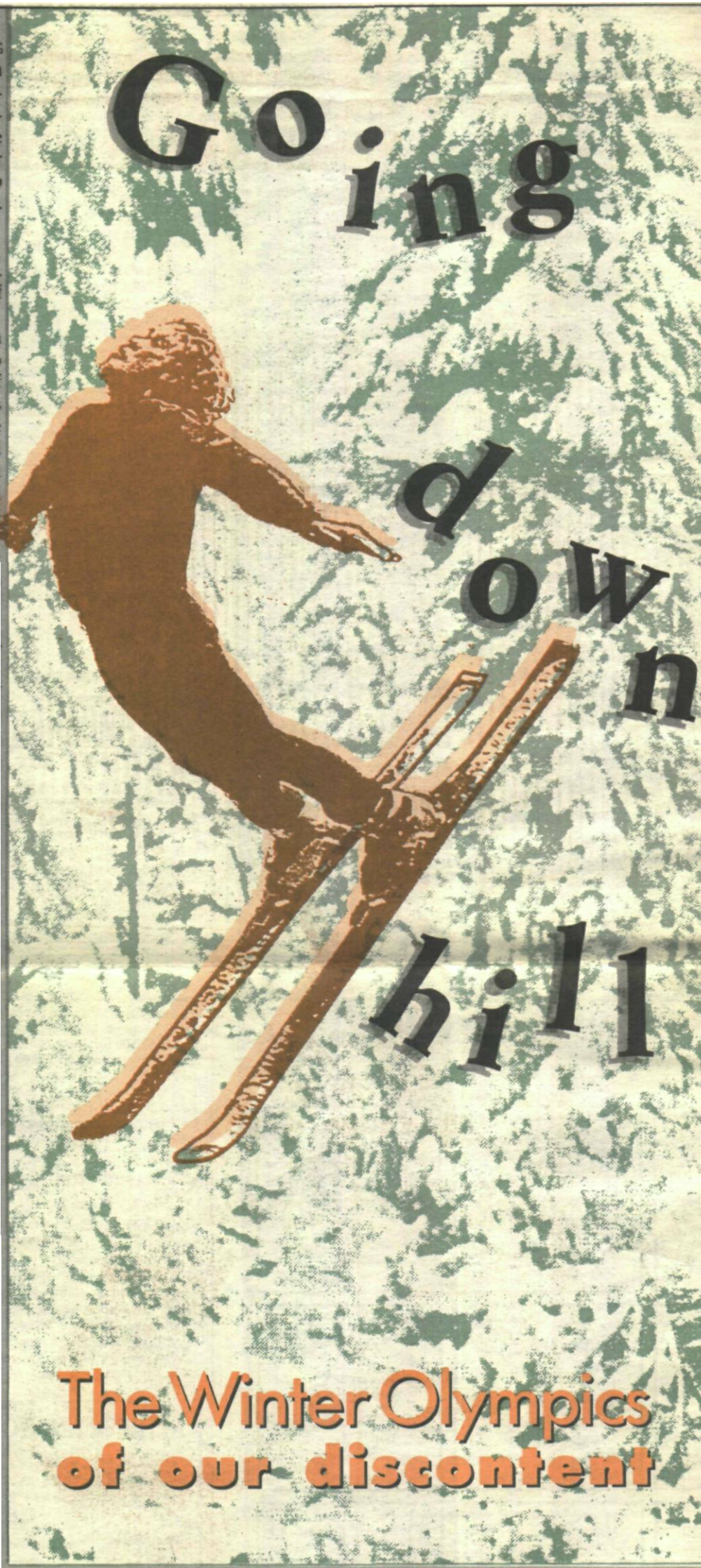
Scott: Jesus Christ, stop sweating and moaning so much and push. I'm losing my patience here. You're keeping me from my board meeting.

Voice-over: Yes, once Scott had a heart attack. Today he had a son.

Scott: Well, finally, it's over. That sure put me through the mill. Thank you Bayer. Bayer means new life.

MUSIC: "Ave Maria"

Voice-over: First it was Gandhi. Then it was



Biko. And now, coming this summer from Richard Attenborough, the motion picture event of the year. Joan Collins is Mother Teresa. You'll cry. You'll sob. You'll weep. And you'll feel good about being a human being.

Bill: And we're back. Finally, we get to see some Americans. You know, training for the Olympics is awfully stressful—let's see how these kids handle it. Let's meet Gillian Wachsmann and Todd Waggoner up close and personal.

MUSIC: Up Where We Belong

Todd: The pressure gets so heavy some times. That's when I get in my plane and go flying. Just to soar—to dance in the sky. A good day of flying really helps my skating—and then I have some milk and cookies. I recommend this stress reducer for everyone.  
Bill: These American kids are great, aren't they Bob? What role models.  
Bob: You bet, Bill. And now, the Soviet team of Gordeeva and Grinkov. You know, she's not like those beefy, hairy-faced types the Russkies usually send over. Why just look at her. She's so petite and cute, cute as a little button. She's still a little girl, and with

that adorable pout on her face, she looks just like an American.

Bob: And that music has a good beat! But she didn't fall down on those throw jumps, so we don't have any replay tape. So, we'll be back after this message.

MUSIC: "America (Oh Beautiful, for Spacious Skies)" sung by Lionel Richie  
Vladimir: I used to be hockey player for Iron Curtain country. But in my country, everyone greedy and stingy. Everyone treat me bad. And no microwaves. So I come to best country on Earth and right away get job with best company on Earth, Dow. Now I am American. And Dow lets me do generous, great things for whole world. Dow means love and liberation for everyone.

MUSIC: "Theme from Ben-Hur"; aerial shot of Saddle Dome.

Bob: And now, what everyone's been waiting for, the ice hockey. Let's get up close and personal with some of those brave U.S. hockey heroes.

Bill: Here's Nick, an astrophysics major at Arizona State. Say, Nick, when you played these guys in 1980, weren't you thinking the whole time about how they invaded Afghanistan and how Soviet imperialism was swallowing up the free world?

Nick: Well, uh, Bill, I, uh.

Bill: And tonight, out here, won't the entire U.S. team be playing not just for our great nation and its people, but for all the freedom fighters of the world bravely resisting Soviet aggression?

Nick: Yeah, well, you know, Bill, really.

Bill: And now, to our special commentators for tonight, Donald Trump and Elliott Abrams.

Bob: Say, Don, what do you think of this rink, having built one of your own?

Don: Well, Bob, it's not as good as we Americans can do in an unlettered free enterprise system, a system that encourages excellence and truly benefits everyone. But it's not bad for Canadians.

Bob: And Mr. Abrams, how do you rate the significance of tonight's Soviet-U.S. face-off?

Abrams: The U.S. must penetrate fast, move quickly behind Soviet lines, get on top quickly and stay on top, and continue thrusting and thrusting again and again and harder and deeper and faster and yes and again and yes and harder and yes, oh yes, until complete conquest is achieved.

Bob: And hear that crowd chanting for their heroes: U.S.A., U.S.A. Isn't that great? Can we get a 360-degree camera pan of that great crowd? Look at all those flags.

Abrams: I think the Soviets are limp right now. I think they'll shoot themselves in the foot.

Bill: You know, we can't show you viewers all the events because we can only be in one place at a time. So we can't show you the women's cross country, the women's luge or women's skiing, right now.

Bob: Boy, what a hockey game! Look! Great! A scuffle between an American hockey hero and a Red. What a game! And we'll be right back.

MUSIC: "Lean on Me"

Voice-over: This is Patty. She's deaf and has a speech impediment. She's going blind and is paralyzed from the waist down. But Patty is happy. Because IBM has dedicated all its energy and research to people like Patty. And now we've given her special equipment. Now, thanks to IBM, the blind can see, the deaf hear, the crippled walk, the mute speak.

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