

♦ The Patent and Trademark Office currently occupies about 1.7 million square feet of offices. This space must not be sufficient, as the agency will soon approve the construction of a 2.4-million-square-foot building that will cost taxpayers some \$1.6 billion. But don't worry; the new building will have everything necessary for approving patents: plazas, sculptures, decorative fountains, and state-of-the-art fitness centers.

♦ Did you hear the one about the scientist who got people to watch the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* while he told them ethnic and sexual jokes? No? Well, you must not keep up with grants awarded by the National Science Foundation. The NSF gave that professor \$107,000 of tax money to conduct that experiment. Maybe it could pay a researcher to find out why the government funds such wacky experiments.

♦ George Goodwin knew just what to call it when he was ordered to pay \$153 for three parking tickets. The Morristown, New Jersey, man wrote "Legal Extortion" on the memo line of his check. A judge found that remark contemptuous and issued a bench warrant for Goodwin's arrest. That was five years ago, but Goodwin just found out about the warrant this June, when he went to pay another parking ticket. When he did, a check of his record found the outstanding warrant. To avoid jail, Goodwin had to pay \$250 bail.

—Charles Oliver

Henry Payne

## BILL CLINTON'S VISION THING



Spurred Teen Smoking" (*The Atlanta Journal*), "Youth Smoking Soared in Era of Joe Camel Ads" (*The Des Moines Register*), and "Since Joe Camel's Debut, New Teen Smoking Up" (*USA Today*).

But the connection is not quite as clear as these accounts implied. The CDC's estimates were derived from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, which asks people the age at which they first tried a cigarette and the age at which they started smoking daily. Based on these recollections, the number of teens who became daily smokers did rise fairly steadily between 1988 and 1996. But the number of first-time teen smokers followed a bumpier trend, falling after Joe Camel's debut, then rising, then falling again before rising for several years in a row, starting in 1991.

More important than the fluctuations are other data from the same survey that seem to tell a story different from the one preferred by the CDC. The percentage of teen-

agers who reported smoking cigarettes during the previous month fell steadily between 1988 and 1992, when it started a three-year rise, followed by another dip. By 1996—the endpoint emphasized by the CDC—past-month smoking among teenagers was at the lowest level ever recorded: 18.3 percent. The next year, R.J. Reynolds gave Joe his walking papers, and teenage smoking went back up.

## Elaine's Closet

By Nick Gillespie

Makers of a contraceptive sponge pulled the popular product off drug-store shelves in 1995 due to Food and Drug Administration pressure (see "Sponge Bath," June 1995). When last heard from, the sponge was a comic subplot on *Seinfeld*: After learning its days were numbered, Elaine hoarded her few remaining devices and demanded that her potential suitors be "sponge-

worthy."

But what the government taketh away, the World Wide Web giveth back—in a new and improved form and with discounts for volume purchases, no less. Contraceptive sponges, along with other devices that do not have FDA approval but have passed official scrutiny in Canada and Europe, can be purchased at [www.birthcontrol.com](http://www.birthcontrol.com), a Web site based in British Columbia. Other items for sale without prescriptions include a one-size-fits-all diaphragm, an IUD, and a Catholic Church-approved fertility monitor designed to assist women employing the rhythm method.

Birthcontrol.com co-founder Heidi Henderson told *Mirabella* the site fills about 100 orders a month, with most originating in the United States. A number of other Web sites conduct similar businesses, and most, like Birthcontrol.com, also offer to sell their wares via fax orders and traditional mail orders.

Despite the lack of FDA approval, U.S. citizens can legally import medical devices (and certain drugs) for personal use, as long as the shipments follow official guidelines. In this case, that means no confidential brown wrappers: Birthcontrol.com's order form warns customers that, in order to pass muster with customs agents, their packages will announce that they contain "birth control devices." The occasional snicker from a mailman, however, seems a small price to pay for wider choice in contraceptives.

## Dry Spell

By James V. DeLong

A recent *Washington Post* report bore the headline "Mighty Rivers Run Dry, Hobbling China's Economy." The piece went on at length about China's current water shortage and all its consequences, including tales of cities in which water is on only two hours a day, long lines at water distribution points, lost crops, and decreased industrial production.

After 22 column inches of such tales, the *Post* vouched a possible explanation for the chronic shortages: Until recently, water was free, and even now farmers, who are



DATA

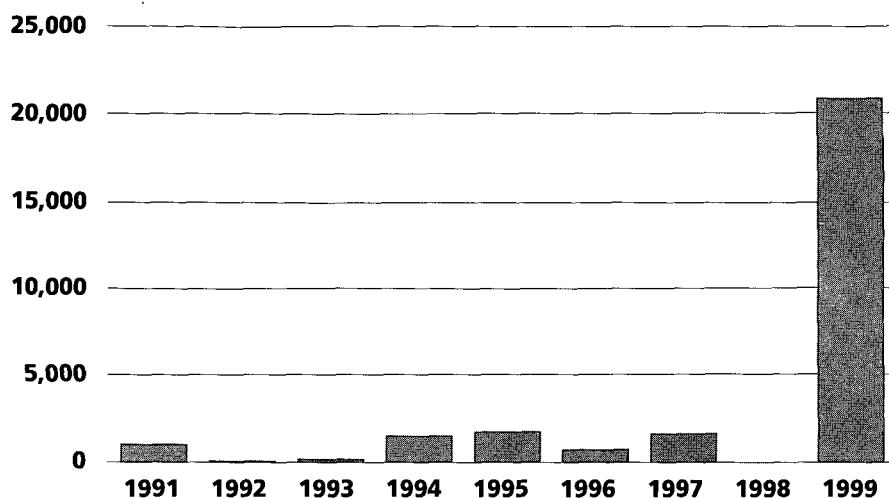
## Continuing State of Emergency

By Michael W. Lynch

When disaster strikes, Uncle Sam likes to lend a helping hand. While the money for such charitable acts is usually doled out as the need arises, some "emergency" spending always finds its way into annual federal appropriations bills.

That's partly because such aid does more than engender warm feelings for beneficent legislators—it lets them spend more money. Since 1991, "emergency" spending has been exempt from budget caps. So this year, when Congress and the president were faced with a \$80 billion budget surplus and a presidential promise to save those funds for Social Security, they put their partisan differences aside and declared a \$20 billion state of emergency. Among the bill's acts of compassion: \$7 billion for the military, \$6 billion for farmers, \$2.4 billion for embassy security, and \$690 million for the drug war. Says Hoover Institution Senior Fellow John Cogan: "[Lawmakers] faced an election. It was a potential personal disaster."

**Emergency Spending Included in Regular Annual Appropriations Bills**  
(in millions of dollars)



Source: 1991–1998, Congressional Budget Office; 1999, House Appropriations Committee

the biggest users, pay only one-tenth of its cost.

Chinese officials agree that water prices should rise, but no specific plans for this appear to be imminent. Instead, the government is planning vast hydro projects to carve tunnels through mountains, to expend huge amounts of energy pumping water uphill thousands of feet, to build monumental dams, and to displace massive numbers of residents. Its partner—*co-conspirator* may

be a more appropriate term—in all this is the World Bank.

Anyone familiar with the history of the great dam building binge in the American West during the earlier part of this century (See "Dam Fools," April 1998) will be overcome with déjà vu. In China today, as in the United States then, the operating principle seems to be that no effort is excessive as long as the government can sever consideration of a

project from the discipline of honest market prices.

Another constant seems to be the dominance of the engineering mentality. The American effort was run by the technocrats of the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, who love water projects for the intellectual challenges they pose and the massive beauty of the final product. Chinese engineers seem the same; building 1,500-foot dams and \$6.6 billion conduits is lots ►