

TILTING AT WINDMILLS

Charles Peters is on vacation this month.



I'm getting too old to write my-generation pieces anymore and I have one more thing to say, so I'd better say it now. The rap on my generation—people born during the baby boom, but young enough so that the sixties represented an adolescent romance rather than a permanent life commitment—is that we've returned to the fifties. We are climbing the corporate ladder, we are materialistic rather than altruistic, and so on.

There's something slightly off about this. My generation is drastically different from the World War II generation in its attitude toward big organizations. We grew up on the grand failures of the federal government and the Fortune 500, and saw our parents personally pay the price that bureaucracies extract from their employees. As a result we developed a real contempt for the kind of

work that stifles self-expression, and we value personal freedom almost above all else. Charles Peters, the editor of this magazine, likes to tell the story of his having gone to work at J. Walter Thompson in the fifties because it was not just respectable but also a little hip; that's inconceivable today. My generation's most common life-fantasy is to be not the Chief of Naval Operations or the chairman of General Motors, but a kind of high-level free agent: the software king, the Wall Street genius, the movie director, somebody who can make the rules he or she lives by and who does "creative" work. If you want to narrow the odds, you'll become a lawyer or consultant who sweeps into organizational life when there's a problem to be solved or a big deal to be made, and lets the drones live

with the consequences. In either case, it's true that having plenty of money is usually part of the dream.

I have chosen to work in a small organization that gives its employees lots of autonomy, so I don't hold myself apart from the phenomenon I'm describing. Socially, it does have benefits, the most obvious of which is the flowering of entrepreneurship we've seen in the last ten years. But to think that the big bureaucracies can be written off as boring and irrelevant is wrong. They need to be made to work again, and that's a task that my generation—which prefers to stay away from large organizations, and when it joins them, does so in a spirit of cynicism—is so far completely ignoring....

Residential real estate is the last frontier of good

journalism. The real-estate sections of most newspapers are still mired in practices that have become outdated everywhere else, like printing press releases verbatim as news stories. Perhaps that's why there hasn't been much attention given to the problem of bait-and-switch mortgage companies.

Here's how they work: you're buying a house, and you flip through the real estate section looking at the mortgage advertisements. You see ads from all the big savings-and-loans in your area; and then there are smaller ads from institutions calling themselves "mortgage companies" offering mortgages at rates from half a point to a point lower. These cheaper companies really are, though they don't tell you directly, mortgage *brokers* that try to sell your application to big companies that buy mortgages. In a time of falling mortgage rates (for example, the spring and summer of 1986), they won't have much trouble; but when interest rates are stable or rising, your application will be hard to sell.

In that case, the company often won't actually turn down your application because that involves a lot of government-required disclosure forms that they want to avoid. Instead, you just never get an answer; when you call, you're told that the "loan committee still hasn't reached a decision." Meanwhile, you can't close on the house. . . .

Apparently the latest addition to the list of weapons that don't work is binary nerve gas. It is difficult to avoid feeling a

certain relief about this. My military-expert friends tell me that nerve gas isn't so bad, because the protection against it is much better than it was the last time nerve gas was widely used, during World War I; in fact, if everyone knows that nerve gas will be used, infantrymen will have to wear bulky body suits that will make it more difficult for them to kill each other with guns and knives. Anyway, I'd just as soon save my passion about military effectiveness for weapons that provide troop cover.

I hear that when the CIA briefed senators about binary nerve gas it made it clear that the gas just doesn't do what it's supposed to do. This didn't deter the Senate from spending a great deal of time on several dramatic debates and votes about whether to put it into production: conservatives saw going ahead with nerve gas as a symbolic test of our resolve, and liberals saw voting against it as a way to show revulsion over the horrors of war. Faithful *Washington Monthly* readers will recognize the principle at work here: make-believe. Important people in Washington find the appearance of governing far preferable to the real thing. Learning the actual substance of issues, fighting off interest groups, and leaving Washington to find out whether plans are going awry in the field—all that is no fun compared to a life of meetings, speeches, and public attention. . . .

It seems to me that the maturing of Washington as a



Why ERA Failed

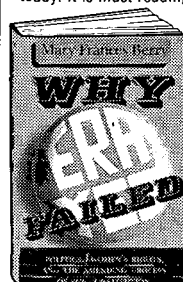
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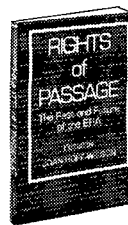
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Published in Association with the Organization of American Historians
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city over the past 20 years, a process that has loosed avalanches of self-congratulation in the local press, has only made the problem of make-believe worse. The more exciting Washington becomes—with culture, restaurants, immigrants from all over the world, and a sophisticated, non-captive press corps—the more tempting it is to mistake the whirl of activity here for great statecraft. The unlikely star status of Norman Ornstein, which Steven Waldman writes about in this issue, is in some ways a testament to the power of make-believe. To a reporter, the center of the action in Washington is an incredibly tempting place to be. It's exciting, even urgent, and it's where the front page stories are, too. Washington has gotten complicated enough that the center is no longer just the White House—it's constantly shifting, from place to place and issue to issue. To stay constantly at the center as a reporter requires moving from story to story so fast you can't possibly write with authority under your own steam. To have someone you can call who can instantly put almost anything in perspective is a godsend. No doubt the pleasure of life at the center is also what has led Ornstein to spend most of his time playing this role for reporters. Public figures less honest than Ornstein profess not to like the press, but they sure don't like it when the phone stops ringing....

Speaking of the large organizations that my generation has ignored, I

have a hunch that the one in the most trouble is the federal bureaucracy, and that when we start taking on national projects in the early 1990s and need government to work again, it won't. Ronald Reagan has curbed some of the bureaucracy's excesses in the pay and featherbedding department, but he has done so without any evident desire to reform it. It's hard to imagine that Reagan's stance toward the bureaucracy has done anything but convince talented and dedicated people not to consider careers in it....

When I was an editor here ten years ago one of the stories I was most excited about working on was a piece by Deborah Baldwin (with a sidebar by James Fallows) that presented parenthood as a kind of personal redemption from selfishness, on the ground that the love of a parent for a child is the only truly selfless love. In the two years since I have become a parent I've been having nagging doubts about this. It's true that I would throw myself in front of a train to save my son's life, but in the meantime he has a more exalted view of me than anyone in the world, and this makes parenthood a condition rich in ego gratification, at least until adolescence comes around. I think we can say at least that not every parent's love is wholly selfless. Was it altruism that surged through Joseph P. Kennedy as he plotted his sons' rise? Parents ought to go out and earn their good citizenship points like everybody else....

If you're white and you live in Washington, did it occur to you as you opened that first issue of the revamped *Washington Post Magazine* that it would provoke a lengthy series of demonstrations by black groups? I doubt it. The nerve the magazine struck with blacks is one that most whites aren't even aware of: it's the feeling among blacks that to whites, all blacks are alike and should be treated alike, i.e., as members of an inferior race. Thus whites see Washington, which has been a capital, if not *the* capital, of the black bourgeoisie for 150 years, as a city with a white upper middle class and a black ghetto. Richard Cohen's infamous column unwittingly raised exactly the point that most rankles middle-class blacks: that because the disorganized black poor commit a lot of crimes, whites will (literally, in the case of the jewelry store owner Cohen wrote about) close the door to the whole race. The ethic of *omerta* about the black underclass that still strongly exists among middle-class blacks comes from this: it's a feeling that if we don't talk about the messed-up lives of the worst off of us, they can't use that to dismiss us all. The crucial next step forward in race relations depends on our ability to get around this barrier somehow....

Democrats feeling euphoric after last month's elections ought to pay special attention to two articles in this issue: Lawrence Wright's memoir about growing up in

Nixon country, and Jonathan Rowe's review of Sidney Blumenthal's book, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment*. Both try to explain something that the thinkers of the Democratic Party still just don't seem to get, namely, why Republican presidential candidates keep winning landslide victories. The explanation that Reagan is personally popular but his policies aren't just isn't enough. A lot of Democrats feel that Reaganism is a passing phase, and that good old liberalism is coming back; I agree that some kind of change is in the wind, but it isn't exactly that one. The other prevailing view in the Democratic Party, that the Democrats need simply to become more conservative (with an emphasis on pleasing business interest groups) isn't very persuasive either; a successful presidential candidate needs, at the very least, a zeitgeist that ennobles the coalition of voters he has stitched together.

Franklin Roosevelt, not entirely consciously, addressed the great economic and demographic changes of the first three decades of this century—immigration, industrialism, urbanization, the rise of the large organization. The next great Democrat has to understand the forces that come through strongly in both Wright's and Rowe's articles: the geographic dispersal of the population, both across urban areas and to the South and West; the slow breakdown in the authority and power of the American Establishment; the rise of the service economy and of television. These have

changed most people's lives, and they aren't going to go away. A presidential candidate has to communicate the sense that he understands and wants to solve the problems created by the changes of the past 30 years without simply repealing the changes entirely (which was Walter Mondale's message). The kind of Democrat who tends to be made fun of for his babbling about the future (Gary Hart, Jerry Brown) will probably do better on this score than the kind who wants to be seen as a moderate, blending elements of liberalism and conservatism (Mario Cuomo, Joe Biden)....

Now that I've sworn off writing about my generation, I think I'll reward myself by starting to sprinkle my work with quotes from great works of literature. Well, maybe not, but here's one from *Moby Dick*: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all

these chapters might be naught."

This is a wonderful writer's creed: the recognition of how difficult it will be to get to the heart of the matter, and the willingness nonetheless to endure anything, including looking awkward or ridiculous, in its pursuit. Judging journalism in Washington on the whiteness-of-the-whale standard, I'd say that the good of the greatly increased emphasis in the last ten years on really explaining things has been nearly wiped out by the great increase in the same span of time in institutions designed to provide reporters with a shortcut so they don't have to struggle with the whiteness of the whale after all. If Melville were a reporter in Washington today, he could just call a pollster or an expert from one of the action-oriented policy-studies foundations around town. "Our research turns up an interesting phenomenon, Herman," he'd be told. "The whiteness thing is playing very, very negatively out there."...

—Nicholas Lemann

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WHO'S WHO in the Administration

One result of the Democratic takeover of the Senate will likely be closer scrutiny of the Challenger accident. Sen. **Ernest Hollings**, who has called for further investigation of the role of the White House and senior NASA officials in the launch decision, will get his chance as chairman of the Commerce Committee. . . .

Expect a mass-exodus from the Treasury Department. Secretary **James Baker**, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs **Margaret Tutwiler**, and Assistant Secretary for Management **John Rogers** are all rumored to be going over to the **George Bush** campaign. The feeling seems to be that the big job—tax reform—is done and there's no time left in the Reagan administration to complete anything else of substance. Even Deputy Secretary **Richard Darman**, who was rumored to be staying to work on international economic issues, is said to have talked to some private investment firms. . . .

Patrick Buchanan's likely departure as White House communications director gives another opportunity for Chief of Staff **Donald Regan** to shape the White House staff in his own image. So the betting is that **W. Dennis Thomas**, a Regan aide, will replace Buchanan. . . .

Mario Cuomo's ability to raise money doesn't seem to have been hurt much by his propensity

for New York provincialism. He has raised \$1 million for the Democratic party without leaving his desk. His signature on the national committee's direct mail letters has raised more than any other elected official's in the last two years. . . .

Although the Senate shift will require **Robert Dole** to change his resume to include the less impressive title of Minority Leader, he is probably breathing a sigh of relief. If the Senate votes to raise taxes it won't be Robert Dole leading the charge, a blessing for his presidential aspirations. The change will also make it easier for Dole to step down from the leadership. Being Majority Leader has been tremendously beneficial for Dole, elevating his status from long-long to long-shot. But he's gotten out of it what he can, and will likely be looking for a way to step down so he can spend more time on the campaign trail. . . .

The more things change. . . . Nearly half of the White House officials and current and former members of Congress responding to a survey, admitted leaking confidential information to reporters. The frequency of those leaks didn't change from 1963 to 1983. One third said they leaked the information to protect their jobs; one fifth to undermine somebody else's. . . .

In

ENERGY

Chairman, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission—**Martha O. Hesse** has been assistant energy secretary for management and administration.

HOUSING & URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Assistant Secretary—**Judith Y. Brachman** has been a field officer with HUD in Columbus, Ohio.

STATE

State Department Spokesman/Designated Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs—**Charles E. Redman** has been deputy State Department spokesman.

Ambassador to Pakistan—**Arnold Lewis Raphel** has been deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs.

AGENCIES AND COMMISSIONS

Assistant to the Commissioner, Internal Revenue Service—**Richard C. Stark** was a partner of

Johnson & Swanson in Dallas, Texas.

Inspector General, Small Business Administration—**Charles R. Gillum** was deputy inspector general for GSA.

Out

COMMERCE

Director, Office of Investigations, Import Administration—**Donald L. Korb**.

DEFENSE

Assistant Secretary—**Dr. James P. Wade, Jr.**
Undersecretary of Defense for Research & Engineering—**Donald A. Hicks**.

HOUSING & URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Assistant Secretary—**Antonio Monroig**.

STATE

State Department Spokesman—**Bernard Kalb**.