

The Worst City Government

Because we regard the breakdown of big-city government a terrible problem, we plan to continue our reports, not only from D.C., but from New York's carnival and elsewhere. Nominations are welcome.

How to explain the decision of the Virgin Islands to import consultants from the Worst City Government in America? Who better, we say, to help set up a system of civil service gradations. After all, a few years ago federal auditors found that 80 percent of the D.C. housing authority's maintenance workers were "overgraded"—getting an electrician's salary, say, for taking out the trash....

While Marion Barry enjoys the company of suspected drug dealers, city managers oversee drug programs in their own way. In 1986, the city gave \$75,000 for a study to a former campaign worker for a city councilman. The study found that citizens consider drugs a problem. The husband of a top city of-

ficial received twice as much, mostly for another survey, which found that young people's attitudes toward drugs are strongly influenced by their parents. With drug-related murders at an all-time high, maybe the city can do one more poll to find out how people really feel about seeing their neighbors shot.

Any questions? Don't call D.C.'s drug abuse hotline. The number listed in the phone book is disconnected....

Runner-up for Worst City Government this month goes to New York for School Board 12, whose members "borrowed" expensive school supplies like computers, hired friends and family for classroom jobs (whether or not they could read), and took expense-paid trips to meetings in Las Vegas, Honolulu, and San Juan. The board member who cast the swing vote in the search for a new superintendent is a homeless heroin addict....

—Katherine Boo

THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY Journalism Award

for November 1988 is presented to

...and one we forgot
from October

Patrick Boyle
The Washington Times

Christopher Ringwald
Staten Island Advance

**Benjamin Weiser,
Elsa Walsh**
The Washington Post

In a three part series, Boyle shows how the District of Columbia failed to levy large fines—let alone close—the Rose Guest House, a boarding house for the elderly and mentally ill that had been cited for literally hundreds of violations. At one point the city did toughen regulations for group homes, but the owners simply applied for and received rooming house licenses, which are easier to obtain.

Ringwald's series shows that deinstitutionalization can work—if the mentally ill are placed in good group homes. He looked at the former patients of Willowbrook, the New York State home for the retarded that was closed when its scandalous conditions were exposed in 1972. Isabelle Weiner, for one, is not only living in a group home, but is also able to enjoy everything from going to the beauty parlor to flying cross-country to visit relatives.

Weiser and Walsh document a frightening increase in court cases that are settled confidentially and pose a great danger to the public welfare. In Washington, a physician settled for \$30,000 with a patient who charged he had sexually assaulted her during an exam. The doctor's name was kept secret and he remains in practice.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper, magazine, television, or radio story (or series of stories) on our political system. Nominations for any newspaper, magazine, or radio or television station in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation.

The award for stories published or aired in December will be announced in the March issue. Nominations for stories published or aired in January will close February 15. The winner will be announced in the April issue. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.

The Case Against Joe Nocera

*How people like me helped
ruin the public schools*

by Joseph Nocera

It's two days before Christmas, and the snow has begun to fall here in the lovely little city of Northampton, Massachusetts. I won't pretend that it's not a beautiful sight. Glancing down from my office window, scarcely a block from the center of town, I see idyllic scenes everywhere, a picture postcard of small-town New England: the snow settling on the roof of the gorgeous, rococo church that anchors downtown; the crowds (such as they are in a place whose population barely exceeds 30,000) of happy Christmas shoppers loaded down with brightly wrapped presents; the cheerful commingling of friends in the parking lot right beneath my office. Just now, my office landlord, a lawyer who also teaches philosophy at Smith College and who works across the hall, came in to wish me a Merry Christmas. He gave me a pocket calendar he has made up every year. He was in wonderful spirits, and so was I. There are days when Northampton feels like nothing so much as a modern-day Grover's Corners, and this is certainly one of those days.

I moved here with my family two and a half years ago to take a job with a magazine. I've since learned a lot about the attractions of small-town life. I live in a place where I never have to lock my car, where a "traffic jam" means having to wait for the light to change twice, where the cost of things is a good 20 percent less than it is in, say, Boston. This past Halloween, a neighboring family held its annual pre-Trick-or-Treat party for the kids on the block; there

must have been 60 people in the house, and everyone knew each other, and later, when we dispersed to go Trick-or-Treating, no one had to worry about whether there would be razor blades in the apples. That was another one of those times when I thought: This is nice.

And yet, and yet. I mention all this not to inspire jealousy, but to bring up the more complicated matter of personal taste. I don't deny the appeal of this life; indeed, Northampton is filled with transplanted New Yorkers who have embraced it with a vengeance. But the truth is, I've always thought of myself as a city boy. I still do. I grew up in what was then the gritty (and is now the hip) city of Providence, Rhode Island, population 150,000. Since then I've lived in Boston and Washington, Austin, Texas and Paris, France. I enjoy spending time in cities other people abhor, like Houston or Los Angeles. For reasons I can't quite explain, I am drawn to cities, finding them both comfortable and energizing. Northampton, on the other hand, always makes me feel a little edgy, a touch unfulfilled. In particular, the pace of small-town life bothers me. I never feel as if I am at the center of things, the way I do in a city.

So why am I here? It's not the job: I no longer do much work for the magazine that brought me to Northampton, nor is my wife employed in the local economy. And while I can toss off a half-dozen persuasive reasons for living here—how I've made good friends that I don't want to leave behind; how I don't think it's fair to my children to keep moving them from place to place; how I could never afford a similar house in a big city—I know in my heart of

Joseph Nocera, a contributing editor of Newsweek and The Washington Monthly, is at work on a modern history of personal finance.