

TILTING AT WINDMILLS



The “Corrections” box continues to be the most fascinating feature in *The New York Times*. Consider this example:

“An article last Sunday about women who received cosmetic makeovers in Macy’s window misstated the marital status of Joseph M. Lerner, who accompanied Joyce Roman. He is married, not a widower. A picture caption misstated their relationship. He is a close friend, not her fiancé.”

Imagine the dramatic scenes that were played out between the appearance of the original story and the correction. I am confident that Mr. Lerner and Ms. Roman were absolutely innocent, but if his spouse fell even a fraction of a millimeter below sainthood, one shudders to think about the domestic cross-examination to which he must have been subjected. . . .

As your kids pack up their Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle lunchboxes, your faith in the public schools must be fortified by this announcement from the *San Jose Mercury News*:

“Volunteers are sought to tutor Santa Clara County Office of Education employees in reading, writing, mathematics, and English.” . . .

Why do men drive women crazy? One clue to the answer was supplied by the testimony of General Merrill A. McPeak before a Senate committee considering legislation that will permit women to fly in combat. After admitting that there are “at least some

women who can do this combat job as well as men,” the general continued: “So it’s the law that’s preventing us from doing this, and I find comfort in that.”

McPeak went on to say that it was his “old-fashioned” preference to have men do the fighting rather than women, even when the women were more qualified. The general concluded by conceding that his view “doesn’t make much sense.” . . .

To understand how even conscientious government employees feel about telling Congress truths that could embarrass their superiors, you should dwell for a while on this statement by Alan D. Fiers, who recently pled guilty to withholding information from Congress about the Iran-contras affair.

“I could have been more forthcoming, but I frankly was not going to be the first person to step up and do that. . . . So long as others who knew the details as much as I—who knew more than I—were keeping their silence on this, I was going to keep my silence.”

What this means is that institutional loyalties and identifications are more important to the executive branch employee than loyalty to the people of the United States, as represented by the people they have elected to Congress. . . .

In case you missed Jessica Lee’s memo to her colleagues about her experience as a social guest of the president and Mrs. Bush, here’s an excerpt from the

USA Today White House correspondent’s report:

“Going to a state dinner at the White House is unbelievably seductive. It was like being Cinderella at the prince’s ball. Anyone who knows me knows I spent hours looking for the right dress. I found a sizzling hot Bob Mackie, but I decided I’d put it on ice for some truly social occasion. I wore a long, slinky black dress with silver accessories. . . . I chatted with the president and the first lady. He introduced me as ‘one of our finest reporters.’ . . . When it was over, my captain escorted me out with compliments on my looks and charisma.”

The Washington Post’s media watchdog, Howard Kurtz, asked Lee if she thought the experience might affect her coverage of the White House. Her reply:

“I’m not really sure that [Bush] gets anything out of it. . . . I thought of it as purely social, like any other social evening.”

Jessica Lee may not be co-opted, but I have seen many of her colleagues who, although they tend to be more sophisticated and guarded in describing the experience, have been subtly seduced by it. In his book *Speaking Out*, Larry Speakes describes reporters literally begging for invitations to White House social events for themselves or their bosses. . . .

That our president is all heart has never been better demonstrated than by this June 22 headline in *The New York Times*:

"Plan to Give Vaccines to Children Is Delayed for One Year by Bush."

If you want to know why the incidence of childhood diseases like measles has risen dramatically in recent years, it is because the Reagan-Bush "do anything for the rich and as little as you can get away with for the poor" administrations have failed to provide adequate funding for immunization programs. . . .

Soon after this magazine was founded in 1969, American industry began to lose the competitiveness race as both workers and managers were given pay increases without regard to increases in productivity. We repeatedly bemoaned the trend as it grew worse in the seventies.

In the early eighties, one part of the problem began to diminish when unions, partly as an act of enlightenment and partly as a result of their reduced power in the Reagan era, moderated their wage demands. Managers, on the other hand, grew greedier and greedier, paying themselves ever more extravagant salaries and bonuses, often with only an inverse relationship to productivity.

The result is that we are rapidly returning to the days of the exploited working class. As we have pointed out, society is stacking the deck against the workers in everything from federal taxes to real estate assessments to military service. Now along comes Thomas Geoghegan with a moving call for us to once again embrace the unions. I'm not so sure about the unions, for the reasons Paul Glastris gives in his review of Geoghegan's book in this issue,

but I am sure that, to the extent the emotion of the book summons us once again to the cause of the working class, it is profoundly right. . . .

Speaking of unions, I sympathize with those PATCO workers who were fired by Reagan in 1981, because some of them, especially those serving at the busiest airports, were dangerously overworked at peak periods and because I think that, after five years or so, they had been punished enough for striking and should have been given a chance to get their jobs back. But they deserved no sympathy for their claims that they were underpaid. Today 66 percent of them are earning in private employment the same as or less than they were paid as air traffic controllers. . . .

I am indebted to "one acerbic economist," quoted by Michael Schrage of the *Los Angeles Times*, for his observation about the American economy in the eighties: "We had a \$200 billion industrial policy for shopping mall construction." . . .

James Fallows and I agree on practically everything, but I thought he was a tad too kind to P. J. O'Rourke in last month's review of O'Rourke's new book. Certainly, O'Rourke deserves an easier path through purgatory for his sense of humor alone. But in his opposition to "rich bashing" he is on the wrong side of what I believe will be the most important fairness issue of the nineties: the need to take back from the rich what they stole from the rest of us in the eighties. Surely you have seen the latest damning statistic: In the period between 1977 and 1988, the income of the top 1 percent rose 122 percent. The 1988 income of that top 1 percent was almost as

large as the combined income of all the people in the bottom 40 percent. Contrast those figures with 1977, when the bottom 40 percent earned more than twice as much as the top 1 percent. . . .

If you doubted that our proposal to tax the churches would yield significant revenue, ponder the news that the income of the Mormon church is \$4.7 billion a year. . . .

Lyndon Johnson always maintained he had nothing to do with his family's Austin TV station. But in his forthcoming book about LBJ, Joseph Califano tells this story, which was told to him by William Paley, the chairman of CBS:

"[F]or years, Johnson had pestered [Paley] to designate the Johnsons' Austin TV station a mandatory buy for advertisers who purchased network time. Paley had refused. At 6 a.m. Austin time on the morning after the 1954 elections, in which Democrats gained control of the Senate, Paley's private line rang in his New York City apartment. 'Bill,' Johnson said to the CBS chairman, 'you are talking to the next majority leader of the United States Senate, and I want that station to be a mandatory buy!' Paley acceded to Johnson's request." . . .

Top postal executives were rewarded with nearly \$20 billion in bonuses between 1988 and 1990, when the post office not only was not making a profit, but was losing more than \$1.4 billion. The rigorous standards used in evaluating the performance of these executives are suggested by the fact that, of all those who could have gotten bonuses, 97 percent received them.

How did the executives justify the bonuses? Here's the defense

offered to *The Pittsburgh Press*, which broke the story, by Frank Brennan, a postal service spokesman in Washington:

"Hey, we saved \$800 million off a projected \$1.6 billion loss." . . .

For roughly half my life, the U.S. Post Office was a symbol of how government could work. It did deliver the mail—two or three times a day during the thirties and forties—and it remained reasonably efficient throughout the fifties, still charging only three cents for first-class letters. But performance began to decline in the late sixties, while costs escalated. So many packages were lost, delayed, or destroyed that demand for a more efficient alternative led to the founding and subsequent flourishing of the United Parcel Service. Special delivery became so unspecial that

Federal Express found a ready market for *its* alternative. I have long suspected that the decline in quality of this most visible function of government has been even more a factor in the decline of faith in public institutions than Watergate and the other sexy scandals, especially for those over 40 who remember the good old days. . . .

In recent years the post office has been the league leader in at least two categories: long lines and indifferent clerks. But it appears to be getting stiff competition these days from the passport office. The scene as an applicant enters the one on K Street in downtown Washington was described recently in *The Washington Post*:

"The line snakes nearly to the door and only three clerks are on duty, one of mediocre talent and two who are even less skilled.

That means it'll be a good two hours, he correctly estimated."

The article helps explain why the affluent can remain unruffled by such problems: The story is about a "stand-in-line-for-a-fee" service. Those who can afford it can pay to avoid the frustration bureaucracy inflicts on the average man.

Because they can afford Federal Express, which does for about 13 dollars what special delivery mail used to do for 13 cents, or a proxy stander-in-line, the affluent class that runs and staffs our major media may lack the motivation to reform the bureaucracy. This may be why they run so few articles on the subject. . . .

Another reason, I am convinced, is that they don't know *how* to reform the bureaucracy, because so few journalists have

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served in it and acquired firsthand knowledge of how and why things go wrong and of who and what should be blamed. And they don't even realize that they should know. A recent study sponsored by The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard found only me arguing that experience working in the executive branch is a desirable qualification for journalists who plan to cover government. The other journalists interviewed in the survey seemed to feel that somehow knowledge of the inside would corrupt them.

Over the years, this has presented a considerable problem for the *Monthly*. Our colleagues in the press have not known whether to believe us when we publish articles like James Bennet's and Harry Crosby's in this issue.

I was once on a television panel show that briefly dealt with the conventional wisdom that federal employees were underpaid. My fellow panelists raised their eyebrows in polite disbelief—my friend Eleanor Clift had that alarmed "Is Charlie going to embarrass himself?" look—as I tried to explain that the usual view was wrong. Like the air traffic controllers, most federal employees were either adequately or excessively compensated, but for a different reason: because the standard by which their pay was determined involved comparing real jobs in the private sector with federal job descriptions, many of which exaggerated the importance of the civil service position and glorified its duties. . . .

New readers have a similar problem, unless they're current or former government employees—in which case they either hate us for revealing the confidence games of their trade or love us because they are idealists who believe the games should be exposed. But if, like the average journalist, the new reader hasn't been inside the government,

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he has to wonder whether our departures from the conventional wisdom are fantasy or the real inside skinny. . . .

Take Sharon Pratt Dixon, the new mayor of Washington. Last fall, we addressed an article about the District of Columbia's personnel problems directly to her [see Scott Shuger, "Memo to the New Mayor," November 1990]. But there have been few signs since then that she understood what we were trying to tell her. She is obviously an intelligent person, so I asked a mutual friend why our message hadn't registered. The friend said, "You have to understand, she's never been in the government. She doesn't know if you're dead right or dead wrong."

All this helps explain why I want to open up the civil service to a lot more short-term appointments, so that more citizens will get inside the bureaucracy, as I was fortunate enough to do for seven years, and have the chance to learn how government really works—and then let their friends, and perhaps even their fellow reporters, in on the secrets. I am, of course, not unmindful that an incidental consequence might be to improve the *Monthly's* modest circulation. . . .

Speaking of people who ignore the *Monthly's* wisdom, the American Medical Association is even more cavalier than our fellow journalists. After we published "Doctored Results" [Alexander Kippen, October 1990], revealing how AMA publications are exploited by the drug companies, the doctors didn't say, "We're sorry, we're going to do better." They said, "Who cares what you say, we're going to do more." If you doubt me, consider this July 17 report from the Associated Press:

"The American Medical Association has announced plans

to publish single-topic medical reports sponsored by drug companies. The reports would include articles rejected by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and its specialty journals, transcripts of symposiums, and articles from other journals that a drug company might want to send to a larger audience." . . .

Speaking of our friends the doctors, the Department of Health and Human Services has at last acted to limit physicians' widespread practice of referring their Medicare and Medicaid patients to clinics and other health care facilities in which the physicians themselves have a financial interest and from which they will profit.

Unfortunately, the restrictions proposed by HHS are typical of the Bush administration's modest approach to the re-regulation desperately needed after the extreme laxity of the Reagan era: If the physicians own less than 40 percent of the business, they can still refer patients to it.

This, I can confidently assure you, will produce an explosive growth in enterprises in which a doctor's share will be 39.999999 percent. . . .

Another example of tough regulation comes from the West Virginia Department of Energy,

which had assessed fines of \$120,000 for environmental violations on a big mining contractor. It recently offered to settle for just 3 percent of the amount owed. . . .

To sample some even phonier regulation, take a good look at the Skin Cancer Foundation. It is supposed to evaluate sunscreen products, granting a seal of approval to those that are safe.

But what do the "evaluations" consist of? Certainly not the independent testing you would assume. All the foundation does is review test results submitted by the manufacturers. In other words, the manufacturers can control the tests and thus the results. . . .

Clarence Thomas says blacks should stop thinking of themselves as victims and start feeling responsible for their lives. His critics say blacks *are* victims and that society should help them. I think Thomas is right about the way blacks should think about themselves. I also think that his critics are right about how the rest of us should think about blacks and other minorities, or at least those of them who are being deprived of a fair chance in life. Self-pity does no one any good, but the rest of us should feel, if not pity, then empathy, for those who deserve our help. . . .

—Charles Peters

Carol Wilson Trueblood

1940-1991

Carol Trueblood was at my side from the moment I first thought of *The Washington Monthly* until the last week of her life. Everyone who worked at the *Monthly* knows she was absolutely indispensable. She would do anything for the cause, performing at one time or another every role on the magazine staff. Her dedication and enthusiasm and her sixth sense of what had to get done to keep the ship afloat are legendary to all who worked with her. Our debt to her is immense, as is our sense of loss. There will never be another Carol.

—C.P.

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WHO'S WHO

White House insiders are worried about **Boyden Gray's** tendency to talk too much to *The Washington Post's* **Bob Woodward**. . . .

Robert Mosbacher may be the front man for the 1992 Bush campaign, but, we're reliably informed, **Fred Malek**, **Robert Teeter**, and **Roger Ailes** will actually run it. . . .

Days before Manhattan District Attorney **Robert Morgenthau** announced indictments against BCCI principals and the Fed slapped the bank with a \$200 million fine, Attorney General **Dick Thornburgh** complained to White House staff members that Senator **John Kerry** and Morgenthau were unfairly criticizing the Justice Department's slow investigation of the case. There are lots of things wrong that are not illegal, Thornburgh told the staff members. . . .

Which government officials will be long-term losers as a result of the BCCI scandal? Thornburgh, Treasury Secretary **Nicholas Brady**, and **Alan Greenspan** seem the likeliest candidates since each of their agencies should have acted against BCCI long before the scandal broke. . . .

So, who was the runner-up to Supreme Court nominee **Clarence Thomas**? Solicitor General **Kenneth Starr**. . . .

As suspected, **George Bush** and his aides were stunned by the confessions of a CIA man, **Alan Fiers**, who single-handedly awakened the investigation of special prosecutor **Lawrence Walsh** when he put National Security Council aide and CIA director-designate **Robert Gates's** nomination in jeopardy. GOP conservatives who consider Gates their ally told the White House in late July that his nomination is doomed. . . .

Observers here are amazed at the courage displayed by Treasury Inspector General **Donald E. Kirkendall**. By referring the case of the two-month delay of the Silverado closing to the FBI, he has risked angering both Bush, whose 1988 campaign benefited from the delay that postponed disclosure of the closing and of **Neil Bush's** involvement in the scandal until after the election, and Bush's close friend, Nicholas Brady. . . .

Where next for Defense Secretary **Dick Cheney**? The Senate. Homestate Republican Senator **Malcolm Wallop**, who has endured tough challenges the past two times, is considering retirement in 1994. Cheney would be assured an easy win. . . .

A House subcommittee's charge that the Environmental Protection Agency has suffered from "serious leadership failure" under **William Reilly** is backed up by EPA insiders who say Reilly has appeared to be concerned more with attaining cabinet status for his agency than with carrying out its mission. . . .

Rumors that **Paul Coverdell** was planning to resign to run for the Senate have not surprised or disturbed his colleagues at the Peace Corps. The director's 19 trips to his

home state, Georgia, in a 15-month period had already aroused suspicion, since his agency is concerned with foreign, not domestic, affairs. . . .

Robert B. Strauss is being a prima donna, State Department insiders say, demanding 10 people instead of the customary 2 for his personal staff at the Moscow embassy. . . .

Why is **Robert Kimmitt** giving up the power he wields as one of **James Baker's** inner circle to take his embassy position, in Bonn? Some say he simply wants a job that will allow him more time to be with his family. Others suggest that he wants to enhance his resume with the title of ambassador to Germany. But the real cynics say it's because Bush wants to get him away from Washington and the congressional committees that will be looking into the October surprise and Iran-contra. Similar considerations, the same cynics allege, led to **Donald Gregg's** convenient exile to South Korea, where he is serving as an ambassador. Both men were working in the NSC under **Jimmy Carter** and could have been valuable sources for **William Casey** in the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign.

But other sources say if you want to figure out who in the NSC leaked to the Reagan-Bush people, consider the man who has benefited most, **William Odom**, a low-ranking colonel under Carter who was mysteriously selected as head of the powerful National Security Agency by **Ronald Reagan**.

Whether or not Casey actually tried to sabotage a possible October hostage surprise, it is almost certain, insiders say, that he would have felt he needed an NSC source to keep him informed of developments, and would have sought a Kimmitt or Gregg or Odom to fill that role. . . .

In—Commerce: Undersecretary for Export Administration—**Eric I. Garfinkel**. **Labor:** Assistant Secretary for Employment Standards—**Cari M. Dominguez**. Assistant Secretary for Labor-Management Standards—**Robert M. Guttman**. Assistant Secretary for Policy—**Nancy Risque Rohrbach**. **State:** Ambassador to Yemen—**Arthur Hayden Hughes**. Ambassador to Syria—**Christopher W. S. Ross**. Ambassador to the Philippines—**Frank G. Wisner**. **Transportation:** General Counsel—**Arthur J. Rothkopf**. **Treasury:** Assistant Secretary for International Affairs—**Olin L. Wethington**. **Agencies and Commissions:** Deputy Administrator, General Services Administration—**John Hiler**.

Out—Health and Human Services: Deputy Secretary—**Constance Horner**. **Justice:** Attorney General—**Dick Thornburgh**. Assistant Attorney General for Environment and Natural Resources—**Richard B. Stewart**. **State:** Ambassador to Syria—**Edward P. Djerejian**. Ambassador to Yemen—**Charles F. Dunbar Jr.**. Ambassador to the Philippines—**Nicholas Platt**. Ambassador to Algeria—**Christopher W. S. Ross**. **Agencies and Commissions:** Deputy Administrator, General Services Administration—**Rebekah T. Johnson**. Commissioner, Federal Trade Commission—**Andrew J. Strenio Jr.**.

—Susan Threadgill