

at affordable costs, there would be public outcry—even from typical middle-class voters—against the Gingrich-Dole anti-environmental assault.

But since the public has in recent years heard little more than doomsaying about the ecology, it is now conventionally assumed that most environmental programs aren't working. And if they're not working, why not undo them? Thus, in a sense, environmental exaggerations of the Left have made possible the current anti-environmental exaggerations of the Right. This is especially true since it is now widely believed that antipollution initiatives impose a burdensome drag on the economy. With a few exceptions, this is not the case: Most environmental rules are cost-effective and good for the economy. Yet Gingrich, Dole, and other anti-environmentalists are able to get

away with depicting environmental rules as expensive burdens, since pessimistic environmental thinking from the Left has created a milieu in which conservation rules are spoken of only in terms of woe. Rarely do institutional environmentalists have kind words for the EPA programs of either Republican or Democratic presidents. This creates the impression, useful to the Gingrich faction, that the programs don't work.

Among the worst aspects of Washington interest groups is that at some point they begin to like negativism, as it endlessly justifies their position and funding. This descent to the lowest common denominator is often seen on the part of industrial trade associations. It would be a sad day, and a profound loss to society, if environmentalism became merely the industrial trade association of the Left. □

The Washington Monthly

JOURNALISM AWARD

February 1995

Stephen Engelberg and Adam Bryant
The New York Times

From the wreckage of the Halloween crash of an American Eagle flight that killed 68 people in Roselawn, Indiana, comes a scrupulously thorough special report that says as much about failed government as it does successful journalism. Roselawn, the authors write, "was a crash that did not have to happen." For years, the Federal Aviation Administration disregarded warnings that the ATR-72 turbo prop plane was ill-equipped to handle the icy weather that brought on the crash. Instead, the agency relied on foreign manufacturers' evaluation of their own aircraft and de-icing procedures dating from the forties. But as Engelberg and Bryant report, the FAA's practice of ignoring flaws until they became fatal stemmed from a bureaucratic culture predicated on inertia, incompetence, and cost-cutting. "There have been assertions for years that issues like wind shear—and de-icing—become priorities only after a fatal crash brings them to public attention," they write. "The experts call it 'tombstone technology.'"

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. Please send nominations to Monthly Journalism Award, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination. Nominations for stories published or aired in April will close May 15. The winner will be announced in the July/August issue.

History As It Should Be Taught

We can't make government work without understanding how it has in the past

BY JOHN MORTON BLUM

The recent debate over the balanced budget amendment was marked not only by an abundance of posturing but also by a profound ignorance of history. President Clinton failed to use his bully pulpit to educate the electorate about the federal government's historical need for a flexible borrowing authority. Congressional Democrats used scare tactics, demanding for Social Security an inviolability they know cannot last, rather than pointing Congress toward the institution of a capital budget. Republican leaders abandoned the practicable, resorting instead to simplistic panaceas.

As in much recent American political discourse, partisanship and ideology overwhelmed compromise and policy. Small wonder that conventional wisdom has Americans fed up with politics. But, in truth, Americans of late have had little exposure to politics as it classically was: the art of the possible. Over most of the course of American history—the onset and aftermath of the Civil War stand as the singular exceptions—the political process brought together conflicting intraparty interests in a common quest to gain national power, encouraged the necessary accommodations to avoid crippling conflict, and abetted the evolution of innovative policies, often through the enactment of gradualist statutes. Within national society and culture, politics reconciled conflicts that arose from differences of income and wealth, of race, religion, and national origin, and of section and occupation. In doing so, politics made government possible.

But politicians today exhibit little interest in our political history and in the examples of good and poor governance it provides. And they are not alone. Just as the state has fallen into ill repute with many Americans, so political history, which focuses on public policy, the state, and the uses of the state, has fallen out of favor among most academic historians.

The intellectual interests of most of those academicians, many of them children of the Left, have flowed instead to social history—to the history, in the current phrase, of “race, class, and gender,” and of ethnicity and the family. Courses have proliferated on the history of women, gays, African

John Morton Blum is Sterling Professor Emeritus of History at Yale University, where he has specialized in teaching and writing 20th-century American political history.