

# Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS

*Consensual Monitoring • Impecunious Victors • A Teacher Who Taught •*

*Detroit's Nazis • The FBI's Psychic*

FURTHER EVIDENCE OF THE media's grotesquely overheated pursuit of Monicagate comes from a report on polls by the Media Studies Center. Since 1972, 555 poll questions have been asked about Watergate. In just 10 months this year, 1,153 questions have been asked about Monicagate.

The report also notes that more questions have been asked about Whitewater than about Watergate even though the Whitewater investigation did not yield what even Ken Starr could dare call an impeachable offense.

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ROBERT EISNER, THE NORTH-western economics professor who died recently, was a hero to *The Washington Monthly*. He was our ally in two notable causes. For two decades he argued as we did—against the prevailing opinion of his fellow economists—that we could have full employment without inflation. That view has finally been accepted by the economic establishment in the last year or so.

The other cause we shared was that college professors should teach. Here alas our views have proved less persuasive. Most academic big shots shun the classroom, feeling virtuous if they teach three hours a term and martyred if it's as much as five. Eisner, on the other hand, was in the words of his obituary in *The New York Times* "a zealous teacher who took special delight in teaching introductory courses to undergraduates."

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WHY, ASKED MICHELLE COTTLE in our June issue, do Harvard and other well-endowed universities

keep raising their tuition even though the value of their endowment has skyrocketed in the '90s? You may have noticed in our subsequent letters sections that Cottle's questions attracted attention. Soon afterward the academic fat cats began to take the rubber bands off their bank rolls. Harvard, for example, announced that it will increase by 20 percent the amount of endowment income that it contributes to annual operating costs of the university. But you should control your excitement. That increase will be from 37 percent to 4.5 percent according to *The Washington Post*, just what it was until the last fiscal year when it dropped to 37.

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BY THE WAY, DID YOU NOTICE how clever Ken Starr was in burying the exoneration of the Clintons on Whitewater, Travelgate, and Filegate? Instead of announcing each of the exonerations when it became clear the Clintons were innocent, he waited until the day he testified before the House Judiciary Committee to break the news. That's because he knew the next day's headlines would be dominated by his allegations of impeachable offenses in the Lewinsky matter, not the exculpation of the Clintons' other -gates. If he had announced each of the exonerations at the actual time it became clear the Clintons were innocent, each finding would

have rated a front page story in even the most Clinton-hating paper. Instead, notes *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz, "The exoneration was reduced to just another subplot."

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WHAT ROLE SHOULD HIGHER education and the media play in encouraging civic responsibility?

That was the question posed at a conference I attended not long ago. Conferences can be deadly. But this one made me think.

For starters, universities must free themselves from domination by departmental and research concerns to focus on teaching. The major issues of the new century should be the subject of interdisciplinary

courses that examine problems like global warming and the cruel havoc markets can wreak on the world economy.

Twentieth century history should be emphasized as essential background for dealing with the issues of the 21st. It should be a required course and should be taught by a teacher or teams of teachers who can make comprehensible the political, economic, and scientific elements of today's problems. Case studies should be used to compare, say, the way Kennedy failed at the Bay of Pigs and succeeded in the Cuban Missile Crisis or the heights to which the House Judiciary Committee rose

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during the Nixon impeachment hearings and the depths to which it sank during the Clinton hearings.

A better grounding in 20th-century history could have saved all those wise guy economists from the folly of thinking that full employment and low inflation cannot coexist. If they had studied the 40s, 50s, and 60s, they would have known that there were substantial periods in each decade when we had both low inflation and high employment—and that Robert Eisner and *The Washington Monthly* were right!

As for the media, it should concentrate much more on explanatory journalism that explains the facts and ideas readers need to understand to confront important problems such as the reform of Social Security, public education, and campaign finance. If the reporters are motivated by a search for solutions, that's even better—as long as they disclose their biases. But to add my voice to the debate that begins on page 22 of this issue, I do favor striving for complete objectivity in the news stories that usually lead front pages and nightly television. Of course, none of us can be totally objective, but with these stories we have a duty to try our damndest. Too many reporters have gotten in the habit of loading the news in order to make themselves look smart. And too many editors reward these journalists with star status.

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THE CRIME RATE CONTINUES TO head down. Last year, according to the Associated Press, it was down 3 percent from 1996, 10 percent from 1993 and 13 percent from 1988. One caveat is suggested by *The Washington Post's* Debbie Goldberg, who reports that Philadelphia's new police chief has discovered that crime there had been underreported because captains were judged on the basis of the rate in their districts. When figures for 1997 were corrected it turned out that the crime rate had

actually risen 2 percent instead of dropping as originally reported. But even in Philadelphia the murder rate was declining. Nationally, according to the AP, it's down 8.1 percent from 1996.

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DID YOU KNOW THAT ALBERT Speer once said that Hitler "would never have considered invading Poland" without synthetic fuel technology provided by General Motors, that in 1938 a GM executive was given a medal for "distinguished service to the Reich," and that in 1939 GM Chairman Alfred P. Sloan described the company's German operations as "highly profitable"? I'm indebted to *The Washington Post* for these facts as well as this ultimate irony: After the war, GM collected \$32 million from the U.S. government for the damage American bombers had inflicted on its plants in Germany. Ford, by the way, was equally guilty. It's good to remind oneself of the dark side of capitalism in an era when people tend toward uncritical enthusiasm for "the market economy."

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BACK HOME IN WEST VIRGINIA, there was bad news at Christmas-time. Weirton Steel laid off 415 employees, adding to the 342 it had dropped in November. The reason is that the United States is being flooded with underpriced imports. More than 10,000 steelworkers have lost their jobs around the country, according to Vicki Smith of the Associated Press. Weirton Steel says that Russia, Japan, and Brazil are violating U.S. trade law with their exports. The Clinton administration hesitates to crack down on the violators because it is concerned about encouraging economic recovery in these countries. But couldn't we do more to insist at least to Japan, which is the main trade offender, that its economic policy encourage a recovery based on increased consumer demand rather than an

increase in exports? That would help Japan without hurting us.

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I'M STILL PONDERING THE tobacco agreement but I can already warn you of one dubious provision. Even though the agreement is supposed to be between the states and the companies, it actually has the effect of limiting anti-tobacco options for the federal government. If the feds decide to increase tobacco taxes to dissuade smoking, whatever portion of the revenue from the tax that goes to the states will reduce by the same amount the payments that the agreement requires the companies to pay the states.

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OF ALL THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO our symposium on journalism, the only one I strongly disagree with is by Walter Shapiro, who happens to be one of the TWM alumni I'm fondest of.

Walter starts by attacking the example of Clinton's August radio address that Jonathan Alter and I use to illustrate how Monicagate has consigned important news to the back pages. The address announced new federal protections against HMO abuses. This was not a policy proposal but an action the President was taking that affected 120 million people. Walter excuses the *Times'* failure to give the story more attention by arguing that the White House had failed, by not having administration heavies like Alexis Herman present, to alert the press that the story was important. Can't reporters think for themselves? Why can't they see without prompting from White House flacks that 120 million people might be quite interested in getting new protections from the HMOs—a subject they had repeatedly told pollsters they were worried about?

Shapiro dismisses the President's Saturday radio addresses by saying they're "normally used to announce Dick Morris style small-deeds-fluff." This description

scarcely fits the HMO speech or the one the president gave in July about what he was doing to control the food-borne illnesses that afflict millions. Or the November speech about the devastating effect the world's economic problems were having on American farmers, or his September speech on the world economy, which was making a lot of us nervous that week, including even the normally optimistic Wall Street bulls. That speech was reported on page 9 of *The Washington Post*, echoing *The New York Times's* downplaying of the HMO story.

But my main disagreement with Shapiro is that he seems to think that what he sees as White House cynicism justifies media cynicism. This reflects a serious misunderstanding of how a democratic leader must govern. He has to calculate the possible effects of his actions on the opinion of those who elect him and on the legislators they also elect. This calculation often invites suspicion that the leader is being cynical. But even if he is, the action he proposes may still be sound. It should be examined on its merits. Do we really care about the motive if the action is good?

Most reporters are so petrified of being conned by the White House that they have become automatically cynical and dismissive. Franklin Roosevelt may have been cynical in his explanation of Lend-Lease—that when your neighbor's house is on fire you lend him your garden hose, which he will return after the fire has been put out. FDR knew the hose would not be returned. The tanks and planes were going to be used and probably destroyed by war's end. But Lend-Lease was still an inspired pol-

icy and worthy of being reported as a great contribution to the survival of Britain and our ultimate victory in World War II. Roosevelt, superb politician that he was, had to know that every action he took against Hitler won him Jewish votes and Jewish campaign contributions. But can anyone argue that he was wrong to take the actions?

## Did you notice how clever Ken Starr was in burying the exoneration of the Clintons on Whitewater, Travelgate, and Filegate?

THE CIA IS BUSY RECRUITING new agents. We hope they'll be more careful than they were during the last big recruiting drive, which took place during Bill Casey's reign in the 1980s. Too many cowboys, misfits, and outright weirdos were added to the agency's rolls. They proved willing co-conspirators in the mad plots hatched by the Ollie Norths of the era.

The good news this time is that campuses are no longer closed to the CIA. Smart people don't automatically rule out an agency career, as they did in the wake of the Vietnam war. This was an example of liberal foolishness. How could they expect the CIA to get better if good people refused to join!

The same point can be made about the rest of the government. If we want it to do a good job, then we must be willing to work for it. The FBI, the IRS, the FAA—all the agencies we get mad at when they screw up won't screw up, or will screw up less, if more good people work for them.

THE MILITARY continues to be embarrassingly top-heavy with brass, according to *Time's* Mark Thompson. During World War II, the Navy had one admiral for every 130 ships. It now has one for every 1.6 ships. The Air Force had one general for every 244 planes; it now has one for every 23.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF PENTAGON lunacy is the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, which includes among its distinguished alumni Manuel Noriega and Roberto D'Abuisson, the alleged mastermind of El Salvador's death squads. Opponents of the school, according to *The Hill's* Betsy Rothstein, include one of my favorite congressmen, John Lewis, while supporters include my least favorite, Clinton-hating Bob Barr—have you ever noticed how eerily similar his smile is to the late Heinrich Himmler's? Come to think of it, the resemblance may be more than physical. Last June, Barr was an honored speaker at a meeting of the Council of Conservative Citizens, which holds that interracial marriage amounts to white genocide.

SPEAKING OF BUREAUCRATIC MIS-adventures, did you know the FBI had engaged a psychic to assist in the investigation of the crash of TWA Flight 800? According to *The Washington Post's* Michael Grunwald, "She surveyed the debris, then announced her conclusion: a bomb hidden in a suitcase near the left wing had destroyed the plane." Her conclusion, as you probably already know, was not confirmed by the investigation.

Grunwald's article suggests that the FBI made other errors in the TWA investigation that were more serious than hiring a psychic. They stuck with the terrorist theory far too long, downplaying evidence that the cause of the crash was the ignition of fumes in the center wing fuel tank, and leaking stories about "explosive residue" and "blast damage in the forward landing gear" that gave the media the excuse it needed to keep exploiting the far more sensational terrorist angle.

LATELY I'VE BEEN QUITE CRITICAL of *The Washington Post* editorial writers for their get-Clintonism, so

it's nice to say a kind word about them for a change. A recent editorial recommended firing bad teachers from the District of Columbia schools, taking on an issue that liberals have been slow to embrace. The *Post* didn't pull any punches: "The difference between District schools in the future and those in the past is that soon poor teachers finally will have to go."

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IF YOU WERE WORRIED ABOUT the Hindu nationalists and their proclivity for nukes, you may find comfort in the recent state election results in India where the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party suffered what Celia Dugger of *The New York Times* calls a "humiliating defeat." The voters, however, had not exactly joined Greenpeace. It seems that they were disturbed less by the nationalists' nuclear tests that alarmed the rest of the world than they were by rising vegetable prices.

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BUCKLEY V. VALEO, THE INFAMOUS Supreme Court decision that equates campaign spending with free speech, lives on. In November the court passed up a chance to repudiate it by declining to hear appeals in two cases involving limits on campaign spending. Many observers now believe the only way to get rid of *Buckley* is by constitutional amendment. The problem of course is that this route would probably consume a decade at least. What I suggest first is for reformers to press Congress to pass a bill that would tell the Court that it is the judgment of the American people, voiced through their elected representatives, that money is not speech, that campaign spending can be limited both in the interest of fair play and to curb the power of special interests. I doubt if the court would then feel strongly enough about *Buckley* to go against the expressed will of the people. Of course, it would be far from easy to get such a bill through Congress. But one thing is certain: Free speech

is hurt rather than helped by *Buckley*. As long as one well-heeled candidate can drown out the message of his opponent, the opponent's freedom of speech is illusory.

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THE GOOD NEWS FROM THE November elections is that money doesn't always win. Several candidates won even though considerably less was spent in their campaigns than in their opponents'. The impecunious victors include Charles Schumer in New York, where he was outspent by Al D'Amato by \$93 million; Russell Feingold, who the experts were predicting would lose the Wisconsin senate race because of his Mr. Clean campaign financing; and Rush Holt, a New Jersey congressional candidate who not only won the general election against a better-heeled opponent but did the same thing in the primary. Unfortunately, the good news just involves three candidates out of hundreds. We still need to repeal *Buckley*.

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BILL CLINTON'S PATIENTS' BILL of Rights has opened up the pocketbooks of the lobbyists. In just the first half of last year, according to Jonathan Salant of the Associated Press, lobbying groups with a stake in the issue contributed \$74 million to congressional candidates. The bad news for the average man is that \$60 million of that amount comes from groups opposed to the bill of rights.

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ONE OF THE MORE FASCINATING inconsistencies of American liberalism is that abortion is advocated while the death penalty is opposed. Conservatives have a similar problem. They love the death penalty and hate abortion. I know only a handful of writers who face this inconsistency—Colman McCarthy, our own alumnus Jason DeParle, and most recently Richard North Patterson, one of my favorite thriller writers, who in his new book, *No Safe Place*, reveals himself to be a neoliberal in

almost every way except for his opposition to high taxes for the rich. (I'm not collecting his royalties or I too might be tempted to stray on this issue.)

Anyway, what reminded me of all this was a recent conference at Northwestern University that featured death penalty survivors, people whose conviction had been reversed at the last minute. I was thinking how wonderfully this demonstrated the central flaw in the death penalty: You don't want to risk frying one innocent person. But then the sponsor of the conference, a law professor named Lawrence Marshall, said: "I defy anyone to look at these flowers that they wanted to extinguish and tell us that their death penalty works." As a former lawyer who has gotten off a number of the clearly guilty in his day, I thought: Bullshit! It's more than likely that only a few of the convicted murderers were innocent flowers. The rest were beneficiaries of lawyers clever enough to exploit the many inefficiencies of the criminal justice system.

But the mere possibility of the wrong man being executed is enough to make me oppose the death penalty except for serial killers like Ted Bundy. As for abortion, I remain convinced that it should be a legal right but that no one should forget it is still a moral choice.

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IN CASE YOU MISSED THE colloquy between David Kendall and Ken Starr, it captures Starr at his most Uriah Heep-ish:

Kendall: One of the purposes [Monica Lewinsky was detained by Starr's investigators at the Ritz Carlton] was to get Ms. Lewinsky to wear a recording device and surreptitiously record Mr. [Vernon] Jordan or the president, was it not?

Starr: It was not ... we explained to her ... one of the things a cooperating witness can do is to assist us in consensual monitoring.

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# Jesse's Victory

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*It was no fluke*

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BY STEVEN E. SCHIER

**I**N THE WAKE OF HIS STUNNING election as Minnesota's next governor, former World Wrestling Federation superstar Jesse Ventura presides as a genuine cultural phenomenon. The darling of the media, particularly televised "infotainment" programs, he allowed over one hundred desperate reporters to interview him during his stopover at the National Governors' Conference shortly after his victory. He has signed a book contract in the mid six figures with a major publishing house, and is in negotiation with NBC for a possible TV bio-pic. Stores in Minnesota feature T-shirts proclaiming "My Governor Can Kick Your Governor's Ass" and, more tamely, "My Governor Can Beat Up Your Governor." Jesse—that's what infatuated Minnesotans call their new governor—loves the media, thinks fast on his feet, and presents himself with a testosterone-juiced air of authority. Americans will see a lot of him over the next four years.

If all this seems a funny political sideshow, it isn't. Ventura's election carries important implications for politics in Minnesota and the nation as a whole. His triumph seems so beyond the pale that a lot must be happening in our politics to cause it. And a lot is. Jesse's ascendancy underscores the great and growing weaknesses of our two major parties with the public. It reveals that third parties have a future in American politics only if national campaign finance and voter registration rules come to resemble those now in force in Minnesota. The success of Ventura's unorthodox, low-budget campaign ads exposes the shortcomings of conventional political advertising. And, perhaps most disturbingly, Jesse's rise to the top confirms the

growing power of celebrity and entertainment in American politics.

## How He Did It

Jesse's victory required a harmonic convergence of legal and political circumstances that took Minnesota's quirky political populism to a new level. During the '90s, voters in Minnesota have taken a liking to candidates who attack the "political establishment" of the state from all manner of directions. In 1990 and 1996, Paul Wellstone's tie-dyed leftist insurgency carried him to victory over establishment Republican Rudy Boschwitz. Rod Grams, as emphatically to the right as Wellstone is to the left, won a Senate seat during the 1994 nationwide Republican insurgency, defeating Ann Wynn, a conventional liberal well-known and widely respected among Minnesota's political establishment. Arne Carlson, the outgoing Republican governor, is a scrapper who has been at war with the activists in his own party for years, and has won office twice despite being denied endorsement for the party primary by two consecutive state Republican conventions. Jesse is the culmination of this trend, rocking the political establishment from the "radical" center.

Why do Minnesotans like the insurgent style in their statewide candidates? The answer lies in the decay of the two major parties in the state. Two decades ago, scholars routinely ranked Minnesota as a state with a strong party system. No more. Though both the Democratic and Republican parties of the state still boast big budgets and many officeholders, they have lost their hold over the voters.

Each election year, Minnesota's parties hold a statewide set of precinct caucuses followed by county and congressional district conventions. At the June state convention, the parties write a platform and endorse a favored candidate for the September primary. Over the last 20 years, attendance at the precinct caucuses has dwindled to the point where the total number of those

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