



Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS

*Lady Rilke and Mrs. Miró • The Steward's Daughter • Johann, George Frederick, and Les
The Managerial Metamorphosis • The New York Window*

I HAVE A DEEP DISTASTE FOR musical instruments that have to be plugged in. Fifty years ago the only respectable musician who used an electric cord was the guitarist Les Paul. He was actually quite good but I now regard him as the beginning of a horrid trend that really exploded into dominance in the 1960s, with musical stages becoming a maze of wires and speakers. The latest outrage is that pipe organs in churches are being replaced by electric devices. Bach and Handel by synthesized sound! The last outpost of sanity seems to be the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music. It has rules prohibiting electric instruments.

.....
IN JULY, CONNIE MARIANO, the Filipino-American White House physician was made an admiral. Her father had been a Navy steward, and therein lies a tale I am proud to tell. Thirty years ago, Timothy Ingram wrote an article for this magazine entitled, "The Navy's Floating Plantation." It described how Filipinos in the U.S. Navy were employed almost exclusively as servants to high-ranking officers and in the executive dining rooms of the brass. The result was the kind of impact we always want for an article but rarely occurs. Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, then the Navy's top officer, immediately issued an order opening up many more jobs for Filipinos. The end result of that order was the opportunity given to Connie Mariano. She recalls that her father had worked for six admirals. As a young girl, she sometimes accompanied him when he went to the admirals' houses: "Never by the front door.

We always went through the garage, the backdoor, or the kitchen."

.....

THE KOREAN WAR LASTED three years. Our next war on the Asian continent, Vietnam, was three times as long. Why the difference?

One reason, I suspect is that in Korea, the sons and daughters of the influential were being killed, while in Vietnam the powerless did most of the dying. James Brady, a writer who fought in Korea, recently described his comrades: "Young men like Wild Horse Callan, off his daddy's New Mexico ranch; Doug Bradlee, the big, red-haired Harvard tackle who wanted to teach; handsome Dick Brennan, who worked in a Madison Avenue ad agency; Mack Allen, the engineer from the Virginia Military Institute; Bob Bjornsen, the giant forest ranger; and Carly Rand of the Rand McNally clan." Brady goes on to describe another of his comrades in Korea, John Chafee, the future governor of Rhode Island and U.S. Senator who died last year: "A college wrestling star, he dropped out of Yale at 19 to join the Marines after Pearl Harbor, fighting on Guadalcanal as a private, then made officers candidate school and fought on Okinawa." Any man who took part in either of these brutal battles would have a right to feel he had done his part. But after graduating from Yale and Harvard Law School,

"he went back to commanding riflemen in combat [in Korea]. A man with money and connections (his great-grandfather and great uncle both had served as governor), he never took the easy out."

.....

JOHN CHAFEE IS one of my heroes. Another, Paul Taylor, has an article in this issue. Paul, you may recall, is the former *Washington Post* political reporter who gave up a career that had him well on his way to journalistic stardom, to devote himself to the cause of campaign finance

**If Cheney
doesn't trust the
government to
run Head Start,
how can he
trust it to shoot
a bullet out of
the sky?**

reform; trying among other things to deal with the failure of broadcasters to do their part. Recently a bipartisan national commission that Taylor had helped form recommended that each station give five minutes a night for 30 nights before the election to letting the candidates speak. They could be local, state, or national candidates, just so both sides were given a fair opportunity. Only two percent of the stations have agreed to make even this modest sacrifice even though their very existence is due to licenses given them by the public.

.....

AS YOU MAY KNOW SAN Francisco's Candlestick Park has been renamed 3Com Park. This is part of a general trend that has one sports team after another selling the naming rights to its stadium to a corpo-

ration. This violates a lovely tradition of evocatively named ballparks from the Polo Grounds to Fenway Park to the recently christened Camden Yards. The one time-honored exception to this rule permits the use of the name of the owner as with Wrigley Field in Chicago and the old Crosley Field in Cincinnati. I believe that this was also the case with Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. But I don't know. If anyone out there does know, please write.

REMEMBER OUR ITEM ABOUT HOW insurance corporations overcharged blacks? I am delighted to report that one of them, a very big one in fact, has agreed to make restitution. American General has agreed to pay \$206 million to settle a class action suit brought on behalf of their black policy holders.

THE GREAT TRADITION OF women's magazines being on the take continues to this day. In the past they were notable for praising the products of frequent advertisers and the resorts, airlines, and cruise ships that gave their writers free trips. Now they're touting the plastic surgeons that give their writers free face lifts and tummy tucks. "There's little question," writes Anne Jarrell of *The New York Times*, "that accepting free treatment is widespread at women's magazines, where most articles about the booming fields of cosmetic surgery and dermatology appear." Does favorable coverage result? Just ask Dr. Patricia Wexler, a Manhattan dermatologist: "All the time I give free botox, collagen, chemical peels to journalists who will write about it. They quote me as if I were George Washington."

One writer dared to criticize a procedure performed for her by Dr. David Bank. "That's the only time that has happened to me," was the physician's indignant response.

WHEN I ENTERED COLUMBIA AS A student years ago, I quickly realized

that if you wanted to impress your peers with your sophistication you had to drop the right names. The problem is that often I learned little more than the name. This had its hazards. One girl I was trying to impress saw through me when I referred to the poet Rilke and the painter Miró as "she."

The insecurities of growing up may excuse this kind of folly in the young. But we all know mature adults who continue to drop names to make it appear they're in the know. What is their excuse? I'm interested in pursuing this matter. What are the names people need to drop today? Similarly, what are the ideas and causes—artistic and political—that they feel they must be able to make a hip shorthand reference to? And what does this need say about them? Perhaps those of you whose hearts did not beat faster at my call for help on Ebbets Field will be inspired to come to my aid on this matter.

DURING THE REPUBLICAN convention, one delegate, arguing for tax reduction asked an interviewer: "Do you want to work for yourself or work for the government?" This is the way many Republicans think. To them, taxes are what some abstract entity called government takes from them. They don't stop to think that these taxes pay for the social security and veterans pensions their parents get. They pay for a Federal Drug Administration to guard against unsafe drugs, etc. ... It's weird. When you remind them of those facts they seem to grudgingly agree. But you can be sure that the next Republican you meet will say "I want to work for myself, not for the government."

USUALLY CONSERVATIVES disparage government programs. Why then do they have this absolute conviction that the government can succeed in building a system that seeks and destroys incoming inter-continental ballistic

missiles? If Dick Cheney doesn't trust the government to run Head Start, how can he trust it to shoot a bullet out of the sky?

MORE ABOUT JOHN GIELGUD. He was such a great actor that it seemed that there wasn't a part he could not play. This, alas, proved to be untrue when he cast himself in a New York production of Euripides' *Medea* starring Judith Anderson and directed by Gielgud. When the actor playing the swashbuckling Jason became ill, Gielgud stepped into his shoes. But Gielgud was slightly effeminate and the resulting performance was embarrassing. This experience taught me a lesson. One is always tempted to think a great artist can do anything. But we all have limits. This is true of the writers with whom I have worked. Many of them are so gifted that you are tempted to ask them to exceed their limit. But you can't ask the unfunny to be funny. And you can't expect good writers to automatically be good editors. And friends in education tell me that a similar truth applies when it is assumed that good teachers will make good administrators. Often this does not prove to be the case.

ANOTHER TREND THAT MAKES me nervous is the rapidly decreasing attention span of young America. "The average Internet download takes 22 seconds," reads a recent Lucent Technologies ad. "That's 22 seconds longer than a 10-year-old wants to wait." The ad continues, "Today's kids are born believing that fast enough isn't fast enough."

MICHAEL WALDMAN IN HIS new book *Potus Speaks* describes "one of the few times" in his years as Clinton's chief White House speechwriter that corporate lobbyists tried to directly influence a presidential address. It was, he explained, "the broadcasters—lobbyists for one of the television networks. Our reform plan expected to include

measures to trim the rates charged by broadcasters to candidates." One lobbyist "slapped his knees. You don't really want to do this, right? ... The TV network he was lobbying for had excoriated Clinton regularly for failing to tame the Washington system."

By the way, the columnist Martin Schram tells us *Broadcasting & Cable Magazine* heralded the outset of this campaign spending spree with a report headlined: "Happy Days Are Here Again."

.....

WHEN CRITICS say that government can't work, there is one answer that occurs to many of us immediately: the efficiency of the meter maids who so relentlessly ticket us when we overstay the limit for even five minutes. I have another example: bureaucrats who can do nothing else seem to manage getting nice cars for themselves (or their bosses). Consider Robert P. Newman, the director of the District's Parks and Recreation Department. Although he had a \$3 million federal grant to put 3,000 low-income children into a summer camp, only 150 children were enrolled when the camp started. Five weeks later counselors stopped working because they still hadn't been paid. But Williams managed to get himself a \$24,000 Ford Crown Victoria. Indeed, according to *The Washington Times*, last year alone the District spent \$12.6 million for 784 vehicles, including 74 SUVs, giving the District a total of 301 of these gas guzzlers.

In my home state of West Virginia, a Supreme Court justice was criticized for getting himself a car

paid for by the taxpayers. His defense: "Everyone else, every office, gets not only vehicles, but several vehicles—from assistants in the auditor's office to the governor's wife." According to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, the justice was wrong

about the auditor's assistants but right about the governor's wife and practically everyone else in the state government, which now owns nearly 6,000 passenger vehicles.

.....

IF YOU HAVE suspected that the legal profession is not too severe with its own miscreants, consider that of the 118,891 lawyers against whom ethics complaints were

filed in 1996, the last year for which figures are available, only 1.57 percent were suspended or disbarred. And if you know a lawyer who tends to bend the rules advise him to move to Hawaii or Washington where the punished number only half of one percent.

Then, of course, there is the medical profession, which goes to incredible lengths to conceal its own wrongdoers. "75 percent of the hospitals in the U.S. never reported an adverse action against any physician," writes James B. Stewart in *The Wall Street Journal*. Stewart isn't just guessing. His figures come from an official report of the Department of Health and Human Services. Stewart has written a terrifying book about one doctor, Michael Swango, who appears to have gotten away with as many as 35 murders of his patients at hospitals where he was employed *after* having been convicted of arsenic poisoning.

When Stewart was invited to testify before the House Commerce

Committee, he says his appearance was blocked by the AMA and the Ohio delegation to Congress. Why? Because, "At Ohio State, doctors recommended that Dr. Swango be licensed to practice medicine after he was accused of injecting a patient with a paralyzing drug and after the death rate soared among his patients (one of whom was cited as a murder victim by the grand jury)." The AMA and Ohio State can't be wrong!

.....

NOW FOR SOME GOOD NEWS. First, Judith S. Kaye, New York state's chief judge, has decreed that nonviolent criminals who are drug addicts be offered treatment programs with their sentences suspended as long as they stick to their treatment. This is a reform this magazine has long advocated and could be a great step forward if both quality treatment is provided and potential backsliders know the penalty will be swift and sure.

The second piece of good news is for all of us who admired Katherine Boo's great series in *The Washington Post* about the mistreatment of the mentally retarded by District government contractors: One of the guilty contractors has been sentenced to seven years in prison for cheating the government out of \$1.6 million. The contractor, Denise Braxtonbrown-Smith, had submitted what the *Post* describes as "phony claims for therapeutic services, including daily psychotherapy and other treatment that never was provided." Guilty contractors usually escape punishment, so this case, like Judge Kaye's ruling, is a refreshing departure from the customary practice.

.....

THE REPUBLICANS WHO HAVE made such a dedicated effort to make the rich richer by repealing the estate tax and reducing the income tax might better concentrate on making average workers richer by reducing the payroll tax on them. "The payroll tax ends up taking a bigger chunk out of most people's

**If you didn't
capture her
attention, she
was sure to turn
to that certifiable
celebrity or that
Greek-god hand-
some guy you
prayed would be
an idiot.**

pockets," Joel B. Slemrod, director of the Office of Tax Policy Research at the University of Michigan Business School, recently explained to *The Wall Street Journal*. It is close to criminal to rave and rant about tax relief as Republicans love to do without talking about the very place it is needed most. An easy way to finance a payroll tax reduction for the average worker is to have the tax apply to salary income above \$76,200 which it currently does not.

"YES, MINISTER" HAS LONG BEEN a delight to those of us who have worked in the federal bureaucracy. (Reruns of the British television series still appear on one local channel.) Its leading character, brilliantly played by Nigel Hawthorne, is the ultimate clever bureaucrat, with skills perfectly honed to the thwarting of any reform that might not be in the interest of the civil service. This skill was recently displayed by American bureaucrats in the Boston social security office. Ordered to reduce the number of managers by Al Gore's reinventers, they simply redefined jobs so that 1,200 supervisors are now called "management support specialists." One of the specialists told Jeanne Cummings and Glenn Burkins of *The Wall Street Journal*, "Our jobs are very similar to what we did before." The *Journal* reporters note that the specialist "continues to attend the Thursday morning management staff meeting and has even kept her space in the managers-only parking lot."

The importance of the free or reduced-price parking space in the bureaucrat's scale of values cannot be overestimated. When I realized I had been given one of just four free parking places assigned my agency in the New Executive Office Building, I felt as never before that warm glow of the arrived.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF RESISTANCE to reform is that the government

employees' unions are said to be trying to sabotage Comptroller General David Walker's effort to reform personnel rules at the GAO. He asked Congress for authority to conduct staff reductions on the basis of skill and performance as well as seniority. Does the employee have a skill we need? Is he good at it? Not just, how long has he been around? This reform seems so sensible that it should be supported by the unions and adopted by the rest of the government.

If you don't care about bureaucratic reform, shame on you. If bureaucrats aren't good, you have planes crashing, secrets stolen, bad drugs approved—a lot of consequences you really don't want to happen. If you care, we just might get a better government that won't make these mistakes.

HAS THE MEDIA TILTED FOR Bush? Yes, says a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs reported by The Associated Press. During 1999, comments on the network news about Bush were favorable 77 percent of the time compared with 49 percent for Gore. This year the trend, though less dramatic, has continued. This reminds me of the 1968 campaign when reporters tilted against Hubert Humphrey until October when it was too late to reverse the trend toward Nixon that they had helped inspire.

Gore is also being hurt by some media good guys who are flirting with Ralph Nader. Nader is a great man. But in my opinion, a vote for him is wasted.

DOES THE INTERNET HAVE AN Achilles heel? Our contributing editor James Fallows thinks it might. "Maybe the whole digital economy will be laid low by an unreliable electric power system," he wrote in the July 31 issue of *The Industry Standard*. Soon afterwards, on August 3, an article about the electric power shortage in Califor-

nia made the front page of the *The New York Times*.

The danger isn't just in California. Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson says there is also a threat of power shortages "in the Upper Midwest, in the Southwest, and parts of the Northeast." One reason is a crazy-quilt pattern of deregulation in some states, regulation in others, some states in transition from regulated to deregulated, all of which gives power companies little confidence in expanding capacity. What we need is a federal power policy so that utilities can count on consistent regulatory policy.

THE MOST ABSURD FORM OF name-dropping is when the name is that of a friend of the celebrity. Here, too, I was guilty. I happened to know two friends of Tennessee Williams'—Oliver Evans and Maria Britneva. So I would work into conversation with the possibly impressionable, "He—or she—is a friend of Tennessee's!" I was thus delighted by a recent article by Richard Stengel in *The New York Times* that got this dead on: "Oh look, there's a woman who's Madonna's best friend." This form of name-dropping, while not unknown elsewhere, was and is most common in New York. Another New York custom Stengel has right is that "New Yorkers give their own or others' curricula vitae when they are introduced." I remember the reason for this annoying habit. It was because at the typical New York party, it often seemed that you only had about 30 seconds to impress that beautiful blonde. If you didn't capture her attention, she was sure to turn to that certifiable celebrity or that Greek-god handsome guy you prayed would prove to be an idiot. Another way a New Yorker deals with the 30-second window is to try to convince the girl that he is hip by flashing his taste badges, as I did so disastrously with Rilke and Miró.



Too Little Time

How broadcasters betray the public interest they're supposed to serve

BY PAUL TAYLOR

BY ALL APPEARANCES, THE \$1,000-A-HEAD fundraiser for Rep. Rick Lazio (R-NY) at Manhattan's swank Le Cirque 2000 restaurant this summer was the sort of straight-up, money-for-influence transaction that has become the signature campaign event of our times.

But this one had a twist. The 125 donors were all from the broadcast industry, a special-interest group that finds itself in the rare and enviable position of not having to wait until after the election to draw a return on its political capital. In fact, the checks they cast upon Lazio that night have already returned manyfold, as the candidate spends millions and millions of dollars to buy television ads in his quest to become the next senator from New York.

The swift round-trip journey of those campaign contributions is a tidy metaphor for the most profitable, exclusive, and mutually beneficial relationship in the new Gilded Age of politics—the one between incumbent broadcasters and incumbent politicians. The outlines of this relationship are familiar to all who follow politics and public policy. Politicians give commercial broadcasters the public airwaves for free. During the campaign season, broadcasters turn around and sell air-time back to the politicians, while imposing a virtual news blackout on candidate discussion of issues. This arrangement appears lopsided, but only on first glance. By creating a pay-to-play model for political speech on the nation's premier medium for political communication, the television industry protects incumbents, starves challengers, and enriches itself.

What's less well-known—because the phenomenon is new—is just how much broadcasters have come to profit from democracy. In election years, political campaigns are now the third-best advertising client for the typical network-affiliated local television stations, trailing only automobiles and

retail stores. As recently as 1992, political ads accounted for just 3.8 percent of the annual ad revenue of the typical local station, according to an analysis of the industry by Bear, Stearns and Co. This year, that figure is projected to rise to 9.2 percent. There will be more political ads on television this year than ads for fast food or movies.

"We're salivating," Patrick Paolini, general sales manager of WTVB-TV, the CBS affiliate in Buffalo, told the trade publication *Electronic Media* last year when he was asked about the prospect of a Senate race involving First Lady Hillary Clinton. "No question it will be huge as far as ad revenue."

His counterpart, Dan O'Connor of WSYT-TV, a Fox affiliate in Syracuse, recalled that in 1998, when Gov. George Pataki and then Sen. Al D'Amato both ran for re-election, political ads accounted for 20 percent of his station's fourth-quarter revenues. "People [ad-buyers for the candidates] call you up and say, 'Can you clear \$40,000 next week?' It's like, 'What? Am I dreaming? Of course, I can clear that!' And they send you a check in the overnight mail. It's like Santa Claus came. It's a beautiful thing."

Business is Booming

Owning one of this country's 1,300 commercial broadcast television stations has always been a bit like owning a money machine. Annual pre-tax profit margins at well-run stations reach 30, 40, even 50 percent. Bottom lines have stayed parked at these stratospheric levels despite a steady loss of viewers, first to cable and more recently to the Internet.

The record seems to defy economic gravity, but it conforms to the winner-takes-more logic of modern markets. In a world where audiences keep getting sliced thinner, the medium that attracts the most viewers keeps getting more valuable, even as it loses eyeballs. Certain kinds of advertisers—candidates among them—simply have no choice but to reach for the biggest megaphone in town. That's still broadcast television. And the broadcasters know it: television ad rates have risen at roughly twice the rate

PAUL TAYLOR, a former Washington Post political reporter, is founder and executive director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns.