

Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS



*Monolingualism at the CIA • The Hazards of E-mail • Rove's Jag
Spy Planes Off Catalina • Changing the Guard*

THE GOOD NEWS ON THE CELL phone front: I rode on two Amtrak Metroliners last month and each had a quiet car in which cell phones were banned. The bad news is a doctor in Hong Kong recently had a nice chat on his cell phone about buying a BMW while operating on a patient's colon. The next day, according to the *Boston Globe's* Hong Kong correspondent, the patient was rushed back to the hospital with a punctured colon. The Hong Kong Medical Society, acting in the great tradition of physician licensing boards, declined to discipline the doctor involved. It did say that it "does not accept the use of mobile telephones during an operation or procedure without due justification." The inescapable conclusion is that the medical society deems getting a good deal on a BMW a "due justification." How can a misplaced slice here and there on a patient compare with shaving a thousand or two off the price of a car?

MUCH OF THE PRODUCTIVITY gain of recent years has been attributed to the computer, but we can't help suspecting that the gain will disappear if the use of e-mail continues to increase. A recent Gartner survey showed 56 percent of respondents saying they had used e-mail more at work this year than last. The average increase in usage is 38 percent. "It's getting worse," Gartner research director Neil McDonald tells Tim Lemke of *The Washington Times*, "and it's going to continue to get worse." A lot of

employees who seem to be working diligently at their computer stations are actually chatting with friends or reading and forwarding jokes and chain letters. And we haven't even mentioned computer games, with which more than a few employees become obsessed. Will fun and games doom the computer revolution?

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE Senate Democrats made a whopper of a mistake when they agreed early on to a \$1.2 trillion tax cut instead of the \$1.6 trillion that Bush wanted. They set the floor too high. They knew the House would give him \$1.6 trillion and they would have to go to a conference committee. They would have to compromise, as indeed they did, ending up around \$1.35 trillion which they know is too high a figure to leave enough money after the cuts to pay for even the education programs we need, much less deal effectively with all the other problems this country faces.

I DELIGHT IN FINDING ARTICLES that have somehow gotten past the conservative editors of *The Washington Times* even though the stories suggest that Bill Clinton did something right or George Bush did something wrong. (For those of you who live outside the *Times'* circulation area, I offer the following four-column headline from its front page to suggest its unique approach to objective journalism: "Charming Bush Lauded After 100 Days.") So you

can imagine how pleased I am by a recent piece in the *Times* suggesting both that Clinton was right to institute his COPS program to put 100,000 new community-oriented police on the streets and that Bush is wrong to propose cutting it. Here's a quote to give you the flavor: "Law enforcement officials said COPS had been a boon for area departments, with grants from the program used to hire or redeploy more than 5,400 police officers in Maryland, Virginia, and the District." A specific example of what the program means comes from Alexandria, where 14 new officers were added and the crime rate dropped more than 30 percent.

IN CASE YOU'VE BEEN PERSUADED by recent reports suggesting that Florida voters really intended to elect Bush, consider this just in from the *Palm Beach Post*: 5,330 ballots were thrown out because they were punched for both Gore and Buchanan, but only 1,131 because they were for Bush and Buchanan.

AS A GENERAL RULE OF WHITE House history, it can be said that the most sought-after office space in the building has been on the first floor, because that's where the president is. But arguably the two most powerful members of the Bush team, Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, have chosen offices on the second floor. You'll also notice that in White House meetings, Rove is rarely shown at front and center, but usually out

of the way, a little off to the side. I like both his choice of offices and where he sits in meetings. The only disquieting news is that he's traded in what he described as the beat-up heap he drove in Texas for a metallic-blue Jaguar. That's not the custom with the wilier Washingtonians I've known. They didn't drive cars that drew attention to themselves. Even when the car was expensive, the color was subdued.

ONE OF THE CONTINUING scandals of the federal government over the lifetime of this magazine has been the failure of its agencies to hire or train their employees for linguistic competence. Time after time, we learn of an embassy or CIA station with only a handful—and sometimes less than that—of local-language speakers. Today, according to *The New York Times*, “roughly half of the State Department’s postings are filled by people lacking the necessary language skills.” And now we find that that poor missionary’s wife and baby were slaughtered because the CIA contractor employee in the spotter plane couldn’t speak Spanish well enough to communicate with the Peruvian who, thinking the missionary’s plane was running drugs, ordered it shot down. And this was not an isolated case. A former CIA pilot told *The Washington Post*, “This is one of the fallacies of the whole program: the language barrier.” Ironically, one of the arguments long used to justify agencies contracting out government functions is that the government can obtain special competencies not possessed by its regular staff. So if the United States was going to hire a private contractor to perform the sensitive function of helping Peruvians determine what planes to shoot down, wouldn’t it have made sense to insist that the contractor’s employees speak the language of

the Peruvians?

DURING MY CHILDHOOD, moonshining was a main source of income for the residents of the hills and hollows of West Virginia and Kentucky. Now it has been replaced by marijuana. Marijuana is West Virginia’s largest cash crop according to the *Charleston Gazette*, which adds that the 38,000 plants confiscated by the authorities are “nowhere near” the 436,673 seized in Kentucky. Figures are not available for Tennessee. But that is another state in whose rural areas respect for law is tempered by a high regard for the illicit dollar, and it is also said to be in the big leagues of marijuana cultivation.

BURIED IN A LONG *Washington Post* article about the Bush White House staff was this little ray of hope for the Democrats. It seems that the growth of minority voters is “putting Republican states such as Florida, Nevada, Missouri, and Colorado within the Democrat’s grasp and is placing swing states such as New Jersey, Delaware, and Michigan out of the Republicans’ reach.” The White House figures that if minorities vote in 2004 in the same percentages they voted Democratic in 2000, their growing number will mean a Democratic voting margin of 3.5 million votes.

THE NAVY SEEMS TO HAVE swept the Greeneville disaster under the rug by compelling the retirement of Cmdr. Scott Waddle. It shouldn’t be allowed to get away with that. It is not changing the policy of encouraging civilians to go to sea on Navy ships,

even though that policy was responsible for the sinking of the Japanese trawler. We now know that the Greeneville wouldn’t even have gone to sea that day if it hadn’t been to entertain its civilian guests. If the Navy wants civilians to visit ships, allow them to do so when the ships are in port, not when they’re on duty at sea, where the needs and activities of the civilians could affect operational decisions. The U.S. Navy should not be Carnival Cruises.

WHEN FUNDS ARE authorized, appropriated, or otherwise earmarked for a laudable

government program, reporters and other observers often turn their attention elsewhere, assuming the good deed has been done. This is a mistake. Often the money is not spent wisely. Sometimes it is only partially used or not used at all. That is why it is important to follow the money and see if the intended good deed actually gets done.

This is what Somiri Segupta of *The New York Times* did with New York State’s funds that were available to help welfare recipients as they struggle to enter the world of work. The reporter found out that only \$12.5 million of the \$66 million available to help drug addicts kick the habit had been used, as was the case with only \$2 million of the \$53 million available to help welfare recipients get from homes that are often in the inner city to jobs that are often in the suburbs. It is enough to make you weep.

Transportation and addiction are the most familiar obstacles to making welfare reform work. Truly concerned bureaucrats would have been eager to make the fullest use of every last dollar. What was their excuse? The fed-

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eral government, they complained, hadn't told them how they could spend the money until April 1999. That was two years and two months ago. What have they been doing in the meantime?

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HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF Chinese planes were buzzing around Catalina or Nantucket on spy missions? I haven't seen the slightest sign that anyone in our foreign-policy establishment is asking that question in attempting to understand the Chinese reaction to Hainan. Empathy for the other side, asking how we would feel in their shoes, is one of the keys to avoiding war. Just read Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* to see how failures of empathy contributed to the horrible slaughter during WW I. And remember that it was John and Robert Kennedy's empathy for Khrushchev's problem with our missiles on his Turkish border that helped resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis peacefully.

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AS SOME OF YOU MAY HAVE heard, the May issue was my last as editor of this magazine. I'll continue writing this column, but the rest of the pages will be in the good hands of Paul Glastris. Paul was a much-loved and respected intern and editor here during the 1980s, then went to *U.S. News & World Report*, where he served as Chicago and Berlin correspondent and worked in Washington with other *Monthly* alumni, including James Fallows,

Timothy Noah, Matthew Cooper, and Steven Waldman. Then he joined the Clinton White House speech writing team with Michael Waldman who, of course, is another former *Monthly* intern. So Paul is no stranger. He will keep alive the best of the *Monthly*'s traditions as he places his own unique imprint on its content.

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readers, who have been so loyal and so helpful—sending us everything from article ideas to clippings that provided items for this column and “Tidbits and Outrages” to those wonderfully absurd “Memos of the Month.”

For the next issue, I promise “Tilting” will return to its usual policy of avoiding long items. But I would like to devote the rest of this column to reflections on what we've tried to do over the last 32-plus years.

The *Monthly* was in many ways a part of larger social movements and of trends in other magazines that were started in the latter half of the 1960s. Neo-conservatives used *The Public Interest* to question liberal orthodoxy with research from the social sciences. *The New York*

Review of Books became a platform for provocative analysis and opinion from the left. And *New York* magazine used “the new journalism” with its reliance on interview and observation to give life and color to the bare bones of just-the-facts reporting.

These influences were evident in the *Monthly*. We tried to offer provocative analysis and opinion but we based it not only on the library, but also on interview and observation. Because our main subject, government, could be heavy going for many readers, we were especially determined to bring the liveliness and fun of the new journalism to our pages. And perhaps a bit more than these other publications, we sought not only to describe problems but also to find solutions for them.

When we started, our immodest purpose was to show the rest of the press how to cover government. Our original staff all came from the Peace Corps, where we thought we had developed ways of getting a clearer picture than outside reporters of what was going right and wrong in a government agency.

Our guiding principles were two. First, talk to the people who really know what is going on, usually the middle- and lower-level staff who are either at the point where the rubber meets the road or closer to it than the big shots and p.r. people too many reporters of that era relied on. Second, examine the culture of the agency to determine the institutional pressures that cause good or bad results in the field. An example in the case of the Peace Corps was the pressure to get large numbers of volunteers overseas quickly, which often meant undertrained young men and women were sent to jobs that didn't exist.

The first principle was not original with us although, alas, far too few reporters seemed devot-

ed to its practice. The second principle was original. Back then, only a handful of anthropologists applied the concept of culture to modern organizations, and it was almost totally novel to journalism.

In our first issue, we had articles examining the culture of Congress ("What Happens to a Senator's Day," by James Boyd), of the bureaucracy ("The Special Assistant," by Russell Baker and myself), and of the press ("Political Reporters in Presidential Politics," by David Broder). Including the press was the first step in our rapid realization that the pressures that operated inside government were often influenced by outside organizations. So quickly we began to look at lobbyists and the organizations that hired them. And, of course, we soon saw that the values of people in government were determined by the values of the broader culture. Within little more than a year, we found ourselves participating in the sexual revolution as we attacked the cult of masculinity and the role it played in bad decisions in Vietnam. And, as early as the second issue, we had begun our assault on the smug complacencies of our new ruling class, the meritocratic elite, with "Diplomacism: How We Zone People," by David Hapgood. (That assault was continued over the years, most notably in articles by Nicholas Lemann, culminating in his recent book, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*.)

The impact of the broader culture on government became even more troubling when the idealism of the '60s was replaced by the selfishness of the Me decade and the orgy of greed that followed in the '80s and '90s. Perhaps our most spectacular failure as a magazine was our inability, despite constant attempts, to inspire a rebirth of the kind of idealism that had been such a vital

force for good in the '30s and '60s. Cynicism has become a far more powerful force than idealism in recent years. But I remain hopeful that good journalism of the kind the *Monthly* has tried to inspire, exemplified most recently in the portraits of welfare reform by Jason DeParle and Katherine Boo, will ultimately lead to a new kind of realistic idealism, one that does not gild lilies but faces the toughest problems confronting the attainment of our goals of liberty, justice, and a fair chance for all.

Realistic idealism is another way of saying neoliberalism, the political philosophy developed by this magazine. In some ways, that philosophy has triumphed. Our aim of getting liberals to accept the good ideas of conservatives has been achieved. In the early '70s, far too many liberals were too soft on violent crime and welfare cheats, and were automatically anti-military, anti-business, and anti-religion. Today, few are guilty of any of these attitudes. But neoliberalism had one other hope. It was that, as we accepted what was good about conservatism, conservatism would accept what was good about liberalism. But as the 1980s turned into the 1990s, conservatives became more stridently self-righteous. It's hard to find the compassion in George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism, and can you imagine Tom DeLay ever using the word except scornfully?

So in reaction, there's been less neo and more liberalism in the *Monthly* in the last decade as

we have fought for health and education programs that will work for everyone and as we have taken on the know-nothings on the right who seem to oppose all government except the military and the police. Bill Clinton seemed to have turned the tide against those conservatives after the government shut-down in 1995, reminding millions of Americans that they need government.

But make no mistake: The right-wingers may sound a tad more reasonable—but they are still up to no good. Now, their technique is to starve agencies by cutting taxes and underfunding them. Just last month we pointed out how the Food and Drug Administration

needs not less, but more money to protect us. Poor schools need immense sums to have a fair chance when they are held accountable by George Bush. Billions more are needed for health care and infrastructure—from runways to roads to mass transit right down to the sewers under the street.

What I fear is that liberals are too fat and happy to do more than just say the right things and introduce the right bills, without the fire and determination to get them passed. To derail the DeLays, we need the passion of the 1930s and the 1960s. One thing I do know is that Paul Glas-tris will bring that passion to the pages of *The Washington Monthly*, which is why I believe, and know you will soon join me in believing, that Paul is the right person to entrust with this magazine's future. ●

**I was once asked
what my last
words would be as
I departed this
life. I needed only
a second to say,
there would be
just one word—
"Thanks."**

The Summer of '61

It all began in the summer of '61, when the first Peace Corps volunteers left home for their assignments in Africa, Latin America, India and Pakistan on what has become one of the great American success stories of all time.

Like most successes, it began midst controversy. It was harshly denounced by the Soviet Union as yet another capitalist plot, and by some of the American media and politicians as a Democratic plot. Host countries were often wary. And there was that embarrassing postcard from one of the earliest volunteers in Nigeria who did not expect her innocent appraisal of local conditions to be read by prying officials and turned into an international cause célèbre. Young Americans, doing their best to be helpful in difficult circumstances, learned quickly about local sensitivities. The Peace Corps was an education. And still is.

Today, forty summers later, more than 7,000 volunteers are serving in 78 countries, from Armenia to Zimbabwe. Altogether, more than 160,000 volunteers have served in some 135 countries. The Peace Corps continues to inspire, to publicly affirm the better angels of the American spirit, to generate deep friendships and lasting loyalties. And yes, it remains a remarkable living legacy of a still mourned President.

One of those early volunteers is now a senior partner with our firm. His specialty is agriculture. He spent two years living with villagers in the Punjab province of India, helping them improve their crops through the miracle of the "green revolution" introduced by the

great American agronomist Norman Borlaug. He saw India transformed from a desperate importer of wheat and other grains to become a net exporter. He became a believer in what is now termed biotechnology.

At the end of his service in the Punjab, he began his journey home on an ancient British motorcycle which, with the help of a series of makeshift repairs by friendly tribesmen along the way, took him through the mountains of Pakistan's storied Khyber Pass and along the Kabul River valley of Afghanistan to that nation's capital, where the motorcycle finally expired but our Peace Corps volunteer remained, teaching English to Afghan children while saving up for the final leg of his journey home.

He will tell you that the Peace Corps was not only a great experience, but left him with a lasting admiration and love for the villagers of the Punjab, the Pakistani tribesmen who saved his life by performing miracles on his Royal Enfield, the fiercely independent people of Afghanistan. A true education in world affairs, in agricultural science, in what Carl Sandburg called "The family of man."

After returning home, Peace Corps volunteer Chris Klose became a reporter, a White House speechwriter, and an association executive. At John Adams Associates, he has worked to help stem the epidemic of malaria in developing countries. And he has continued to encourage new agricultural technologies that will help feed tomorrow's children. He has been there. He knows the issues. He helps define who we are.

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Monkey Do

Bush's White House is repeating the Clinton administration's biggest mistake.

BY BRUCE REED

IF THERE'S A SINGLE PRINCIPLE THAT motivates George W. Bush, it's that he's no Bill Clinton. As a candidate, Bush didn't find his voice until a McCain commercial in the South Carolina primary compared him to Clinton. He closed every stump speech with a pledge to restore honor and dignity to the Oval Office, raising his hand more in 18 months on the campaign trail than he must have in 18 years of school. Every move Bush has made as president—from working banker's hours to shunning the bully pulpit—seems carefully choreographed to show that the era of Bill Clinton is over.

Yet for those of us who served in the early Clinton White House, the little ways the Bush administration has tried so hard to look different are less striking than the one big way it looks familiar. A Southern governor with lots of charm but an uncertain mandate wins the presidency by promising to take his party in a new direction. Then his administration spends its first months doing everything in its power to assure his party he didn't mean it.

The Bush White House, justifiably proud of its discipline, no doubt considers it a victory to get this far without a scandal like Travelgate, a distraction like Waco. Though Bush lost one cabinet nominee over a domestic worker whose papers weren't in order, Clinton lost two.

But what nearly killed the Clinton administration in the cradle was not indiscipline and inexperience

(although we had plenty of both). On the contrary, what hurt us most was that we did everything the voices of experience in Washington advised. We rushed bills that couldn't pass but congressional Democrats wanted, such as the economic "stimulus package" which gave obstructionist Republicans their first victory. We delayed bills like campaign-finance reform and welfare reform, which Clinton had promised to pass but Hill leaders didn't want. Instead of setting out to command a broad bipartisan majority across the country, we settled for a narrow, shrinking majority of our own Democratic ranks. The American people, who had hoped for better, took us to the woodshed in the 1994 elections.

One might have expected George W. Bush, whose political career got off the ground in the 1994 election, to recall that object lesson. After all, not even the Supreme Court could have elected Bush president if he hadn't run as a different kind of Republican out to change the tone in Washington.

Alas, it seems that some things never change. If the Bush team was ever sincere about putting country before party, it didn't take long to revert to form. On the defining issues so far—tax cuts, the budget, the environment, campaign reform—the man who promised to "trust the people" has deferred to his partisan base in Washington every time. Even as Bush has labored mightily not to make any of Clinton's early mistakes, he may be making the most important one of all.

Why don't new administrations know what's good for them? What kind of pressure could take an administration from promising to "leave no child behind" one day to easing arsenic standards the next?

BRUCE REED, formerly Bill Clinton's domestic policy adviser, is now president of the Democratic Leadership Council.