

An Insider's View of the Iowa Capitol

by *Bill Witt*

My love of writing with light—photography—began with fascination at the beauty of light itself: my first clear memory is of lying on a polished oak floor, arranging and rearranging clear plastic toy blocks and an empty water glass to fashion patterns of early morning sunlight and send them flashing and arcing across the golden expanse of the wood. I had just turned two.

A decade later, I discovered in an old, folding roll-film camera a highly serviceable tool for satisfying my growing curiosity about my surroundings and the people I encountered. With a camera in hand, I could ask friends and strangers alike to share some of their time with me, while I asked questions and recorded them and their doings on film.

When at 23 I went to Afghanistan with the Peace Corps, my two cameras became keys that opened the gates to a new world of faces, labors, customs, language, and landscapes to me. Photography changed from an interest to a passion as I sought to explore, experience, record, and understand all I could of the Afghans.

I returned home to Iowa in

late spring of 1975, and there was nothing for me to do but become a professional social explorer, communicator, and meaning-seeker: I began working as writer and photographer on a small newspaper and soon added freelance magazine work to my portfolio. A 12-year stint in public relations at the University of Northern Iowa commenced in the fall of 1980, and I continued magazine freelance work.

I also became a citizen-advocate, a volunteer for such causes as environmental protection and the rights of the elderly, disabled, and mentally ill.

In June 1992 I discovered that I could approach strangers without a camera and ask to talk with them: I launched my first campaign as a candidate for the Iowa House of Representatives. Over the course of five months, I knocked on almost 8,000 doors and filled a succession of pocket-size books with notes and comments from the people I hoped to work for in Des Moines. At some point, I began carrying a pocket-size camera, too, an Olympus XA4, loaded with black-and-white film. As always, sooner or later I gave my photo subjects copies of the images I had made of them.

In that 1992 race, every vote

counted. Nearly 14,000 votes were cast that election day—and three weeks later, just before Thanksgiving, the final count showed I had won by 17.

As I had discovered myself in a new world in Afghanistan, so too did I find I'd entered a new world as a member of the Iowa legislature, and it wasn't long before I began shooting low-key images of new surroundings, faces, and customs. During the first few years, I made relatively few pictures, but as my colleagues got more used to me and my propensity to pull a camera from my desk drawer, and as I understood more about them and the ways of legislative culture, I took more and more frames.

My medium was black and white, my favorite "dialect" of the photographic language. On request, I would also record special events for my colleagues with color film.

In time, I expanded my photo explorations, photographing the Capitol itself, showing quiet, recondite places the public never sees, or the work of janitors and maintenance people whom the public sees, but seldom notices. And I photographed the citizens themselves, who came as visitors or lobbyists, or whom I encoun-

**Right: Light and shadow play off
statuary in the Iowa Capitol.**



Hammering out a budget deal late at night in the Speaker's Conference Room, April 1994, are (left to right) Rep. Pat Murphy, Ranking Member on the House Appropriations Committee; Rep. Ron Corbett, House Appropriations chair; Senator Larry Murphy (back to camera), Senate Appropriations chair; and an unidentified staff member.

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Several weeks later, I filed the last batch of negatives and contact sheets and counted them. In ten years, I had put nearly 200 rolls of Tri-X film through my cameras—more than 6,000 frames. This is therefore a very small selection of those images, and I hope at some point to be able to publish a more representative one. I will always be grateful for the patience and generosity of the hundreds of people who allowed me to record and interpret the life and the work we shared.



The Legislative Mail Room is little changed in 122 years. Mail is sorted by each member's "seat number." The slots numbered above 100 on the right side of the photo recall the pre-1960s era, when state representatives were elected by county, and the most populous counties had two or more.



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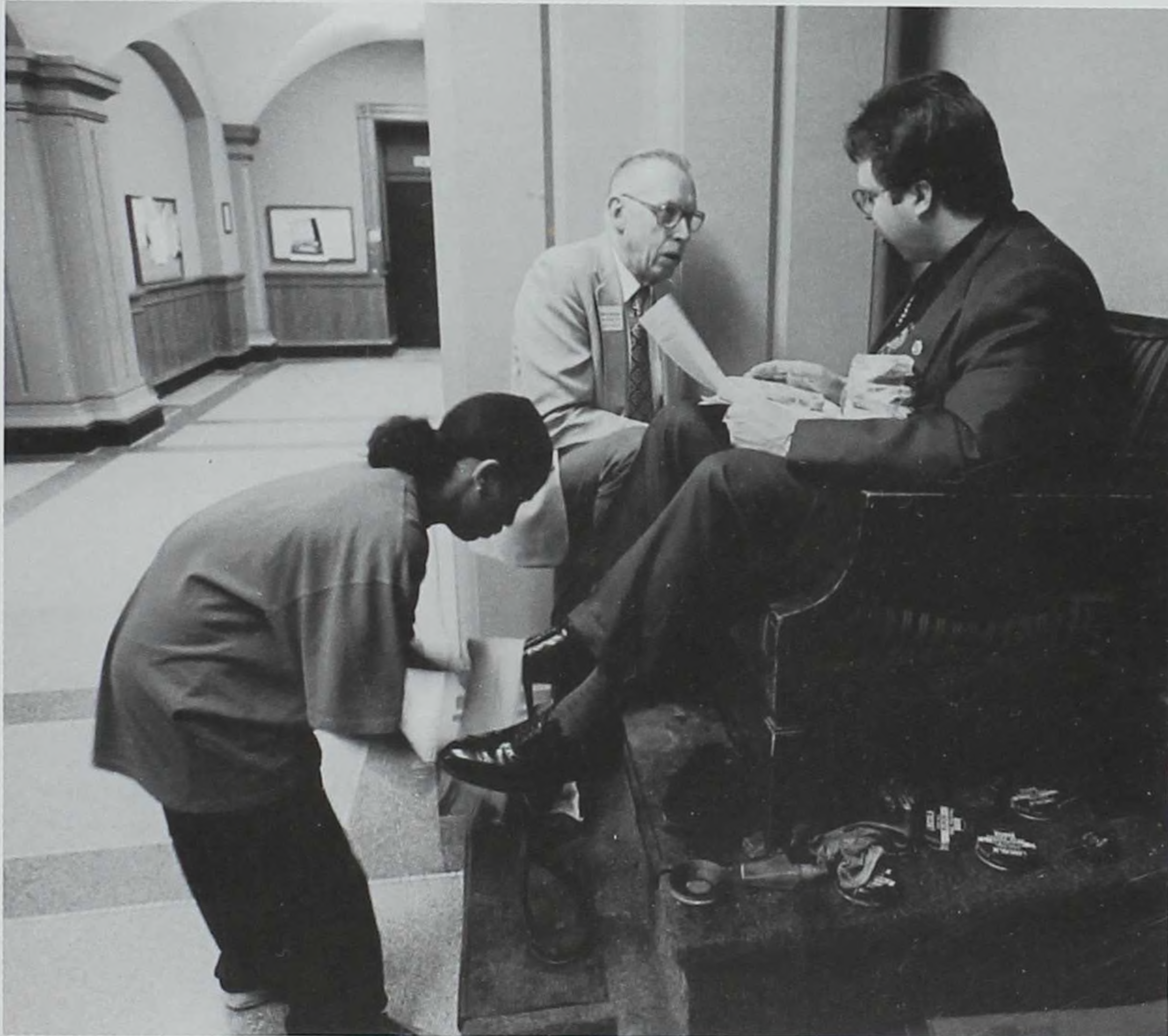
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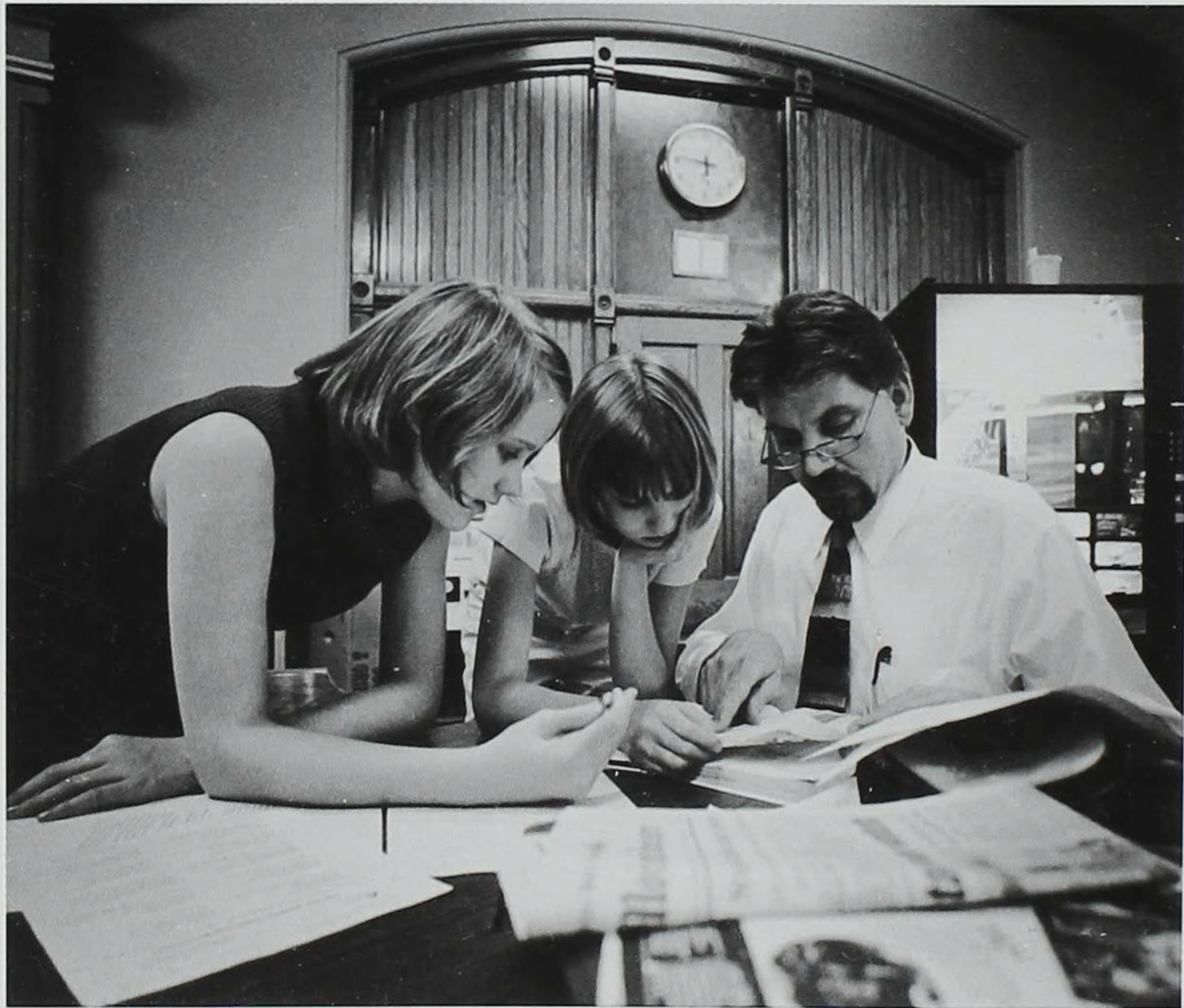
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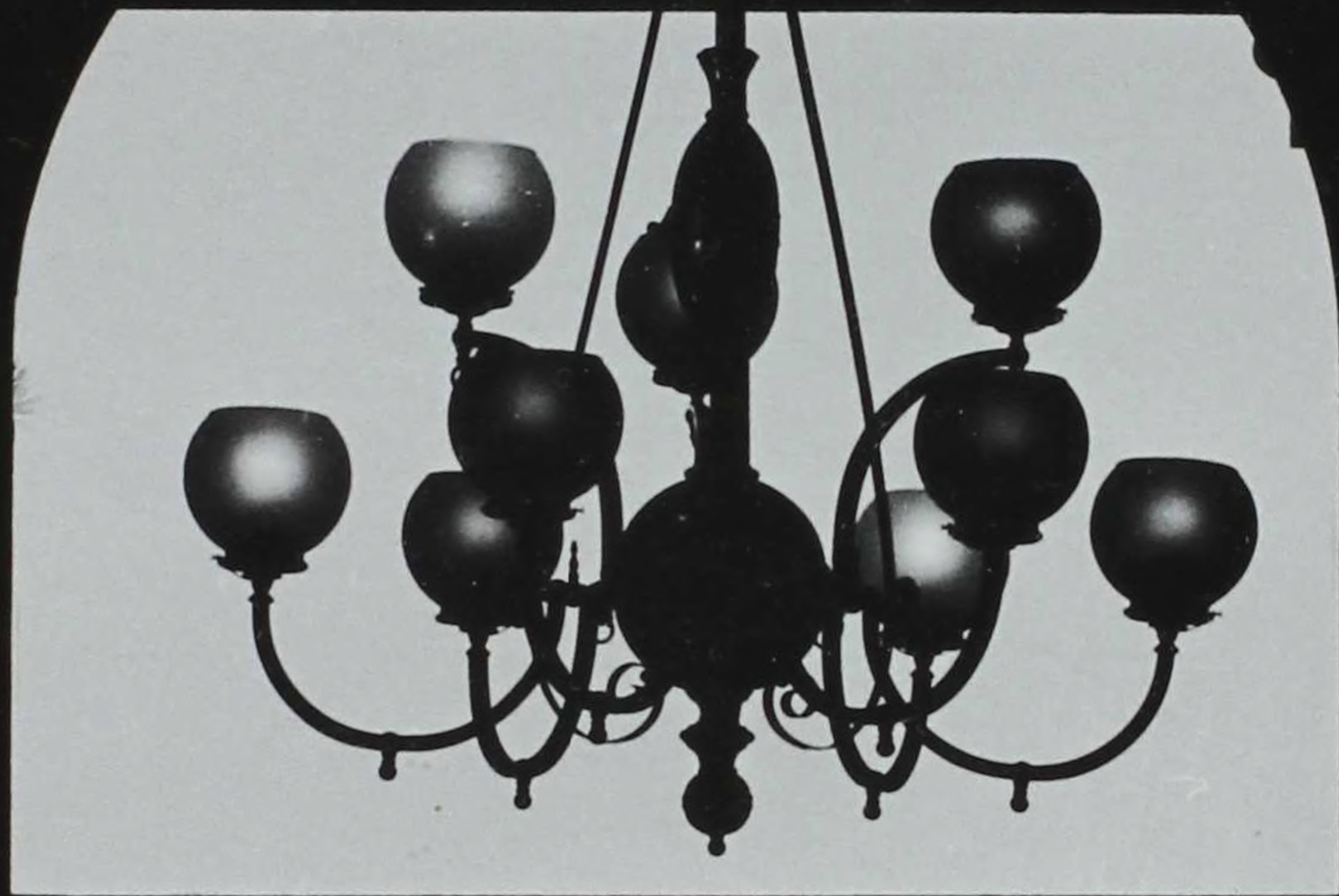
“Multi-tasking” ability is a must for legislators. Here, in March 2001, Rep. Todd Taylor gets a shoeshine while grabbing a bite of lunch, studying a briefing paper, and listening to a visiting constituent in the Capitol’s lower level.

Rep. Pam Jochum’s daughter, Sarah, was born with a rare chromosomal defect, Ring 22 Syndrome, which led to mental retardation and other developmental disabilities. Jochum, as a divorced single parent, has continued caring for Sarah at home, bringing her to live in Des Moines during the legislative sessions. Here, in April 1996, Sarah, seated at her mother’s desk in the House chamber, gets an affectionate nuzzle. Jochum reports that “Sarah’s now a working woman” employed in a sheltered workshop and that she still visits the Capitol from time to time.



Here in the Capitol's basement cafeteria, during a supertime lull in floor debate, John Pederson helps his daughters with homework assignments. He was then the Attorney General's legislative liaison for the Department of Natural Resources.

Opposite: Ten full-time workers met the Capitol's day-to-day maintenance and custodial needs.



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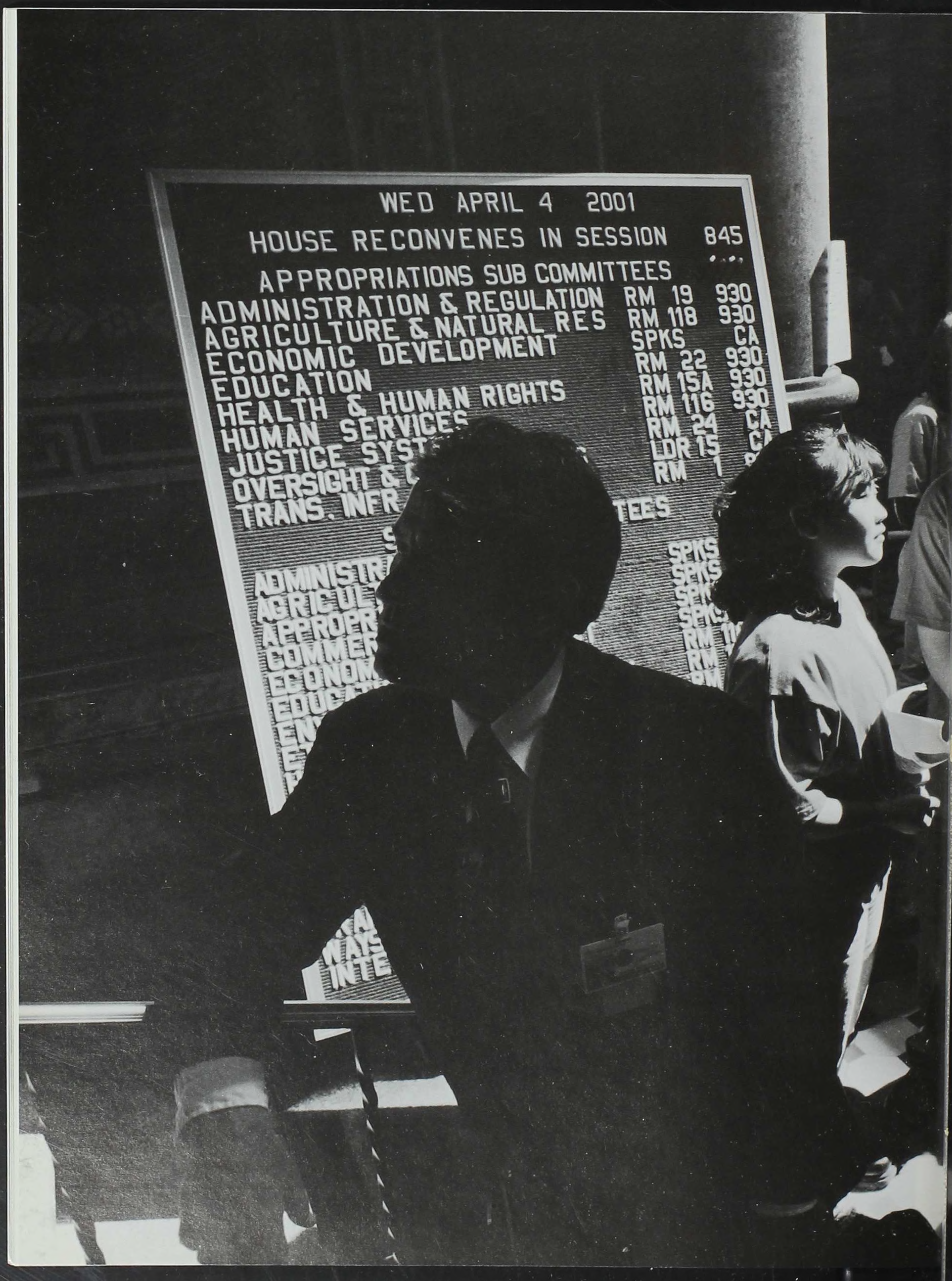
HOUSE RECONVENES IN SESSION 845

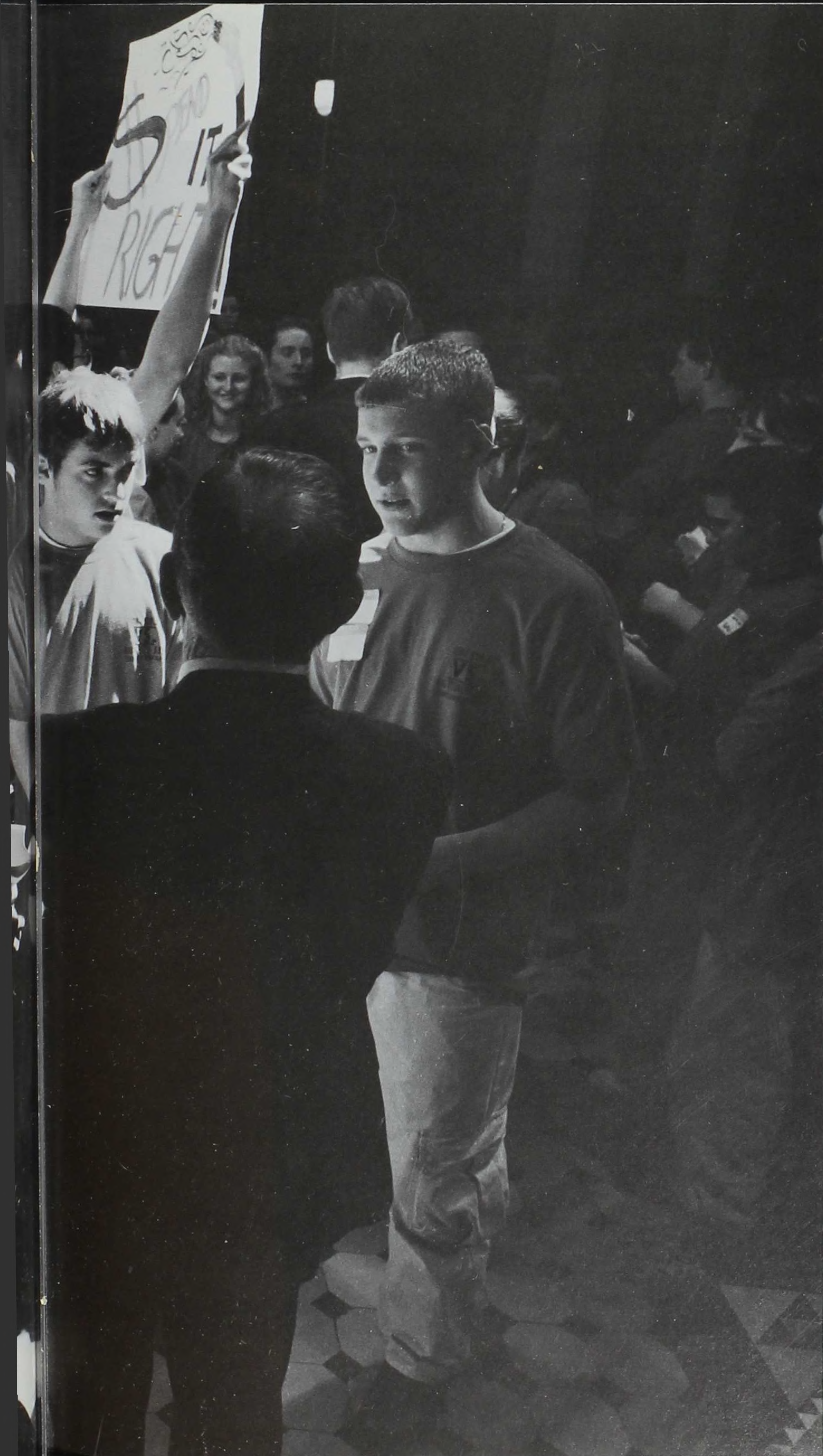
APPROPRIATIONS SUB COMMITTEES

ADMINISTRATION & REGULATION	RM 19	930
AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RES	RM 118	930
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	SPKS	CA
EDUCATION	RM 22	930
HEALTH & HUMAN RIGHTS	RM 15A	930
HUMAN SERVICES	RM 116	930
JUSTICE SYSTEM	RM 24	CA
OVERSIGHT &	LDR 15	CA
TRANS. INFRA	RM 1	CA

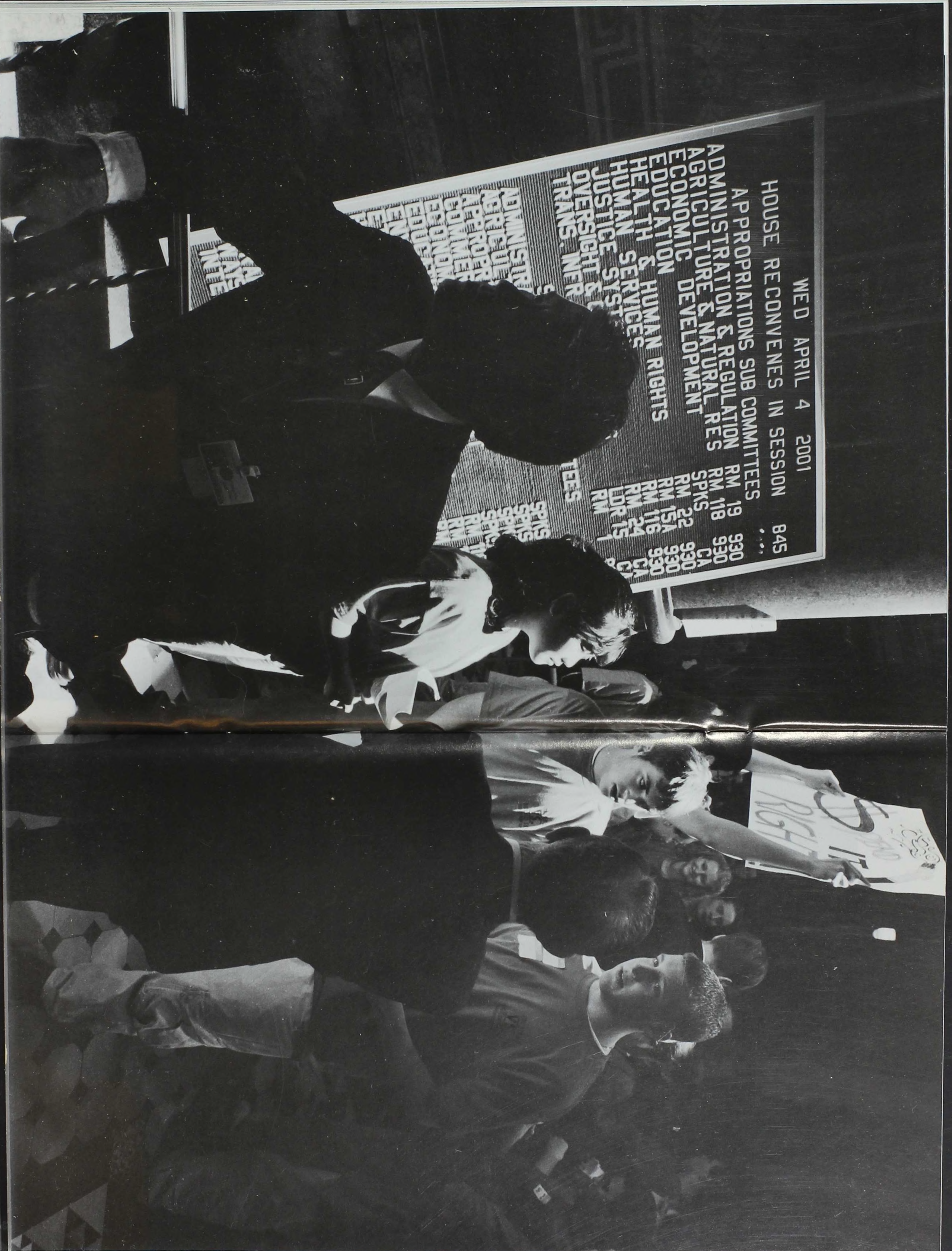
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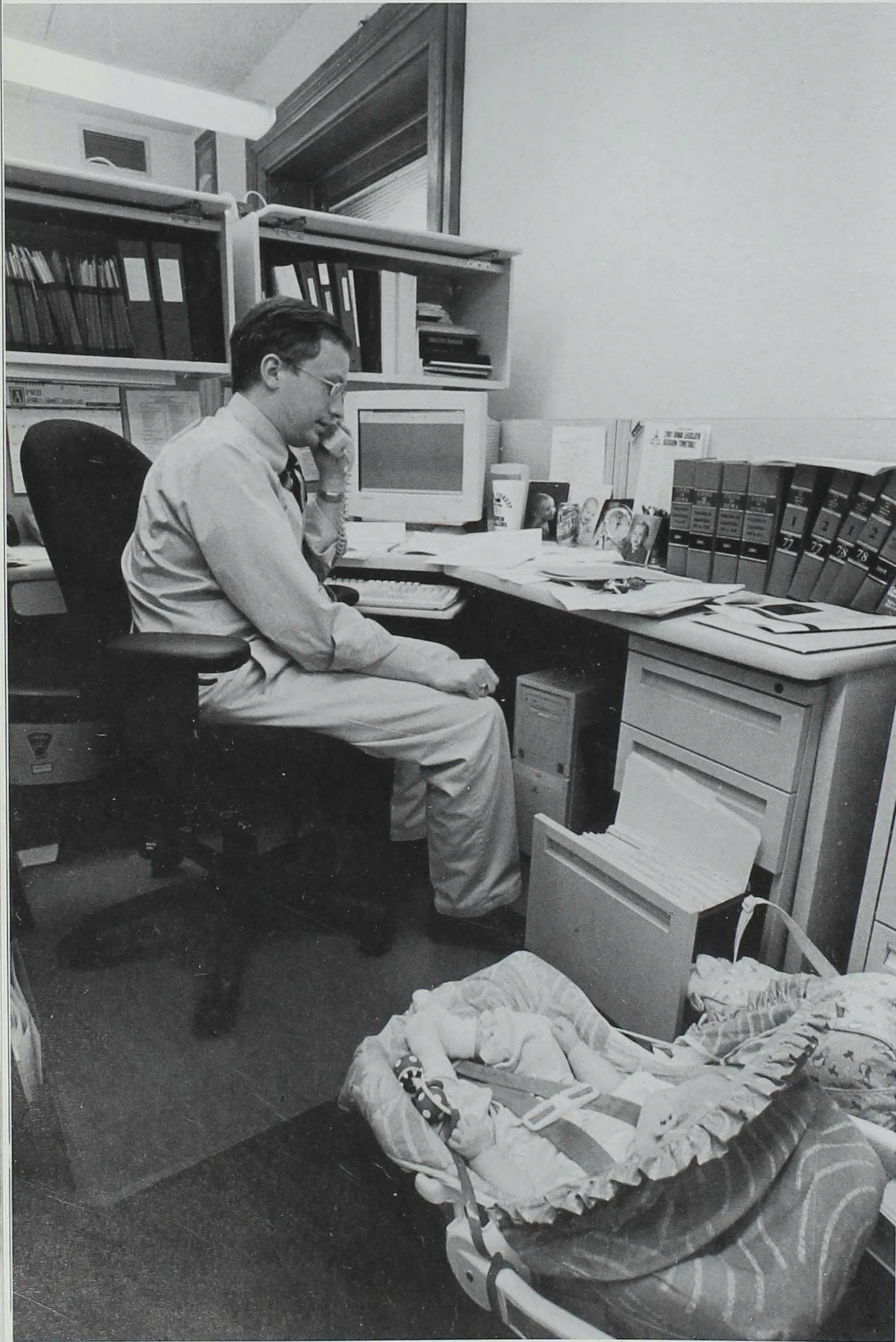
Each working day of the session, legislators have the opportunity to invite pastors from their home districts to offer the opening prayer as **Minister of the Day**. The prayers are usually earnest and brief. But once a year the Rev. Robert Connors, brother of Rep. John Connors, would rouse the chamber with a rollicking set of gospel songs. Here in March 2001 are (left to right) Senator Matt McCoy, Rev. Connors, Rep. John Connors, and House Speaker Brent Siegrist.







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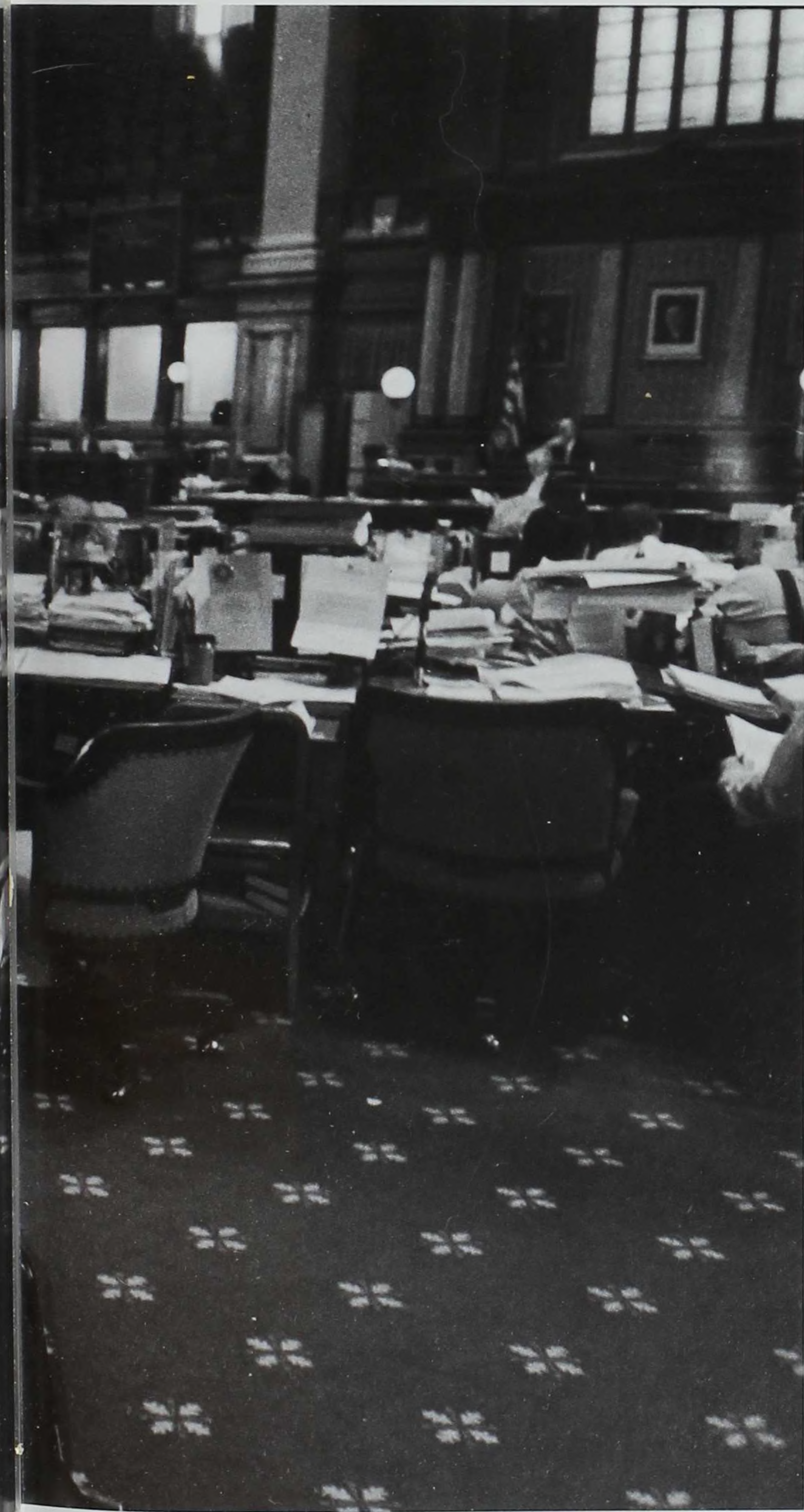


Legislative Service Bureau (LSB) staff members specialize in drafting bills and amendments for senators and representatives. Each is an expert in a particular area of state law and policy. During the closing weeks of each legislative session—as floor debate intensifies, deals are struck, and hundreds of amendments and dozens of amended bills fly back and forth between the two chambers—LSB staffers are on call almost 24 hours a day. Here, while his daughter Courtney sleeps, Tim McDermott talks with a bill's floor manager (2000 or 2001).



School and church choir traditions are one of the minor glories of Iowa culture. A large, skilled, and well-rehearsed choir—comprising legislators, their clerks, staff members, and lobbyists—is featured at a memorial service held every other year to commemorate former legislators and staff who have died in the preceding two years. The candlelit service is held on a spring evening in the House chamber, and the singers practice for weeks in advance. Here, in March 2001, Senator Mark Shearer rehearses the choir.

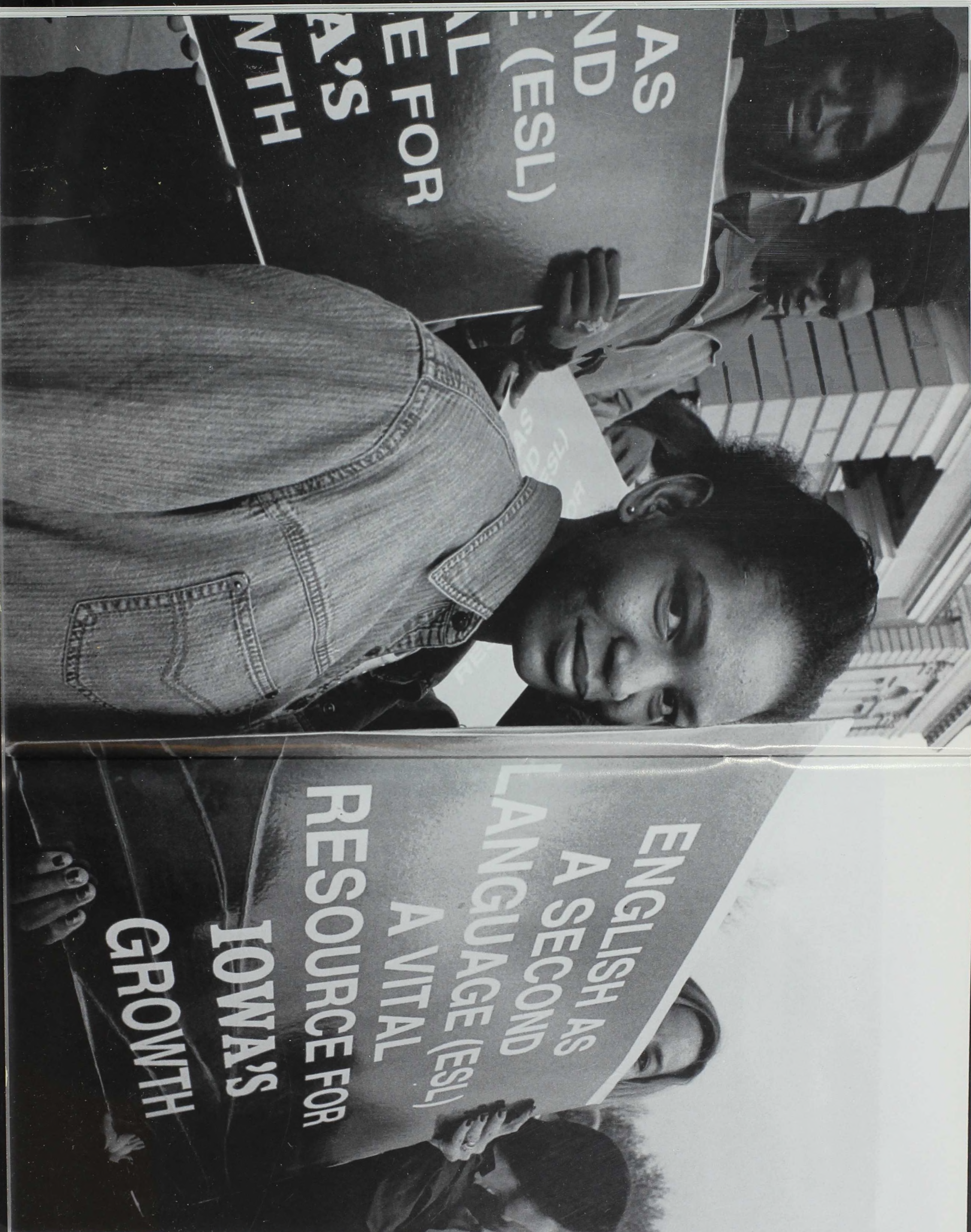




Passage of the Personal Assistance Services Bill was a landmark for Iowans with disabilities, not only because it established the state of Iowa as a national leader in this area. It was also the first time that disabled Iowans actually witnessed debate from the House floor. Previously, citizens in wheelchairs could only listen to debate by way of the public address system in the House lounge; the galleries were not accessible to those in wheelchairs. Here, in 1995, advocates from the Iowa Systems Change Congress, led by Nancy Witt and Carl Gobb, leave the chamber following the historic 96-0 vote.



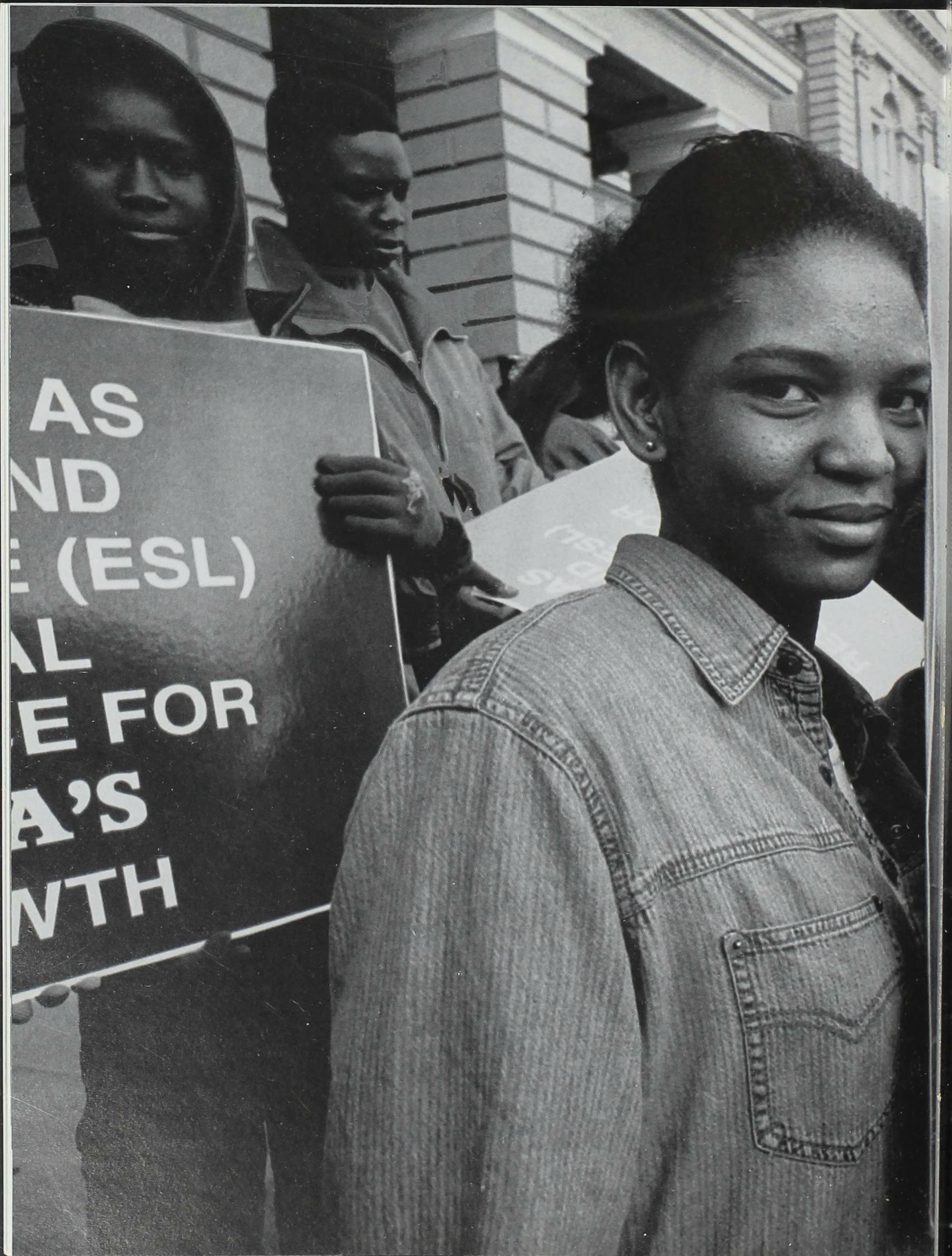
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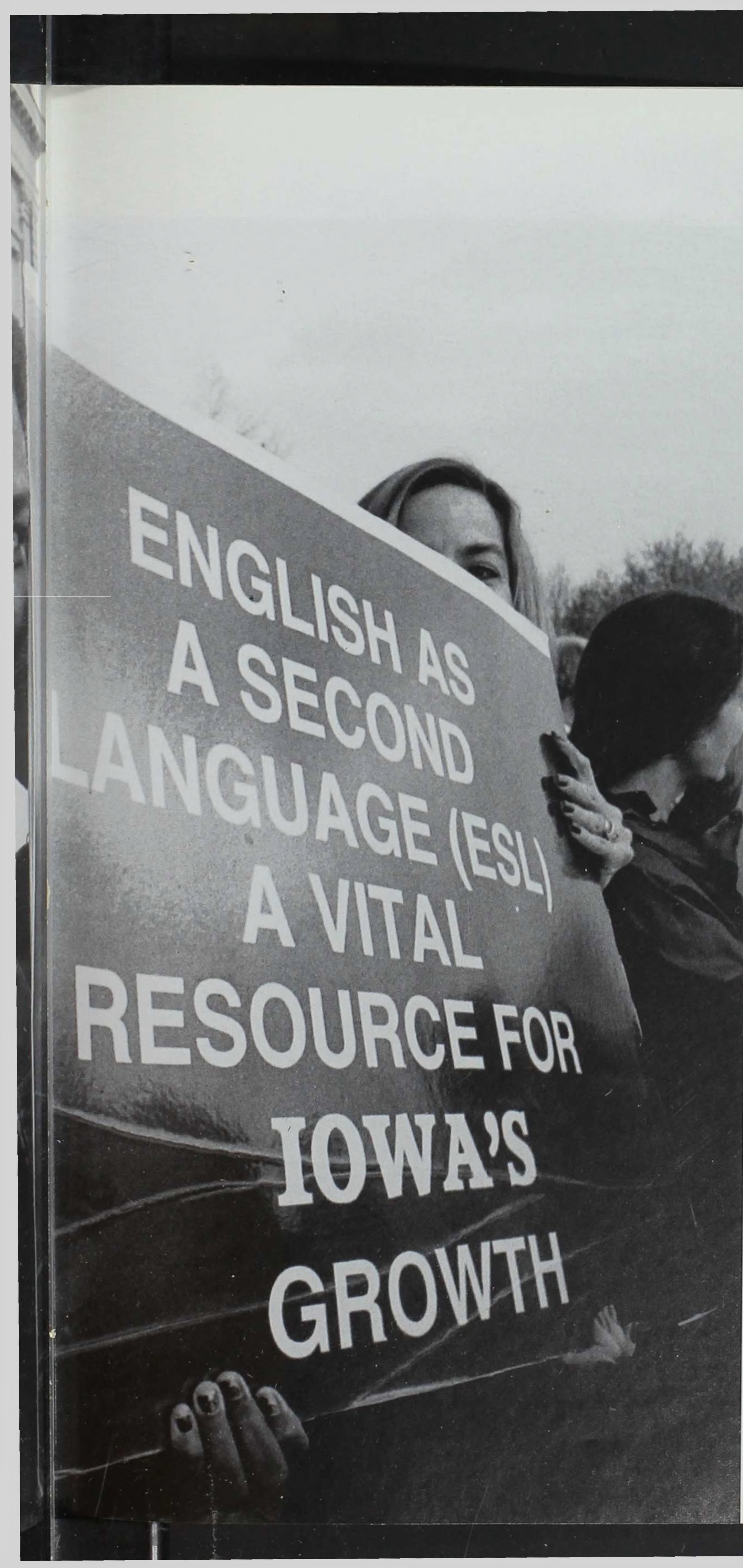


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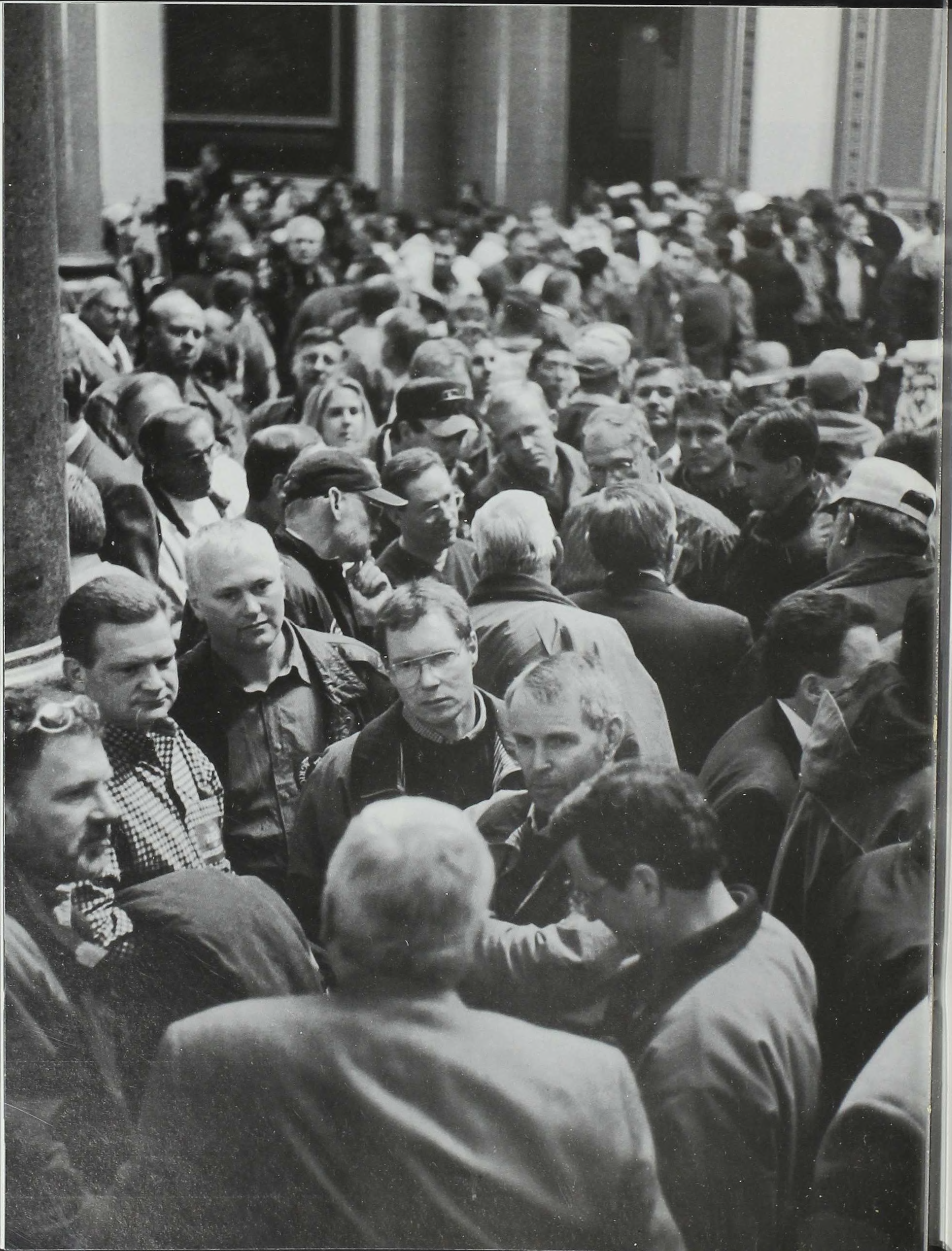




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Late in the 2002 session, independent pork producers held their convention in Ames. When rumors began circulating that the so-called 12 Apostles, a bipartisan group of legislators who had worked for months behind the scenes on CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation) issues, were about to release their long-awaited bill, hundreds of farmers drove to the Capitol and jammed the second-floor rotunda.



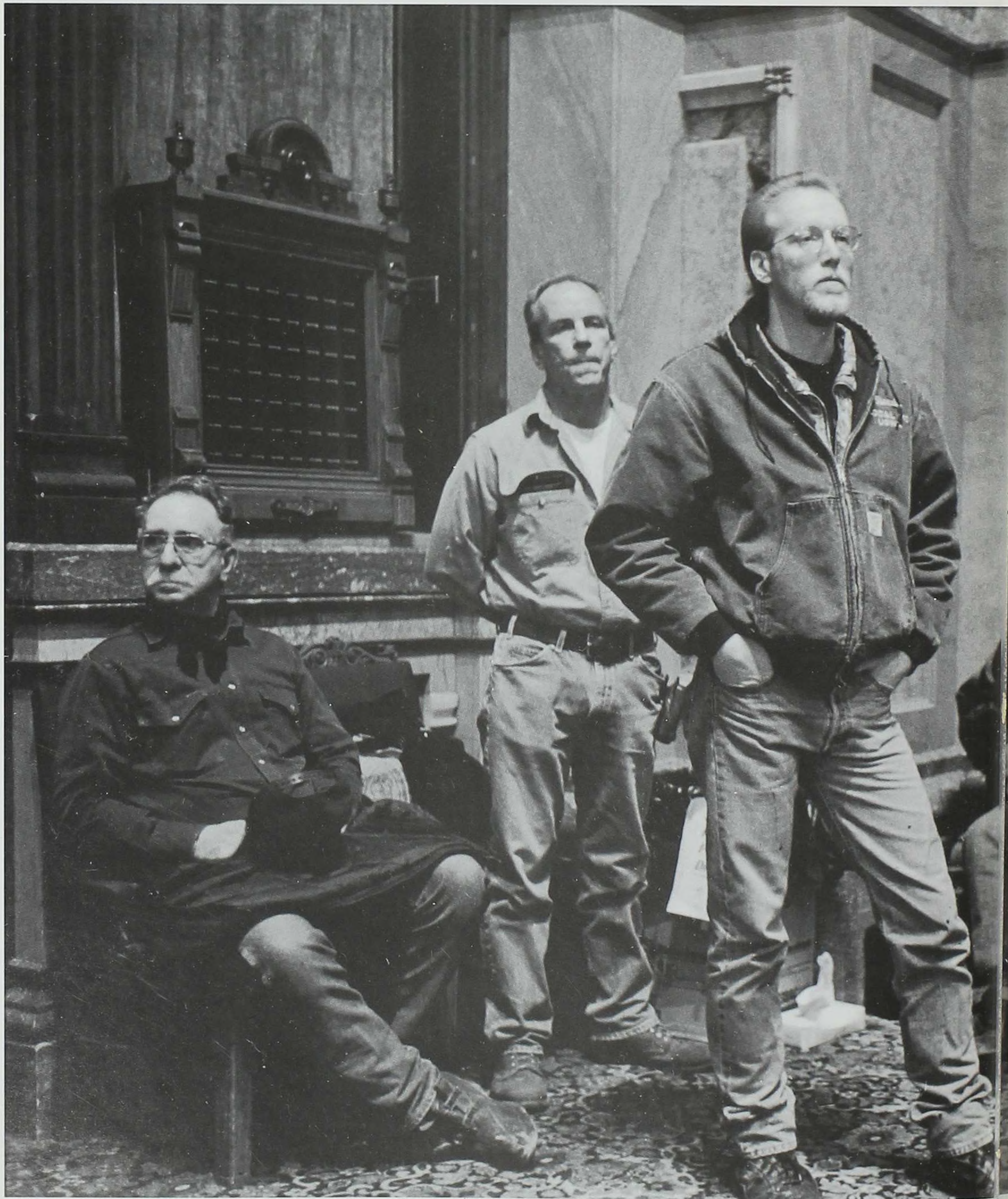
Lobbying can be hard work, and after a long session of helping her mom advocate for more support for the arts in February 2001, this young lobbyist was ready for some comfort and reassurance.





Iowa's "Bottle Bill" is once again under pressure from opponents who want it repealed. Photographed during the 2000 session, this retired farmer leaves no doubt where he stands on the issue.

Left: The Dove Hunting Bill was emotionally trying. Legislators were swamped with letters, calls, and e-mails pro and con. The "Dove Dancers" from Fairfield took a different approach. They spent an afternoon performing "dances of peace and compassion" outside Governor Tom Vilsack's office, in hopes that he would veto the bill, which had passed narrowly. The dancers were onto something: Vilsack shot the measure down—with his veto pen.





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After a late-running debate in January 1993, we legislators came out of the Capitol to find freezing mist shellacking our cars. Partisanship was forgotten as we helped one another chip and scrape the ice off windshields. Before I turned on the ignition, I braced my camera on my car's luggage rack to make this image.

Author and photographer Bill Witt served five terms in the Iowa House of Representatives, representing Cedar Falls and Hudson in Black Hawk County. Following his retirement in 2002, he returned to full-time employment at the University of Northern Iowa, where he is the Special Projects Assistant in the Division of Business and Community Services. He has worked as a freelance magazine writer and photographer since 1978. Witt has recently donated many of his photographs to the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).