

# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Spring 1988

## Prairie Dog: Commentary

Bored? Irritable?

Checking C-Span every twenty minutes in search of a presidential campaign fix? Wish a reporter or pollster would call? Miss those personal notes from total strangers praising Paul Simon?

Here's what happened while you were looking for yourself in the crowd on the ten o'clock news, or worrying about who was most electable, or

pondering the mysteries of the *Des Moines Register's* political coverage.

The Iowa City Council determined that it has enough money to re-open the public library on

Thursday nights and Fridays. Despite the city manager's claim that the city faced a budget deficit of nearly a million dollars, money has been found for additional library staff. This came as a pleasant surprise to those who had swallowed the city's line that a local sales tax or an enormous property tax increase were the library's only hopes.

DSA-endorsed Council candidate Karen Kubby had campaigned vigorously on the issue of full funding for the library. Council members, including Kubby's victorious opponent Randy Larson, voted in favor of the re-opening.

The Johnson County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to bill Iowa City for the cost of the sales tax ballot, but later agreed to share the expense. The supervisors were less generous with elected county officials and deputies, opting to slice 66 2/3% off the Compensation Board's recommended salary increase.

When rural taxpayers saw their taxes rise in past years, they were quick to question the salaries of public employees. This year, rural property owners received a 10% tax cut, but none were heard to suggest that county employees might de-

serve more than the 2 1/2% average wage hike granted by the supervisors.

On the legislative front, Representatives Dvorsky and Neuhauser each introduced proposals for a local option income tax. Senator Varn sponsored a bill to prevent censorship of student newspapers, and assisted in fashioning a reasonably sensitive and sensible AIDS bill. Senator Lloyd-Jones guided a state anti-apartheid divestment bill through committee. Representative Doderer provided the best quote of the session: "This legislature hasn't done anything for the last two or three years

but pro-business bills."

Congressman Dave Nagle has compiled a respectable voting record, with good ratings from AFSCME and the ACLU, and he is keeping in touch with his constituents. Many were grumbling, however, about Nagle's decision to vote for so-called humanitarian aid to the contras. Most Democrats bought into Speaker Wright's tortuous rationalizations that such action would stave off a more sinister Republican aid bill, but Pat Schroeder, Ron Dellums, and Nagle's senior colleague Neal Smith were among those who chose to just say no.

Thanks to the protests of local activists and students last October, the CIA cancelled spring recruiting at the University of Iowa. A few days after the cancellation, a jury of their peers found the protesters not guilty of criminal trespass. Iowa City is a Nuclear-Free Zone—maybe the time has also come to declare it a CIA-Free Zone.

*More on page 4*

*THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE* is edited by members of the Iowa City Local of The Democratic Socialists of America, 112 S. Dodge, Iowa City, IA 52240. Editors for this issue: Jeff Cox & Gary Sanders. Each article represents the views of the author, and not those of the editors or DSA. We welcome articles and responses to articles written from any point of view whatsoever. Subscription per calendar year: \$5. Contributions of money are always welcome.

Labor donated.

COMMENTARY BY  
PRAIRIE DOG:

*Welcome back to the  
wonderful world of  
local politics!*

**"Call it what you may, call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all of God's children."**

*— Martin Luther King  
in 1965 speech to Negro American Labor Council*

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# What's Wrong With Means-Testing?

by Jeff Cox

Despite Bruce Babbitt's disastrous showing in the presidential race, one of his central ideas shows signs of becoming a fad. That idea is the "means testing" of all government programs. Senator Kennedy has introduced legislation which would introduce means-tested pre-school programs for four year-olds into our public schools, and our Johnson County legislators are working for a similar program at the state level. Good liberal Democrats in Congress can be heard complaining that social security benefits go to people who don't need them.

The notion that government benefits should only go to those people who need them has an irresistible common sense appeal. But the concept is now being applied in a simplistic way to all sorts of social problems without any consideration of the problems caused by means-testing.

This approach is most evident in discussions of the elderly. Social security recipients have been the target of a barrage of ill-tempered criticism in the press for their greed in defending social security benefits. Columnists are shocked to discover that some of these benefits go to people who don't need them. The alleged affluence of the elderly is somehow linked with the growth of poverty among children as if one were the cause of the other. Commentators frequently advocate means-testing of social security benefits in order to free up resources for children.

These arguments miss the main lesson to be learned from the social security program. It is our only successful public welfare program, successful in the sense of actually reducing the number of elderly people in poverty. It is successful precisely because benefits go to those who do not need them as well as those who do. Social security recipients are all treated like citizens. The stigma

of means-testing, which is an inevitable feature of it, does not exist in the social security program. Furthermore, the morass of rules and regulations which attempt to guarantee that every recipient of means-tested aid is "truly needy" do not exist in the social security program.

Consider the contrast with our social programs for children. We have AFDC and WIC and food stamps and medicaid and housing vouchers and free school lunches and waivers of school textbook fees and free hearing tests and the Head Start pre-school program and more. It is no exaggeration to say that a poor person would need an accountant to take full advantage of the means-tested programs available for his or her children. Yet all of these well-meaning liberal programs have failed to deal with the problem of poverty among children, which is growing.

These means-tested programs are a failure, first of all, because no matter how well designed, they never reach all of the people who need help. The Women's Infants and Children's nutrition program has never reached even 15% of the children in poverty. Medicaid reaches about 40% of the people in poverty while tens of millions of Americans lack health insurance and two out of three black children have no family doctor. Food stamps go to about half of the households in poverty. Iowa's Democratic legislators who are fighting for increased benefits for AFDC, the classic "welfare" program, should keep in mind that it reaches fewer than half of the children in Iowa who live in poverty.

It is difficult to name a single means-tested program which reaches even half of the people who do not have enough money to support their children. One of the

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Means-Testing (con't.)

reasons for this dilemma is easy to understand for anyone who has dealt with a means-tested program from the recipient's point of view. All of these programs are hedged in with restrictions designed to restrict access to the "truly needy." The bureaucrats and social workers in charge are obliged both to serve the poor and protect the interests of the hard-working taxpayer. Consequently, many people in need either don't meet the requirements, don't know how to meet them, are led to believe that they don't meet them even if they do, or are deterred by the bureaucratic presumption that they are trying to get something which they don't deserve.

Means-testing sounds simple to a well-meaning liberal, but in reality it is hopelessly complicated. Add to

that the stigma associated with "welfare", a stigma which no amount of liberal good will can erase, and the hopeless inefficiency of means-testing should be evident to anyone. As a consequence of this inefficiency, children are poor and hungry.

The alternative to means-testing is the universal social entitlement, which the European social democracies have been using for decades. These programs are not only more efficient, they also treat all citizens as equals, a principle not only of socialism but of the American Declaration of Independence. Universal entitlements, such as free public educa-

tion, teach children that they are equal citizens of the Republic.

Means-tested programs, on the other hand, reinforce the stigma of poverty and teach children that they are not equal to other children. Bruce Babbitt and his liberal allies give us a vision of the future in which Americans are divided into two groups: taxpaying citizens who are all created equal, and government-dependent paupers subject to inefficient bureaucratic regulations and the contempt of their neighbors.

## Democratic Socialists of America

YES, I want to subscribe to *Prairie Progressive* for 1988 (\$5). \_\_\_\_\_

YES, I want to be on Iowa City DSA's mailing list in 1988 (\$5). \_\_\_\_\_

Iowa City DSA local dues 1988 (both *PP* and other mailings) (\$10) \_\_\_\_\_

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# Prairie Dog Continues

Readers of the *Prairie Progressive* have no excuse for boredom or irritability these days. Jimmy Lee Swaggart's confession/performance/Pentecostal psycho-drama was enough to cure even the worst case of post-caucus depression. If you're still feeling a bit cranky, put on some of Jerry Lee Lewis' albums and try to imagine just what his cousin really did with that hooker in New Orleans.

Still yearn for the good old days? Even the most jaded survivor of the sixties had to have been stirred by the stunning victory of the students at Gallaudet College. A seed of protest grew to be a movement, then blossomed into a glorious reminder of the greatest feeling in the world: the exhilaration of empowerment.

Think the left is dead on campus? Barbara Ehrenreich, national co-chair of the DSA, and author of "The Mean Season," recently drew a crowd of 250 at the Iowa Memorial Union. Ehrenreich mused that the press would continue to downplay Jesse Jackson; even if he were to win the presidency, headlines would read "Jackson Elected Broker." *Prairie Dog* predicts that, the day before Jackson's inauguration, TV anchor-men will ask, "What does Jesse want?"

The difference between pessimists and optimists, said Clare Booth Luce, is that pessimists have a good deal more experience. Despite this rare bit of wisdom from a Republican, prairie progressives, like baseball players, are entitled to indulge themselves at the end of a long winter in moments of hopefulness and good cheer. May the trials of the Iran/Contra indictees sustain you like cool breezes through the dog days of summer.

"Prairie Dog"

# OUR PICK FOR "BEST PICTURE" OF '87

## Hope or Glory? Boorman's Anti-War film makes us choose between the worlds of women and men

by Jae and Roberta Retz

World War II has never been told quite like John Boorman tells it in his "shockingly happy memoir" (*New York Magazine*) *Hope and Glory*. This romp through the rubble of the London Blitz opens in a movie house where a newsreel about the preparations for war holds no interest for an unruly crowd of boys. "All words, no action," explains Boorman, the film's narrator. Only the cowboy movie brings the boys back to their seats and holds them spellbound: "Hopalong Cassidy, on the other hand, now that was the real thing."

But the "real thing" comes soon enough, and their devastated neighborhood becomes the perfect playground. While their mothers grieve at the destruction, the boys' ordinary games are thrillingly intensified. Billy, who is "gunning down rustlers" when the news of war arrives, is soon proudly collecting shrapnel and playing with toy soldiers. The young warriors-in-the-making set up outposts in the ruins of houses and mimic the destruction of war in their ritual sessions smashing up any household goods the bombs have spared.

Even the game of cricket becomes a comic metaphor for competitiveness and deception, traits so vital for the deadliest game of all. Before leaving for his military assignment, Billy's father takes him into the backyard to "pass on a secret—father to son—in case anything happens to me." The secret is the "googly", a special way of throwing a ball so a cricket bowler can fool the batsman. That's "like telling fibs," Billy exclaims. It is hardly cricket.

*Hope and Glory* has been described as having a "subversive thesis" in making a lark of war, (*Newsweek*) and at first glance its title seems to bear out the charge. However, both the ironies and structure of the plot invite closer inspection of what is hopeful and glorious in the lives and values of these average Londoners.

In a movie about the Battle of Britain, one expects battlefield glories, but the only battle scenes occur in Billy's dream sequences. The only wounds we see are those inflicted on the palms of Billy's hands by his headmaster's caning. Billy's father enlists only to end up "typing for England," his worst wartime experience being his trouble getting typewriter ribbon. When a German pilot is downed in the neighborhood garden, there is pointedly little glory in his capture, as the police officer leads him off to jail pointing out the brussel sprouts along the way.

As for the hope? The moment of greatest hope for the boys comes one morning when they find that a Nazi bomb has destroyed their school. "Thank you, Adolf!" exults one youth, celebrating the most ironic *deus ex machina* ever. Then the family is forced to flee the country. In an almost mythic purification by fire and water, we see the young protagonist, forced out of the city by fire, taking a solitary twilight dip in the water. A rite of passage to manhood from the violence of the city for the pastoral world of his grandfather?

*continued on page 6*

# Calendar of Events

April 13 7 P.M. Lecture by Doctor  
Triangle Ballroom, Hasan Abdel Rahman,  
IMU former Director of  
PLO Information Office

April 14 8 P.M. Big Mountain Benefit  
MacBride Auditorium Concert with Ann Reed  
Admission is \$6.00 (child care available — 335-1486)

April 16 International Pessimists  
Towncrest Inn, IowaCity Convention

April 15 12-6 P.M. Domestic Violence  
April 16 8:00-3:30 Project Garage Sale  
2207 J. Street  
(near Southeast Junior High School)  
To donate Items call 351-1042

April 11 & 18, 5 P.M. "Eyes on Justice".  
April 12 & 19, 6 P.M.  
April 13 & 20, 7 P.M.  
Cable Ch. 26  
Discussion on Central America with Rose Hayslett,  
Central America Solidarity Committee  
and James Balmer, former chair of Johnson County Re-  
publican Party

April 18 - 22 9:00 A.M.. Art Show to raise funds  
Old Brick -9:00 P.M for Latin American  
Human Rights Advocacy  
Center  
For information call 351-1394

April 20 3:30 P.M. David McReynolds,  
Lucas Dodge RM former Socialist candi-  
IMU date for president

April 20 7:30 P.M. Film "Anou Banou: The  
Iowa City Library, Daughters of Utopia"  
Meeting Room A Interviews with early  
Jewish socialists settlers  
in Palestine

April 23 Johnson County Demo-  
crats "Casino Night"  
fundraiser

April 25 & May 2 5 P.M. "Eyes on Justice"  
April 26 & May 3 6 P.M. Interview with Barbara  
April 27 & May 4 7 P.M. Ehrenreich, Democratic  
Cable Ch. 26 Socialists of America.,  
Co-chair

April 28 7 P.M., Willa Kenoyer  
Johnson County Arts Socialist candidate for  
Center president  
1291/2 E. Washington

April 30 1 P.M. Gay and Lesbian Pride  
March in Dubuque  
For information call Gay People's Union at 335-3251

April 30 7:30 P.M. Film "Beyond the Walls"  
Communications Building RM 101  
May 2 7:30 P.M. Israeli film of Jews and  
Van Allen RM 2 Arabs thrown together in  
prison

Sundays 1 P.M. Take Back The Night  
Woman's Resource Organizational Meetings  
Action Center  
130 N. Madison  
Call 351-8041 353-3021

May 14 Third District Democratic  
Convention, Conway  
Civic Center, Waterloo.  
(First round of National  
delegate selection)

June 25 Democratic State Con-  
vention (Final delegate  
selection for national  
convention)

July 18-21 Democratic National  
Convention, Atlanta.  
"What Does Mike  
Dukakis Want?"

*"Best Picture" (con't)*

Not quite, for even in the rural paradise by the Thames lurk the forces that brought war to the city. The world of the grandfather contains the same elements—the games and the guns—that have made a battlefield of civilized society. What better image of the snake in the garden than that of the grandfather at the breakfast table, blasting his shotgun past the heads of the women and children at a rat among the vegetables. It is also in this Eden that Billy betrays his father by using the googly trick against him. "The law of life—cruel isn't it?" remarks one of the characters.

Yet the transition to life in the country is important. It more sharply focuses our attention on the contrast between London, now devastated by men and machines, and a country life now shaped by the homely domesticity of women's values. The grandfather is the only man in this household of women and children. "All hens and no cocks!" he snorts, for "glory" is a meaningless concept to women: we think of Billy's older sister, angrily searching for her stockings while the news of war comes over the radio, or the younger daughter tugging on her father's holster to come out and play as the King broadcasts a call to arms. Even the bombs, which devastate the city, bring a feast to the country: when a stray bomb in the river fills Billy's boat with fish, it is "a miracle," exclaims the grandmother, like "the feeding of the 5,000."

The "inglorious" values of women domesticate war. Women, Boorman seems to say, are our connection to true civilization: to the values of home, or hearth, to food and drink, and especially to music.

The film identifies women with music and contrasts them to the noisy games of men and boys. Billy's mother, Grace, in one of the film's most poignant moments, sits at the piano in their half-destroyed house, playing Chopin with a bandaged hand, momentarily banishing the war for her listeners. And only the string quartet played by his four daughters—Grace, Charity, Hope and Faith—can put the crotchety, irascible grandfather at peace with the world.

John Boorman has long been fascinated by the world of men and their violence against each other (*Deliverance*) or against nature (*The Emerald Forest*). He now says he does not "have the stomach anymore" for such films, and in *Hope and Glory* seems to be questioning the allure that the glory of war and violence has held for him. Perhaps hope, if not glory, can exist only in a world humanized by women and music—not in the world of men and their dangerous games.

**THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE**

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