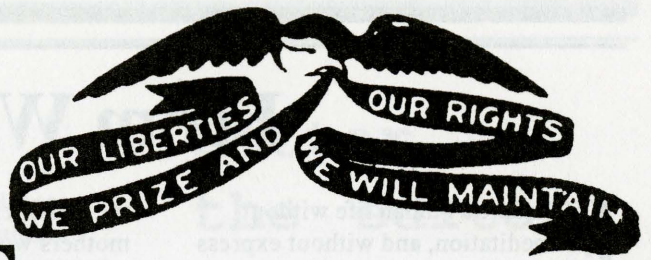


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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Spring 1999

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Prairie Watch

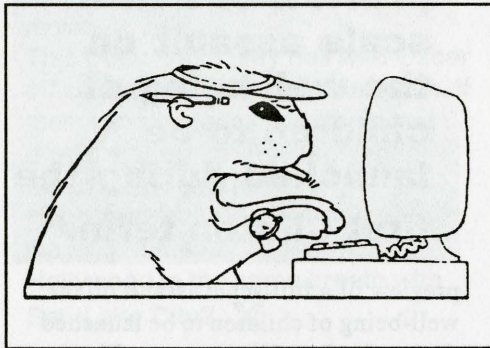
City Shame

The lopsided result of the Iowa City sales tax referendum defies analysis. Even a seasoned observer has trouble finding class or neighborhood trends when a measure fails in every single one of 52 precincts. The local option proposal had absolutely no base of support. Even Manville Heights, three-to-one in favor twelve years ago, rejected it this time.

If there's one thing that can be learned from the local option's crushing defeat, it's that the city council should feel ashamed for putting it before the voters. A 5-2 majority of the council was either very cynical, very out of touch with its community, or very irresponsible. You almost had to feel sorry for the sales tax supporters, struggling to sell a profligate proposal that had holes big enough to drive a SEATS van through.

At the risk of being repetitive, it's hard to resist pointing out that council member Karen Kubby was right all along. She opposed putting the local option on the ballot. She tried to put contingency funding for the public library in the city budget in case the sales tax failed. She suggested that the city do some kind of exit-polling to learn something useful from the vote (were voters anti-taxes? or only anti-sales tax? anti-library, or only anti-cultural center? or simply distrustful of the council?). And a few days after the sales tax vote, she opposed a \$1.5 million expansion of the Civic Center.

Kubby is also right about what to do next. Let's get to work on a library expansion plan unencumbered by a cultural center and a sales tax – as the council should have done in the first place. And let's find some city council candidates genuinely committed to our public library.



Statehouse Snooze

State senators fell asleep at the wheel when the nursing home industry asked them to restrict public access to inspection results, violations found, and enforcement actions taken by the Department of Inspections and Appeals. The Senate voted 50-0 in favor of a bill that Iowa's long-term care ombudsman called "totally for the financial benefit of the facilities."

Governor Vilsack upbraided his former colleagues for their laxity, reminding them that people can't make informed decisions about nursing home care for themselves or for their relatives without access to citations, fines, and outcomes of compliance checks. No doubt he remembers from his days in

the Senate the enormous amount of campaign contributions made by nursing home corporations.

The bill, SF 300, would have severely curtailed the required "report cards" approved by last year's legislature. Interestingly, Beverly Enterprises, the nation's largest nursing home chain, has long touted its own report card to self-evaluate its operations.

Beverly, with holdings in Iowa, epitomizes the problems of privatization. The conglomerate receives millions in government subsidies through Medicare reimbursements, at the same time that it violates federal labor laws, attempts to avoid paying minimum wage to nurse's aides, and lobbies Congress for weaker inspection and enforcement rules.

Nationally, the pendulum is swinging toward stronger oversight. Instead of going backward, Iowa should keep the report cards. Raise minimum staffing levels. Require more training and better wages. Provide more money for community programs to keep people out of nursing homes longer.

And if outfits like Beverly refuse to put some of their profits into these measures, maybe it's time to return to the days when nursing homes were non-profit and government-run. Of course, our Senators would still have to stay awake when the nursing home lobby sidled up to them.

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From Waco to Kosovo

If you take a human life without premeditation, and without express or implied intent to do harm, you might be charged with manslaughter. The assumption is that your behavior is so reckless and irresponsible that you should have foreseen the consequences of your behavior. There appears to be no comparable word to describe the act of facilitating "ethnic cleansing" without premeditation, and without the express or implied intent to do harm, but if we had such a word, it would be applied to the Clinton administration's policy in Kosovo.

The only thing standing in the way of the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo was the presence of foreign observers and the prospect of on-going negotiation on a mutually acceptable political agreement. When the Clinton Administration removed those barriers, ethnic cleansing proceeded like clockwork, predictably, leaving NATO forces with no means to prevent it. Whether Milosevic survives or is driven from office in this war, he will have achieved his horrendous goal of driving nearly a million people from their homes. The scale of the post-bombing ethnic cleansing puts it in a fundamentally different category from pre-bombing persecution. What had been limited and localized incidents of brutal victimization have been turned into an unprecedented disaster for humanity.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that large numbers of people are being rounded up in miserable camps, and that traumatized and starving children are suffering worst of all. The Clinton Administration has made a specialty of turning good intentions into large scale suffering, especially on the part of children. One of the administration's first decisive acts was the assault on the religious maniacs holed up in the Branch Davidian compound in Waco. On Attorney General Janet Reno's orders, dozens of children were tear-gassed for hours on

the mistaken assumption that their mothers would rush out of the compound and deliver their children into the arms of the tear gassers. Then an armed assault was launched that killed the inhabitants who had not already been tear-gassed to death.

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preview of a full-scale assault on the well-being of children to be launched during the first Clinton term. Thanks to the 1996 Welfare Reform bill, the number of people on welfare has dropped from 14 million to 8 million, and the number on food stamps from 29 million to 18 million. In the entire history of the Republic there has never been a more sustained assault by the federal government on the living standards and well-being of poor children. While the Clinton Administration treats falling welfare rolls as evidence of the success of their goal of ending dependency, America leads the industrial world in rates of child poverty. The soaring number of uninsured children, and the large increases in patronage of food banks, are only the tip of an iceberg of misery

and deprivation that will come into full view during the next recession or depression.

While slashing the standard of living of poor children, the Clinton Administration has turned tens of thousands of them into orphans with the 1994 crime bill, which bailed out those states facing fiscal crises from the explosive growth of prisons. We now incarcerate 1.8 million adults, most of them young, many of them parents. No one is keeping statistics on the success of the federal government in throwing children into the care of single parents, grandparents, or distant relatives, but you can be sure that we are facing a crisis of sustenance and family solidarity that will haunt America for decades.

The children of immigrants face special treatment from the Clinton Administration as more and more of their parents are rounded up into detention centers, or simply deported after police-state style raids on their workplaces. The American Friends Service Committee reports that parents in Iowa immigrant communities are actually afraid to send their children out to play for fear of harassment by the police. When Iowa children see members of their community on television, marched in chains on to airplanes for deportation on the orders of federal attorney Steve Rapp, it is not surprising that they regard Iowa as a place of fear and humiliation.

Then there are the children of Iraq. The figures quoted by humanitarian agencies about the number of dead children in Iraq as a result of the American embargo are unbelievable. But the figures keep coming—5000 deaths a month according to the U.N.—and our government hardly bothers to deny it. Iraqi hospitals have been likened to pediatric death rows because

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of the absence of basic medical supplies to treat malnutrition and associated diseases. Ignoring the suffering, America conducts a never-ending campaign of bombing, sanitized for the American public by the lack of body bags. When Saddam Hussein wanted to get rid of the foreign weapons inspectors, he simply goaded the Clinton administration into another round of bombing, helping Saddam achieve his goal.

Clinton appears to be conducting a virtual global war on children with no protest in the U.S. There was a time when a Democratic president who pursued morally unacceptable policies could count on criticism within his own party; now partisan loyalty keeps the entire party in line. During the last Clinton bombs-away on Iraq, Johnson County Democratic Chair David Tingwald called for a public demonstration—to defend the president from an alleged assault on the constitution by the Republicans. White House spiritual advisor Jesse Jackson conducted a similar rally in Washington, D.C. As Clinton abandoned diplomatic initiatives in Kosovo and began bombing, Senators Harkin and Wellstone joined the entire Democratic Senate caucus in voting for this reckless policy. Our videogame air technology appears to have fooled many Americans, and all Democrats, into thinking that we can always get our way in every part of the world, heedless of the U. N. Charter and the U. S. Constitution, heedless of history and terrain, heedless of the costs and consequences of our actions. ✂

— Jeff Cox

Chomsky on Yugoslavia

Recognized principles of international law and world order, solemn treaty obligations, decisions by the World Court, considered pronouncements by the most respected commentators — these do not automatically solve particular problems. Each issue has to be considered on its merits. For those who do not adopt the standards of Saddam Hussein, there is a heavy burden of proof to meet in undertaking the threat or use of force in violation of the principles of international order. Perhaps the burden can be met, but that has to be shown, not merely proclaimed with passionate rhetoric. The consequences of such violations have to be assessed carefully — in particular, what we understand to be “predictable.” And for those who are minimally serious, the reasons for the actions also have to be assessed — again, not simply by adulation of our leaders and their “moral compass.”

While the Reaganites broke new ground, under Clinton the defiance of world order has become so extreme as to be of concern even to hawkish policy analysts. In the current issue of the leading establishment journal, *Foreign Affairs*, Samuel Huntington warns that Washington is treading a dangerous course. In the eyes of much of the world — probably most of the world, he suggests — the US is “becoming the rogue superpower,” considered “the single greatest external threat to their societies.” Realist “international relations theory,” he argues, predicts that coalitions may arise to counterbalance the rogue superpower.

A standard argument is that we had to do something: we could not simply stand by as atrocities continue. That is never true. One choice, always, is to follow the Hippocratic principle: “First, do no harm.” If you can think of no way to adhere to that elementary principle, then do nothing. There are always ways that can be considered. Diplomacy and negotiations are never at an end. ✂

— Noam Chomsky

“Their argument is that we have to do something, which is true. But cheering on a military machine designed for carving up the planet is a worse abdication than doing nothing. It’s like arriving at a burning house with no water, and screaming: ‘Well, chuck petrol on it then, at least it’s something.’ The first week has not only failed to save anyone, but appears to have speeded up the Serb butchery. So now the allies sound like a parent who’s been smacking a naughty child to no effect. ‘Right,’ they say, ‘well if you still won’t stop, we’ll, we’ll, I’m warning you, you’re really in for it.’”

— Mark Steele,
The Guardian

**Thank You! to the 83 subscribers who
contributed \$1437 in the last 3 months**

Oscar Not YK2 Ready

Whoopi Goldberg's impersonation of an adolescent boy in a locker room wore thin fast in what was surely one of the worst Oscar ceremonies ever. (I still haven't forgiven her for dissin' Jesse in '95.) Too bad for us viewers that *Elizabeth* was subtitled *The Virgin Queen*, two words that Whoopi simply could not get past. If she doesn't rein in her raunch, people will start assuming that a cushion was named after her.

This last Academy Awards ceremony of the century was billed as a battle of Love vs War, pitting *Shakespeare in Love* against *Saving Private Ryan* as the top contenders for most Oscars. Another way of putting it would be G.I. Joe vs Queen Elizabeth. She was big this year. Her prominent role in both *Shakespeare in Love* and *Elizabeth* would, in contemporary movie vernacular, qualify these films as "chick flicks." (I got an idea of how ingrained this word is with young men when a teenaged friend asked: "Who was that chick who ran for governor?")

But dick flicks were also very big this year. (That one's for you, Whoopi.) Not one, but two movies about World War II: *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, won nominations for Best Picture.

To honor the end-of-the-millennium occasion and the huge success of war movies, the Academy enlisted both the right stuff and America's top gun to give a heroic twist to the evening. John Glenn introduced a collage of "real" heroes in film history, like Lincoln, Lindbergh, Gandhi, Patton, and John Glenn. Denzel Washington as Stephen Biko was included. Noticeably absent was Denzel's Malcolm X, even though the United States Postal Service has seen fit to issue a Malcolm X stamp as part of its Black Heritage series. The Postmaster General clearly has more courage than Oscar.

As if Glenn's presence wasn't enough of a patriotic lift, the Academy

brought out former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, everybody's most beloved African-American, Colin Powell, to introduce clips from the two war movies. But it was hard to maintain the desired soaring-American-eagle tone with Whoopi lobbing racy asides to the guys in the orchestra pit.

"More was askew on this record-breaking four-hour evening than just the hostess."

The Best Picture candidates in this end-of-the-century ceremony all had one thing in common: the past tense. Each was set either in Elizabethan times or during World War II. You'd have to search pretty hard to find another year in which all Best Picture nominees are so firmly rooted in an historical, non-fictional past. The five historical epics left no room for the smaller slice-of-life dramas, focusing on contemporary issues, like *A Simple Plan* and *Little Voice*, movies about ordinary characters desperately hoping that instant fortune will change their lives. The Academy chose depictions of male violence on a grand national scale over *Affliction's* portrayal of how everyday domestic violence gets passed down from father to son.

Why, in this last Oscar ceremony of the century, is Oscar looking back? Is he unwilling to acknowledge the present realities that will carry over into the next millennium, or do filmmakers sense a future beyond Y2K of totalitarian rule and war?

Life Is Beautiful, also set during World War II, portrays the best and worst of human nature. It is a movie about a man protecting his son from the horrors of a concentration camp by

convincing him that it's all part of an elaborate game. Roberto Benigni, creator and star of this historical fable, gave us an insight into what kind of an artist would even dare take on a story like that when he greeted the announcement of his first Oscar with a high wire walk on the backs of the auditorium seats. Teetering moronically on the edge of the abyss was an apt metaphor for the risks he took with this movie. *Life Is Beautiful* gives promise that Germany's shame will not be forgotten in the next millennium. "The evil that men do lives after them," as Shakespeare put it.

The masterpiece about America's shame got only one nomination, for costumes. The Americans who like seeing African-Americans still wearing the clothes worn by the cast of *Beloved* were joined by the Academy.

More was askew on this record-breaking four-hour evening than just the hostess. Maybe it all began with the hype around *Saving Private Ryan*. People were calling it the greatest antiwar film ever. But a truly antiwar movie would not unleash the dogs of patriotism like this one has. Jack Valenti, Chairman and CEO of The Motion Picture Association of America, introduced Colin Powell with a flourish about young men and women heroically protecting our freedom whenever "the dagger is at the nation's belly." This notorious industry cheerleader raised even his hyperbole to a new level for this special occasion.

The master of real antiwar movies died this year. Stanley Kubrick made three of them: *Paths of Glory*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. None received the Oscar.

What an evening, one that gave us Whoopi's self-love instead of Oprah's *Beloved*, the glory of victory instead of

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April 28

Workers Memorial, Hancher Auditorium, Iowa City. More info: 319-628-4541

May 8

Iowa Civil Liberties Union Annual Dinner, IMU, Iowa City, featuring guest speaker Robert Pratt, District Court Judge. More info: 515-243-3988 or iclu@radiks.net

May 17, 1954

US Supreme Court rules that racially separate schools are inherently equal

June 29

Public vote on Stanley Amendment to the Iowa Constitution

July 19, 1984

Geraldine Ferraro becomes first woman nominated by a major party to be a vice-presidential candidate

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the horror of war, and the Holocaust with a bold helping of slapstick. Presenting the Lifetime Achievement Award to Elia Kazan, a towering artist but a miserable sell-out of a man, was not out of place on this strange night. Oscar also gave us a couple of major upsets, that caused some morning-after rancor. *Shakespeare in Love* was a surprise winner over *Saving Private Ryan* for Best Picture, and *Life Is Beautiful* star Roberto Benigni's best actor Oscar was the shock of the evening. Miramax waged an all out election style campaign to promote these films to Academy members. Promotional costs for *Shakespeare* may have reached \$10 million to \$15 million. Those used to be budget figures for making, not marketing, a movie.

This trend could play hell with Oscar office pools in the next millennium, if marketing replaces spectacle and mediocrity as the Academy standards for judging movies.

How great is the danger that we may someday be mentioning Hollywood in the same breath with Salt Lake City? ✂

— Jae Retz

Letter to the editor

Comrades:

All last year I tried to save up for your septuplet special, \$70 for a lifetime subscription. (This is a lot like life insurance, isn't it--betting that I will live longer than *The Prairie Progressive*?) But irritating bills like house payments, electricity, and telephone seemed to crop up at amazingly regular intervals. Then I got this year's fund appeal, and the goalposts were moved!

It was worth it, I thought, to get a Prairie Dog beanie baby. That is, until I realized, thanks to the Rev. Falwell, that you had not specified the sexual orientation of the Prairie Dog. I looked more carefully at the illustration, and discovered to my horror that the Prairie Dog, except for a visor, was naked! Not even Calvin Klein children's underwear to hide his? her?--who knows!--private parts.

Since this promises to be a multi-million dollar enterprise for you, please excuse this tiny contribution, as those bill-collectors continue to hound me.

—Bill Douglas

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Meanwhile, the House showed its short-term shortsightedness and long-term hypocrisy by passing a build-more-prisons bill disguised as a get-tough-on-methamphetamine law. HF 573 addressed the nearly non-existent problem of sale of meth to minors by restricting bail, encouraging snitching, promoting random drug testing, and stiffening possession penalties for other controlled substances, including marijuana. Representatives Burnett, Fallon, Doderer, Mascher, Parmenter, and Shultz voted no. Senators voting no were Bolcom, Dearden, Hammond, Harper, and Szymoniak.

Frenzied House members, higher than the Capitol dome after their "three-pronged attack" on the so-called meth crisis, voted to make possession with

intent to deliver one-half ounce of marijuana a felony (currently, one ounce is felonious). Five representatives voted no: Burnett, Doderer, Fallon, Mascher, and Myers.

Caucus Plutocracy

George "Shrub" Bush vs. Albert Gore – what could be bleaker in 2000? The Iowa caucuses will be a mere formality for these two patrician politicians who were born and bred to live in the White House. Never before have the two major presidential candidates both had fathers who were elected to the US Congress (both George Sr. and Albert Sr. were freshmen in the House of '52).

Bill Bradley has some appeal, thanks to his unapologetic support for affirmative action and his opposition to the "welfare reform" of 1996, but he has shown few signs of becoming

either a viable candidate or an effective voice of protest. Unless Bradley distinguishes himself more forcefully from the Clinton-Gore administration, prairie progressives can expect a listless caucus season.

The caucuses have always created opportunities to define issues, build party organizations, and bring fresh blood into the electoral process. This year, our efforts might be better spent on living wage campaigns, supporting workplace democracy, and recruiting candidates for local offices. Four city council seats will be up this year in Iowa City. Working on one of those races could be a lot more rewarding than watching the vice-presidential motorcade roll stolidly through the state. ✕

— *Prairie Dog*

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