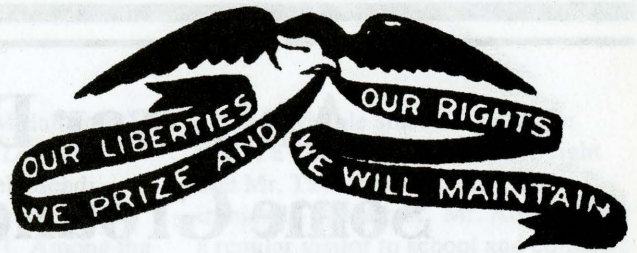


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



Fall 2006

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

As American as Pizza and Sushi

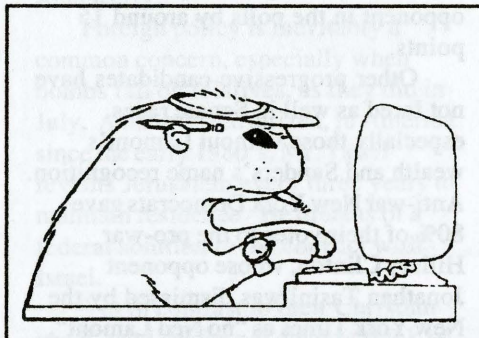
In an inspired moment some 25 years ago, it occurred to the German journalist Klaus Harpprecht that America is the Noah's Ark of denominational diversity. Iowa is a living history farm of what he had in mind. Home to communitarian German Pietists since the mid 19th century, the state has been equally welcoming to followers of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi since the third quarter of the 20th. Today, the nation's biggest kosher and biggest halal meat packer coexist and flourish with none to make them afraid in a state that also breeds and processes over 40 percent of the nation's pork.

When two Pakistani scholars arrived to study religious diversity in summer 2001, the State Department's Visitors program didn't hesitate. It put them on a plane for Iowa City, where the University of Iowa's ecumenically secular School of Religion has offered courses in the subject since 1927, and Prof. Jeffrey Cox, an authority on missionary activity in British India, was waiting to show them around.

He began with Iowa City's oldest (1869) Catholic church and Quaker meeting. He then packed them in his car, and headed for metropolitan Cedar Rapids, with its 200,000 people, export-dependent economy, and estimated 2000 Moslems from 23 countries. Middle American as it gets, the city and its suburbs have thereby become home to a Moslem population about three times the national average.

The first stop was the white frame Mother Mosque of America for a chat

with its Jerusalem-born imam, Taha Tawil. With its unintentional but unmistakable family resemblance to the white frame farmhouse that Grant Wood, another Cedar Rapids product, immortalized in "American Gothic," it was the first American mosque actually built to be one.



Opened in 1934, it was seemingly phased it out in 1971, when the community, like countless other second-generation immigrant congregations, moved to roomier premises and more parking space. But a newly-formed Islamic Council of Eastern Iowa made its recovery a priority in 1990. Since 1996, it has been listed in The National Register of Historic Places.

The next stop was the Midamar Corporation for a chat with its locally-born CEO, William Yahya Aossey, Jr. Known to virtually everyone as Bill, Mr. Aossey spent two years in Senegal after college as America's first Moslem Peace Corps volunteer. He then hitchhiked his way from Africa to Southeast Asia, parlayed graduate study in Iowa City into a Fulbright

grant to study the impact of war on Vietnamese agriculture, and taught for a few years in Saudi Arabia.

On his return in 1972, the path seemed clear. He would adapt Iowa dairy farming for the Saudi scene and market. Three decades later, Midamar had instead become America's major exporter of halal food products, with customers, including all the McDonald's in Turkey, extended over some 35 countries from South Africa to the Baltics, and North Africa to Malaysia.

He had never met a Moslem named Bill, one of the visitors mused on the way back.

As American as pizza and sushi, Cedar Rapids' Arab diaspora and Moslem community go back to the 1890's, when a pioneer contingent of Christian peddlers and storekeepers arrived from eastern Lebanon. Their families and Moslem neighbors followed. "It is a fact and generally known that Cedar Rapids now has a fair sized colony of genuine Arabians, which is being augmented rapidly and bids fair to become a feature of our cosmopolitan population," The Cedar Rapids Gazette reported in 1897. Others identified the newcomers as Syrians, Assyrians, even Turks. Yet save for language, religion and their favorite dishes, the community essentially marched to the same drums as their Czech and German neighbors.

Their families and Moslem neighbors followed. A composite family

As American as Pizza and Sushi

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Anti-war Democrats Gain Some Ground in the Primaries

Progressives in Iowa are now focused on whether or not Democrats will take control of the Iowa governorship and legislature, and the U. S. House and Senate. Having just finished a vigorous primary season, it is a good idea to look back and ask what kind of Democrat will take office if the party wins, as it should, given the unprecedented unpopularity of George Bush

In the 1990s the Clinton/Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) wing of the Democratic Party enjoyed virtually no opposition at all within the party, but the war in Iraq and the cumulative effects of capitalist globalization on the American standard of living have changed that. The aggressively pro-war and pro-capitalist stances of the party leadership have led to progressive insurgencies around the country, thanks in part to the presidential campaigns of Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich.

Hoping to extend their influence beyond their losing campaigns, both Dean and Kucinich created organizations to sustain a new Democratic left, Dean's Democracy for America (www.democracyforamerica.com) and Kucinich's Progressive Democrats of America (www.pdamerica.org). Cooperating closely with the Progressive Caucus in the House, both organizations have worked to support primary candidates who will support Representative John Murtha's resolution to set a deadline to withdraw our troops from Iraq (with over 100 co-sponsors in the House), Representative John Conyers's single payer health legislation (with over 70 sponsors in the House), and the pro-labor Employee Free Choice Act (215 co-sponsors in the House). Equally important has been progressive support for congress members who will modify the Clintonite/DLC trade

agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA that drive down the wages of America's workers.

DFA and PDA have made different choices about which candidates to support, but their efforts have led them into conflict with the leadership of the Democratic Party, including pro-war Senators such as Hillary Clinton, and the right-wing leader of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), Rahm Emanuel. The biggest win for the left has been the unseating of pro-war DLC incumbent Joe Lieberman by Ned Lamont. In Vermont independent socialist candidate Bernie Sanders is leading his Republican opponent in the polls by around 15 points.

Other progressive candidates have not fared as well in Senate races, especially those without Lamont's wealth and Sanders's name recognition. Anti-war New York Democrats gave 80% of their votes to the pro-war Hillary Clinton, whose opponent Jonathan Tasini was dismissed by the New York Times as "no Ned Lamont", apparently because he isn't rich. In another disappointing Senate primary, pro-war Democratic Representative Ben Cardin defeated Kweisi Mfume in the battle to replace retiring Senator Paul Sarbanes.

In House races, Emanuel's DCCC has intervened directly in Democratic primaries to stop progressive insurgencies. Last spring in Illinois's sixth congressional district they poured money into the primary campaign of pro-war Tammy Duckworth and defeated the anti-war, insurgent campaign of Christine Cegelis. The DCCC is also putting large amounts of money into the general election in Illinois's 8th congressional district, where a pro-war Democratic incumbent, Melissa Bean is in a close race with a

Republican. Because Bean is one of 15 Democrats to support the Central American Free Trade Agreement, she also faces an independent labor candidate supported by the Teamsters, Unite Here, and the Service Employees International Union.

The DLC and DCCC have not had it all their own way in House races, though. In New Hampshire Emanuel put party funds into a primary fight between the pro-war candidate for a house seat, Jim Craig, and anti-war insurgent Carol Shea-Porter, who was outspent ten to one. Shea-Porter defeated Craig decisively. The DCCC suffered another primary setback in upset upstate New York when their candidate was defeated by singer-songwriter John Hall, who was dismissed in the mainstream press because he attracted celebrity backing from the music community.

Progressives almost knocked off a pro-war incumbent House member, Al Wynn of Maryland, although at last count his African-American and anti-war opponent Donna Edwards was slightly behind and demanding a recount. Progressives held on to a seat in Brooklyn in a crowded primary where the progressive vote was split between Chris Owens, son of the incumbent Major Owens, and endorsed by both Kucinich and Bernie Sanders, and Yvette Clark, who brought John Murtha in to campaign for her. Clark won in a narrow victory over a pro-war Democrat. Progressives in the House will be reinforced by a new representative from Minnesota, where Muslim Keith Ellison won the primary with an aggressive "troops out now" campaign.

What about Iowa? Our own governor Tom Vilsack is national

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City Appeals Citizen Victory

In response to the Iowa City Police Department's aggressive use of "knock and talks" (to gain entry into residences without warrants) and garbage searches, in what was widely perceived to be an infringement of our 4th Amendment rights, three petitions were circulated in the summer of 2001. These petitions asked the City Council to put on the ballot three amendments to the City Charter. The amendments were:

- 1) Make the Police Review Board a permanent city board and give it subpoena powers;
- 2) Make the City Manager and Chief of Police subject to retention votes by the citizens every 4 years (much as judges are);
- 3) Designate the police force as primarily a peace-keeping force, minimizing garbage searches and "knock and talks" and making marijuana law enforcement the lowest priority.

In less than 2 months, 1600 signatures (more than twice the number required) were gathered and filed for each petition. All legal details of signature gathering and filing were carefully observed.

The City, rather than putting the proposed amendments on the ballot, convened an "objections committee" consisting of the mayor, one councilperson, and the City Clerk. This committee quickly found all the petitions "out of order."

A group of the petitioners then took the City to court to appeal this injustice. Five years of legal maneuvering by the City finally culminated in the recent decision by the district court that the petitions were validly prepared and filed and that the objections committee had improperly blocked them. Another decision quickly followed, finding that the City's objection to the content was not

timely; i.e., the legality of the measures sought by the petitioners should be decided if and when they were passed by the citizens when voted upon. Instead of accepting these decisions, the City has decided – in executive session, with no media present – to take its case to the Iowa Supreme Court rather than let the citizens vote on these amendments.

Meanwhile, between 2001 and 2006, some changes have occurred. The City Charter Commission convened to review the Charter, and two improvements were made. The Police Review Board was made a permanent board, and the hiring of the police chief was transferred from the city manager to the City Council. However, as the people who were fighting Wal-Mart learned to their sorrow, the right to petition for referendum on zoning changes was removed and added to the long list of other subjects on which citizens may not use the grassroots mechanism of initiative and referendum.

Here is the list:

Article VII. Section 7.1

B. Limitations. (1) Subject matter. The right of initiative and referendum shall not extend to any of the following:

- (a) Any measure of an executive or administrative nature.
- (b) The City budget.
- (c) The appropriation of money.
- d) The levy of taxes or special assessments.
- (e) The issuance of General Obligation and Revenue Bonds.
- (f) The letting of contracts.
- (g) Salaries of City employees.
- (h) Any measure required to be enacted by State or federal law.
- (i) Amendments to this Charter.
- (j) Amendments affecting the City Zoning Ordinance or the land use

maps of the Comprehensive Plan, including the district plan maps.

(k) Public improvements subsequent to City Council action to authorize acquisition of property for that public improvement, or notice to bidders for that public improvement, whichever occurs earlier. "Public improvement" shall mean any building or construction work

What's left? Anything important?

In addition to not being fond of our 4th amendment rights, the City apparently thinks it is all right to remove any meaningful use of our 1st amendment right to petition the government for redress of grievances.

Someone should explain to us what exactly the advantage of our present council/manager form of government is for ordinary citizens. Whatever the ideals for it are, the reality is that the City is being run by one appointed official and is insulated from the voters by seven city councilors. Council elections occur every two years, but never are more than 3 seats contested. This means that it is virtually impossible to unseat a city manager. Meanwhile, having no recourse to initiative and referendum, for all practical purposes we are powerless to change anything. It will be interesting to see how long it takes the citizens of Cedar Rapids to realize what a quagmire they got themselves into when they recently voted to change to council/manager government.

Here in Johnson County, let's stay vigilant about any attempt to de-democratize our County government by changing to a county/manager form of 'government' – if we believe that government should be "of the people, **by the people**, and for the people." ✕

—Caroline Dieterle
lives in Iowa City

Mr. Nussle Goes Back to Iowa

Remember that old Frank Capra classic about a man without a political bone in his body going to Washington to replace a deceased senator? A K-street hardened Jim Nussle coming back to Iowa to run for governor is about as far as you can get from the pure soul played by Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Mr. Smith is head of a boy's organization called the Boy Rangers. If it had been the Boy Scouts, we'd have at least one point of agreement between the 1939 movie and the 2006 campaign: neither the Boy Scouts nor Jim Nussle like being around gay people.

But Mr. Smith and Mr. Nussle go in opposite directions, Smith from a beautiful unnamed western state east to the nation's capitol, Nussle from Washington DC back to Iowa. Since, as Nussle has sagely observed, Iowa has "no mountains, oceans or theme parks," he suggests selling our quality of life. Indeed, a ban on gay marriage is a "quality of life tool," and there are others: a ban on abortion, a ban on undocumented workers, a ban on stem cell research. He could run as the deodorant governor.

Almost.

Were it not for that stench of corruption following him. While Mr. Smith wouldn't have dreamed of leaving behind the roots of his home state, Mr. Nussle is striving hard to shake off the baggage of his years in Washington. But look! Here come the Swift Boat Boys of Texas and their smelly attack ads! And if he has his way on the issue of choice, he'll turn Iowa into the next South Dakota. Since he is joined at the hip with a president who shoots from the hip, will we have to fear a governor Nussle invading those godless blue states Minnesota and Illinois?

The vast divide separating Mr. Smith and Mr. Nussle begins with their names. Jefferson Smith is named after

a Founding Father who believed "Among the first of [nature's] laws, is that which bids us to succor those in distress." James Hoover Nussle shares a name with the man who could have ended the Great Depression, had he not feared making the people dependent on their government. (So instead he gave \$25 million to dairy farmers to feed their cows.)

The Lincoln Memorial plays a prominent role in the movie. Mr. Smith stands in awe at the feet of Lincoln,

"Nussle has been a key player in the scheme to replace the Democrats' safety net with a Republican cement slab."

reading the highlighted words inscribed on the wall—"with malice towards none, with charity towards all"—and listening to a young boy recite the words "a government of the people, by the people, for the people." Mr. Nussle sat at the feet of Newt Gingrich, Founding Father of electoral character assassination, the man who put out a Contract on America designed to eliminate the helping hand of government from people's lives. Mr. Nussle has been a key player in the scheme to replace the Democrats' safety net with a Republican cement slab.

Mr. Smith wears a trademark hat to set himself off from the other senators. Mr. Nussle became famous for a different sort of headgear. Back in 1991, ashamed that his colleagues were bouncing checks at the House bank, Mr. Nussle showed up on the House

floor with a brown paper bag over his head. That's back when he still cared about an overdraft, and before he would, as Chair of the House Budget Committee, give a new twist to that famous Hoover quote: "Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt."

Natural disasters play an important role in each man's life. Jefferson Smith becomes a public hero when he puts out a forest fire all by himself. Jim Hoover Nussle couldn't stop the Great Flood of 1993, but he did try mightily to keep \$3 billion of flood relief from flowing into Iowa and the Midwest, arguing that fighting deficits was as important as funding disaster aid. When all is said and done, couldn't you say that Mr. Smith and Mr. Nussle are as different as fire and water?

But wait! Hold the presses! Mr. Smith and Mr. Nussle do have one thing in common—both fall in love with a secretary.

But even there we find a huge difference. Mr. Smith: eligible bachelor. Mr. Nussle: a wife and two kids back in Iowa. So, if by some grand perversion of justice, not to mention family values, Mr. Nussle moves into Terrace Hill with Newt Gingrich's former secretary as first lady and sets about to do for Iowa what he and Bush have done for America, he should do so with that shame sack over his head. It would be a quality of life tool. ✕

—Jae Retz

As American as Pizza and Sushi,
Continued from Page 1

photo, taken in 1936, shows several hundred carefully dressed citizens, from toddlers to founding grandparents. The imam and Orthodox priest are demonstratively shaking hands in the middle of the second row. A 1948 directory lists one dentist, two lawyers and many, many grocers.

Today, their legacy includes public philanthropies like Nassif Heart Center and YMCA, and the former Patricia Nassif, a University of Iowa law professor, who has been Baroness Acton of Aldenham since her marriage to the fourth Lord Acton in 1988. Cedar Graphics, the creation of Hassan Igram, president of the Islamic Center as well as the family firm, is in the top percentile of US printing companies, with 150 employees and an annual turnover of around \$20 million. In 2005 Mr. Aosseay testified on trade with Bahrain before the House Ways and Means committee. Mohammad Sheronick, from another of the community's founding families, is acting city attorney.

Post-Ottoman war zones from Bosnia to Gaza, plus Rockwell Collins, the avionics manufacturer, have meanwhile re-energized and extended both the Christian and Moslem community. One of the city's blue-ribbon law

firms owes a partner, and Midamar its supervisor of halal, to the Lebanese civil war of 1975-90. Zeineb Mehdi from Tunisia was named Cedar Rapids Woman of the Year in 2003. Among the seven men and two women currently on the board of the Islamic Center are a housewife, a teacher, a businessman and five engineers; a Lebanese, an Egyptian, a Sri Lankan, and a Pakistani.

A trophy photo of Mr. Igram with Terry Branstad, the state's Republican governor from 1983 to 1999, hangs in Cedar Graphics' reception area. A photo of Mr. Aosseay collecting an award from President George H. W. Bush hangs in Midamar's. But neither Mr. Igram nor Mr. Aosseay regards himself as a political activist, let alone a party-liner, and their votes in recent elections have covered the board from Ralph Nader to George W. Bush and John Kerry.

Foreign policy is inevitably a common concern, especially when bombs fall on relatives, as they did in July. A naturalized citizen, in America since the early 1980's, Mr. Tawil revisits Jerusalem every three years to maintain residence. He dreams of a federal solution to the conflict with Israel.

Yet in contrast to their Christian peers, who prefer not even to think of themselves as Arab, Cedar Rapids Moslems have made themselves more,

not less, visible since 9/11 and the rise of a Christian Conservative right that Mr. Tawil refers to only half ironically as Taliban. Mr. Aosseay is a regular visitor to school and college classes. Mr. Igram recently helped organize an interdenominational support group called the Children of Abraham. When Vice President Dick Cheney appeared in 2004 to campaign for the district's longtime Congressman, Jim Leach, Imam Tawil, a veteran of interfaith councils and civic commissions, and counselor-chaplain at 12 state prisons, joined Rabbi Jeffrey Portman, his colleague from Iowa City, in invoking divine grace from the platform.

America has been an education, says Mr. Tawil. The Islamic law faculty of Jerusalem's Al-Quds University introduced him to sharia. The University of Iowa School of Religion introduced him to the big picture. The board of the Cedar Rapids Islamic Center introduced him to Robert's Rules of Order.

A pedestal of American identity, enshrined in the very first amendment of the Constitution, and reflected under "Churches" in the Yellow Pages of any phone book, the experience is so obvious that it's easy to overlook. Yet it could hardly matter more in a world where the sight of red, white and blue makes Moslems around the world see red, and immigrants' kids in other countries burn cars and bomb trains in the name of Islam.

Harppecht got it right. America as Noah's Ark was already a comparative advantage when those first homeless, storm-tossed losers of Europe's religious wars stepped ashore 150 years before independence. Five years after September 11, it is at least as basic to what Americans now call homeland security as any number of strip searches, bomb detection technologies, and interrogation guidelines. ✕

— David Schoenbaum of Iowa City
has lived in Germany, the UK,
Italy, and Holland.

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Anti-war Democrats Gain
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president of the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, and the good news is that two members of his administration, Mike Blouin and Dusky Terry, were soundly defeated in their campaigns for Governor and Secretary of Agriculture respectively. Progressive labor lawyer Bruce Braley won the Democratic primary for congress in Iowa's first congressional district after weathering attacks by his opponents for his anti-war views. The bad news is that Progressive candidate for governor Ed Fallon came in third in the gubernatorial primary. Although he surprised everyone by carrying Polk and Story counties, he failed to carry Johnson County or even Iowa City. Like Dean and Kucinich, though, Fallon is keeping

his campaign alive and campaigning around the state for progressive candidates.

We will all have to hope that our Democratic gubernatorial candidate Chet Culver will display some hitherto unrevealed campaigning skills as we work to bring in Democratic victories throughout Iowa, put progressive Secretary of Agriculture candidate Denise O'Brien in office, and help progressive Clara Oleson win a legislative seat in Cedar and Muscatine counties. Win or lose, we can then turn our attention to making sure that Iowa turns in large caucus majorities in 2008 for the presidential campaign of Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold, the only member of the Senate to vote against the Patriot Act. There's always something to look forward to in politics. ✕

— Jeff Cox

**Coming soon!
Prairie Dog's
20th Annual
Honor Roll**

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

Box 1945
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**“He had never met a
Moslem named Bill.”
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