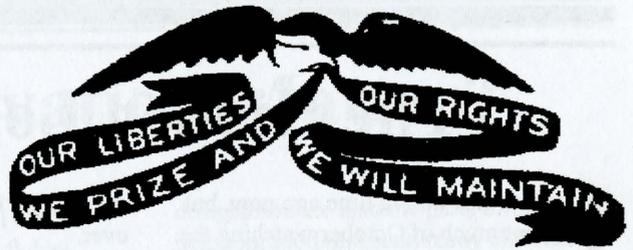


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



February 2009

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Surviving the Purple Tunnel of Doom

Last November, I called my son Robert, a college student in Minnesota, and demanded that he travel to the Inauguration with me.

He had worked fulltime for Obama in Iowa. After attending our caucus together, we stood side-by-side for then-Senator Obama's victory speech in Des Moines. We were there on that cold January 4th night when Iowa picked the next President of the United States.

Robert resisted, saying "We won't be able to see him."

"Who cares?" I responded. "We've seen plenty of Obama. The point is to be there, to be part of that crowd of happy people."

I also wanted to boo Bush in person at least once while he was still President. I figure I was owed that much after the last eight years.

I found housing with a cousin who lives in Arlington, Robert recruited some classmates to help drive, and we were set.

Our decision to go was reaffirmed when U.S. Representative Tom Latham's office told me that I had won two tickets in his lottery. Score!

The drive to Minnesota and then on to Washington was uneventful: a ground blizzard followed by an all night drive through snow and freezing rain. Along the way, I learned that Robert, as a former paid Obama staffer, had himself acquired two official tickets.

His purple tickets were mesmerizing. The map on the back made it clear that the Obama event organizers, geniuses that they are, were putting their most vocal supporters right up front.

On Monday, we stood in line for three hours with thousands of other lucky Americans, waiting to pick up our precious tickets. I was thrilled to see purple when I opened the heavy official envelope containing two tickets.

That afternoon, Robert got his first look at the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the museums along the Mall, the Washington Memorial, and the Vietnam War Memorial. There were smiling people everywhere. The massive jumbotrons, the thousands of porta-potties, and the miles of security fencing were part of extensive preparations.

We checked out the purple ticket section. What luck! We would be standing right behind the seated sections.

With such outstanding tickets, getting started at 4:30 AM the next morning (3:30 AM Central Time) was obviously the right move. Downtown, there were lots of people in motion on the darkened streets, but things seemed well organized. The police presence was overwhelming in any case.

After a 10 block sprint, we had reached a police barricade in front of the 3rd Street Tunnel, an automobile tunnel running under the Mall. We presented our purple tickets, ran to the end of the line, and turned round.

We were all set to travel the short distance back out of the tunnel and into the glory of a new day for America.

As soon as the hour was decent, I made calls back to Iowa to family and friends, eagerly reporting that we were successfully in the purple ticket line, fired up and ready to go.

Unfortunately, that was as close as we ever got to the Mall. The cop who checked my ticket as I entered the "Purple Tunnel of Doom" was the last contact I had with anyone in charge, the sons of bitches.

Now, if you have to stand for hours in a freezing, filthy tunnel while history is made over your head, here are the sort of people you would want to wait in line with.

Little old ladies from North Carolina who have waiting for years for a black president. A retired judge from Colorado who worked non-stop since February to elect Obama. An Obama campaign staffer in Virginia who organized an area with one million voters, registering 45,000 new voters in the process.

As the hours passed, as more people streamed into the tunnel, and as our hope (HOPE!) faded, I argued that we were sure to be admitted. After all, there were thousands of people with purple tickets behind us. If we didn't make it in, there would be lots of empty spaces in front of Obama. (Check the satellite photos, there were.)

We gave up when we exited the tunnel to see massive street chaos. Rooftop snipers were the only sign of authority. After driving 1360 miles, our best option now was to walk directly away from where the spot where Barack Hussein Obama would become the 44th President of the United States.

Purple Tunnel of Doom
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The Hidden Logic of “No We Can’t”

It seems like a long time ago now, but I spent much of October watching the presidential campaign from Germany. Baffled Germans would ask me politely if I could explain Sarah Palin to them, to which I could only reply “don’t ask”. Watching from abroad, what struck me about the presidential race, and about public debate in general in America, was the way in which certain issues are off limits in America.

For instance, we know in America that some foreign countries do some things better than we do. As a point of logic, we should be able to conclude: “If they can do it, we can do it too.” Instead in American political debate, there is a hidden logic that applies to some issues. It goes something like this. “Yes, they can do it, but we can’t”.

This logic applies to local and national issues, in Iowa as well as America generally. Identifying the issues where this logic applies helps us to understand the limits to the Obama administration. Barack Obama was a successful candidate in part because he understands and respects those limits. He has taken care, with good reason, to break with the Bush Administration on issues where the American people are already prepared to listen to his arguments. Here are some examples of the hidden logic of “no we can’t”.

Other countries provide an entitlement to health care for all their citizens. The most applicable example is Canada, but any European country would do. What those countries have in common is what is missing in Obama’s health care proposals: a government entitlement to health care for all citizens. What we have instead from the Obama administration, just as we had from the Clinton administration, is a mish-mash of halfway measures that leave out large sections of the population. Many of Obama’s proposals are admirable, but they are all partial. When it comes to a universal entitlement, like Canada’s single-payer

system, the logic of “no we can’t” takes over.

Other countries have passenger trains. If there was ever a time for an American president to call for spending tens of billions of dollars on an interstate passenger network, it is now. Americans are fed up with late flights and impassable interstate highways, and ready to spend money on infrastructure. Even a car-crazed country like Germany has an accessible, efficient national network of trains that are a pleasure to use. Because Germany does it, we know it can be done, but in America, we can’t.

Other countries use much less energy

“Even if it works,
we can’t do it.”

per capita. The European Union has stringent automobile emission regulations. In Germany, all residential and commercial building is subject to national energy regulations that have been highly effective. Furthermore, this extensive government regulation has not left Germany impoverished, or even destroyed the healthy German system of federalism. We know how they do it: government regulation. Government regulation is simple, and it works. What we have instead is a patchwork of government incentives for energy production, and state-by state building and automobile regulations. They can do it, but we can’t.

Other countries have non-commercial public broadcasting. We know it can be done, because Great Britain has the world’s most successful radio and television network, the BBC. We used to have non-commercial radio and television. According to the people in charge of public broadcasting now, “we” had no choice but to introduce commercials on the allegedly “public” radio network.

Local issues are affected by these issues as well, as anyone who listens to the beer and automobile commercials on Iowa Public Radio knows. Other places have non-commercial broadcasting, but in Iowa we can’t.

Other countries have unarmed police forces. Great Britain. Right here in Iowa City we have had an example of a long and entirely successful experiment with an unarmed university police force, which lasted for decades without any complaints except those coming from the police force itself. Once the university police began to argue for arms, though, the university administration ignored this experiment, and pointed out that every other major university has an armed police force. Even if it works, we can’t do it. Evidence simply does not matter.

Other countries can criticize Israel. The consensus in American politics behind the Israel occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is entirely baffling to Europeans. Without understanding the force of the underlying logic, how else can one explain the shameful way that the Democratic Party muzzled Jimmy Carter at the Democratic convention, allowing him to smile from the platform without saying a word? He had transgressed the hidden logic of “no we can’t” by publishing his courageous book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.

Without reference to the hidden logic of “no we can’t criticize Israel”, how else can we explain the votes of our congressional representatives from Iowa last month? As Israel welcomed in the Obama administration with a brutal assault on the imprisoned civilians of Gaza, burning little girls alive, mutilating little boys, crushing elderly couples to death as they lay sleeping in their beds, there was hardly a peep of protest from Americans. As Israeli forces were seen on television bombing hospitals, shelling medical personnel, forcing civilians out of their homes and into schools and then bomb-

“No We Can’t”
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Does Historic Preservation Matter?

The Northside Neighborhood Association in Iowa City recently gathered in the gym of Horace Mann Elementary School on a cold night in January. We—and by that pronoun I refer to a straggly band of NNA loyalists—were feeling a little more bumptious than usual, if you can use that word to describe a handful of middle-aged people perched on school lunch table benches.

We had lobbied successfully for a clarification of the city's sign ordinance so that neighborhood houses could not be used as billboards for property management companies—no more “rentourhouses.com” signs cluttering up clapboard siding. And we were sitting in the presence of that policy's enforcers—visitors from the city's Housing and Inspection Services office, who spoke agreeably about the new sofa rule (which bans stuffed furniture on front porches) and about the apprehension of scofflaws who let their sidewalks go unshoveled.

Yes, it was a beautiful night in the neighborhood if you are the kind of fussy person who cares about whether a Barcalounger is mouldering on a neighbor's porch. But as the hour wore on, and the visitors left, talk turned to planned improvements to North Market Square (delayed due to city budget constraints) and to rumors about the future closure of the city's two oldest elementary schools (due to their failure to comply with ADA standards). Since the climbing rope of one of those schools was dangling over our heads, and since the loss of this school would make illegal signage and fading furniture seem like the smallest of petty concerns, the mood in the room grew grim. And then we started talking about historic preservation.

The Northside Neighborhood Association is filing paperwork to request that the near Northside become a local historic district. The area under consideration—a precarious mix of lovingly maintained, benignly neglected, and commercially exploited old houses—can

already lay claim to National Historic District status. But the national designation has no teeth; it takes the local designation to ensure preservation, to make it harder for someone, just say, to rip down an original Sears kit house garage and leave in its place an asphalt parking lot.

This initiative will, inevitably, bring out advocates of limited government, people who bitterly resent any government encroachment on porch construction or window replacement. But in a neighborhood like Iowa City's Northside—populated by a mix of fami-

“Grand old buildings can anchor a neighborhood and make people want to live there.”

lies, students, retired people, and urban wannabes—historic preservation has a role to play in neighborhood preservation. The commercial pressure on the city's near-downtown neighborhoods is tremendous because there is so much money to be made from student rental property. And landlords have a strong financial incentive to defer maintenance, to pave side yards (so as to create more parking spaces), and to strip fussy architectural details. All of these changes make it less likely that a house, once it becomes a student rental property, will ever go back to being an owner-occupied home. And if the ratio of student renters and owner-occupiers gets tipped out of balance, there can be neighborhood-gutting effects.

The parts of the Northside that already have local historic district

designation are also the parts of the neighborhood that send many children off to Horace Mann school in the morning. The Northside's north side, Brown and Ronalds streets, have enjoyed a renaissance in the years since the area became a local historic district, with families inhabiting houses that were once chopped into rabbit warrens of tiny apartments. These families' children help keep the school's population where it needs to be in order to avoid having the school superintendent enact his affection for “economy of scale” (bureaucrat-speak for closing small schools) and for shiny new schools on the outskirts of town. It's possible to bring a hundred-year-old school into ADA compliance, but in order to spend the money necessary to do so, you have to appreciate how grand old buildings can anchor a neighborhood and make people want to live there.

Back in the school gym, we self-appointed guardians of the neighborhood, cranky complainers about misplaced trash cans, wrapped scarves around our faces and ventured out into the cold cruel world where a battle over historic zoning will soon, once again, be fought. ✕

— Judith Pascoe lives on
Iowa City's Northside

One Step Forward, Seven Steps Back

It's 1:10 am on January 20th. Bush begins his slide into oblivion today. He leaves us entangled in Iraq, bogged down in Afghanistan, and teetering on the brink of Depression. Bush has done well. As Thomas Frank says in his book "The Wrecking Crew," conservatives don't try to govern, they wreck the system so that nobody can. And, of course, they steal everything that isn't nailed down in the process.

I'll watch Barack Obama take the oath of office, and marvel at the changes that really have occurred since, at the age of seven, I marched with my parents to mourn Martin Luther King's death. Black Panthers marshaled the St. Louis procession while the FBI snapped photos.

Obama inspires hope himself and also because he is not that pretend cowboy Bush. I wonder if Obama can rebuild the wreck he's been left with. In addition to the economic mess, two wars, and the Gaza crisis, he faces the hostile corporate media, spineless Democratic prima donnas, and their GOP attack dog colleagues in Congress.

Closer to home, Governor Culver just made his State of the State speech to the Legislature and proposed a \$700 million public bonding initiative to rebuild roads, rails, trails, public buildings, and utilities. This sounds great, Iowa is long past due to replace the public works of the WPA, Eisenhower era, and the Great Society. However, legislators, with some notable exceptions, rarely think beyond the next election. And the state resists grand gestures, good or bad.

I'm all for the state bonding, taxing, or even collecting cans for the nickel deposit, to get money to rebuild infrastructure. But, this 21st century economic collapse will not be cured by pouring cement or building schools. That kind of economic stimulus takes a year or two to even get going, and how many union laborers are there to do this work? Culver and the Legislature would be better off cutting community college tuition in half,

creating the first state run single payer medical insurance program in the U.S., and bonding to build a publicly owned green electrical power system.

No doubt some version of the fair share fee for public employees will come up in the Legislature this year. I fully believe in such a fee, because I understand the costs of contract administration

"Iowa is long past due to replace the public works of the WPA, the Eisenhower era, and the Great Society."

and grievance representation for contract covered workers who do not pay union dues. However, I do not think most Iowans ever get beyond the simplistic idea that public employee unions are trying to ram dues for non-members through the Legislature.

It's not enough to "win" fair share for public employees in the Legislature.

Sisters and Brothers, we have to win first in the minds of our fellow Iowans. If we can remind them of the way the Labor movement benefits everyone, then we can do more than sweep up the scraps of labor law reform passed by those who so gladly take our money.

Think of Iowa Labor's successful fight to get employment law enforced to protect "independent contractors." How much different would the story be in Postville if the UFCW had been allowed to organize the plant and take the employees out on strike. Or if our largest union drew a line in the sand saying that privatizing the State Lottery is unacceptable.

Finally, I hope that our Senators and Congressional Representatives are thinking of the 30,000 United Auto

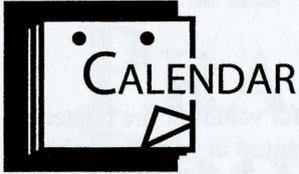
Workers who live in Iowa. Some of those UAW members work in auto parts, many work for Deere, and more are retired with the dignity that only a union pension and insurance can provide. All are deeply concerned about the future of Ford, Chevrolet, and Chrysler and their employees. It is an outrage that Senator Grassley opposes loaning money to the Big Three until the UAW agrees to wage and benefit cuts. Does he plan to cut his salary, health benefits, and pension in order to help President Obama cure the financial calamity left by Bush?

Senator Harkin and Congressman Loeb sack support loans to keep the auto companies in business while they restructure. I would like to see them state unequivocally that the car company union employees and white collar staff should take no pay cuts. Let the top management and stock holders who drove the companies over the cliff make some sacrifices.

2:19 CDT Only eight hours until President Obama takes over! ✂

*— Duncan Stewart is a member of
NWU-UAW Local 1981*

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Feb 17, 1909
Geronimo died

Feb 10
Marriage Equality Day
State Capitol, Des Moines
9-4 PM

Feb 18
Naomi Klein lecture
IMU, Iowa City
7 PM

Feb 25, 1964
Cassius Clay won the world
heavyweight championship

Feb 27, 1939
Supreme Court outlawed
sit-down strikes

Mar 18, 1969
US began unannounced
bombing of Cambodia

Mar 26, 1979
Israel and Egypt signed
Camp David accords

Apr 21, 1954
US began flying French
reinforcements to Indochina

At-Will in Iowa
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disasters of 2008. He explained to me that, believe it or not, this did become an issue for a few volunteers who were terminated or threatened with termination because disaster response caused them to miss work last year.

House File 82 has been assigned to a sub-committee of the Public Safety Committee. Though I do not serve on that committee, I will be watching the progress of this bill over the next few months. This may not be legislation that creates headlines, nor will it help figure out the State's budget mess, but it is an idea with great merit and I will work to make it become law in Iowa. ✂

— Nate Willems represents District 29
in the Iowa House

"No We Can't"
Continued from Page 2

ing the schools, trying out new weapons that inflict horrific burns and mutilations on children, every single Iowa member of the U. S. House of Representative joined in a 390-5 endorsement of these war crimes.

The logic of "no we can't" is very powerful, encompassing both political parties and liberals as well as conservatives, but it is not immutable. The limits that shackle us, and prevent us from dealing with social problems at home and global injustice, can change under the force of circumstances. Jimmy Carter recognized the limits we are up against, and stepped beyond one of them purposefully and with a full recognition of the likely consequences. The logic of "no we can't" can be challenged when we acknowledge those limits and struggle against them. ✂

— Jeff Cox

Purple Tunnel of Doom
Continued from Page 1

We watched the oath of office in a Chinese restaurant on a black and white TV that occasionally broke into color. We listened dully to Obama's speech intermixed with energetic side conversations in Chinese.

And then we left, too tired to eat, too tired to fight for a spot along the parade, too tired to consider what it meant to travel so far and be so disappointed.

In the end, I'm glad Obama is our President. I'm glad I traveled to DC with my son and his friends.

And I'm very, very glad I was not there at the end, when hope died for the remaining purple ticket people, huddled around cell phones, trying to catch a few snatches of Obama's first address to the nation as President. ✂

— Rusty Martin of Perry remains a
proud Obama precinct captain

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At-Will in Iowa

The first bill I have co-sponsored was introduced in the Iowa House last week. House File 82, written by Representative Tom Schueller of Maquoketa, provides job protection for volunteer firefighters, reserve police officers, and other volunteer first responders. If enacted, an employer could not be able to terminate an employee for joining a volunteer public safety organization, nor could a volunteer be fired for missing work due to responding to a call.

My guess is that many people would have the reaction: "I didn't think anybody could be fired for that." Unfortunately, they can. Iowa law has a very strong presumption of what is called "at-will employment." Most people are considered at-will employees. That is, they can be terminated at any time for a good reason, a bad reason, or no reason at all. Individuals who work under a contract or collective bargaining agreement typi-

cally have some greater degree of job protection. Also, an employer cannot terminate an individual on the basis of race, religion, gender, etc. However, if the employer decides to let an employee go, in most cases the terminated worker has no legal recourse.

The idea behind at-will employment is that even though an employer can terminate an employee at any time for any reason, the reverse is also true: any at-will employee can quit their job at any time for any reason. This is usually little comfort for individuals who feel they have been wrongfully terminated. As an attorney, I have listened to numerous unfortunate stories from people who believe they were wrongfully terminated. In the vast majority of instances, I have to tell them that I am sorry, but that their employer did not violate any law.

House File 82 would carve out an exception to the presumption of at-will

employment for volunteer fire fighters and others engaged in volunteer public safety activities. The affected individual would have to demonstrate that the termination was a direct result of their duties as a volunteer in order to have a right to be reinstated. As volunteer fire fighters play such a key role in public safety in our smaller communities, and provide a great public service without compensation, enacting this bill into law is the very least we can do to express our gratitude.

I would also guess that many people would have the reaction: "I can't believe any employer would fire somebody for being a volunteer firefighter." I had the same reaction. The author of this bill, Representative Schueller, is also the Chairman of the House Rebuild Iowa Committee and has been closely involved in our response to the flood and tornado

*At Will in Iowa,
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"Conduct your blooming in the noise
and whip of the whirlwind."

— Gwendolyn Brooks