

VIEWPOINT

THE BATTALION
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

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Slouch

By Jim Earle



"That's it? I come in here in good faith to ask your advice on how to improve my grades and all you can come up with is 'study'?"

O'Neill's words signal need for vigilance

By DON PHILLIPS
United Press International

WASHINGTON — Where have all the reforms gone? Where is "government in the sunshine?"

As far as the Democrats of the House of Representatives are concerned, the concept of open meetings is last year's old coat.

When Democrats who were elected to the incoming 97th Congress gathered in Washington Dec. 8-11 to organize themselves for the battles ahead, the meetings were closed.

What's more, unlike past years, the concept of open vs. closed meetings was not even an issue. No citizens pressure groups lobbied for open meetings; no groups of legislators banded together to try to open the meetings; there wasn't even a press release from an outraged group or individual.

It's almost as if the open meetings advocates declared the battle won and retired from the field, only to have the enemy silently steal back in and occupy the area.

In those organizational caucuses, the Democrats selected new leaders and new committee chairmen for the new Congress. They discussed — but did not approve — proposed rules changes for the new Congress that would have an indirect effect on the lives of all Americans.

In past decades, almost all congressional hearings were closed. There were "public" hearings at which testimony was given by interested groups or individuals, but when the time came to make decisions, the legislators retired to smoke-filled rooms and the public was effectively shut out.

Of course, not all the public was shut out. Highly placed lobbyists always had a "pipeline" into the closed meetings, and it was normal to see a congressman stroll out of the meeting and retire to a dark alcove with a lobbyist to discuss the subject at hand.

Then, in the early 1970s Common Cause and other citizens groups pushed for reform of

the entire congressional process, including open meetings.

The pendulum swung so far at that time that Congress even agreed to open most of its deepest, darkest meetings, the House-Senate conference committees that work out compromises between differing House and Senate bills.

Reform was not without its strains. Like the face-to-face standoff between a half dozen economic reporters and former Rep. Wilbur Mills, D-Ark., then-chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, when Mills attempted to close a committee hearing on the grounds that it was an "informal meeting."

The reporters, in effect, staged a sitdown in the committee room, telling Mills the House rules did not provide for informal meetings. After several tense moments, Mills backed down and never tried that ploy again.

All the reforms of those years have not been dumped, of course. Most hearings still are open, and no one has suggested changing the rules to close them again.

But if the attitude expressed by Democrats in their organizational caucus is any indication, there is a danger of erosion.

House Speaker Thomas O'Neill was asked about the closed caucus at one of his regular pre-session press conferences. Washington Post reporter Richard Lyons asked O'Neill why the caucus couldn't be conducted in public.

O'Neill answered in a sarcastic tone. "Because the pendulum of reform always swings," he said. He added that "reform" was simply doing something different this year from how it has been done in the past, and now the pendulum was swinging to close meetings.

The O'Neill comment was at least half funny, of course. But it was at least half sincere too.

Someone once said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Apparently the same goes for reform, and this year someone — a lot of us — dropped the ball.

It's time to circle the wagons

By DICK WEST
United Press International

WASHINGTON — Two New York University professors, Herbert London and Albert Weeks, have brought forth a book under the title "Myths That Rule America."

I can't tell you anything about its contents, having never peered between the covers, but the blurbs really make good reading. Permit me to quote a couple from a mail order form distributed by the publisher:

— "As a nation, we need to remember those myths that gave us strength and then practice using them."

— "... an urgent call for a national effort to rediscover the myths that gave our nation greatness."

You don't find too often these days anyone who is willing to say a good word for myths. In particular, you don't often hear it asserted that myths are what made this country great.

For whatever reason, myths have fallen upon hard times of late. Yet, deep down, we know

that had it not been for the pioneer myth-makers conquering the wilderness and pushing back frontiers, American would never have made it to the Top 10, much less nail down a procession of No. 1 rankings.

The main reason so many people today appear to be aimlessly drifting is because they have lost sight of the guiding myths by which we once steered our course.

As I have already indicated, I do not know what national myths the authors of the book deem worthy of rediscovery. My own candidates for that honor most definitely would include the myth that the wheels of covered wagons spin backwards when pioneers are being chased across the prairie by Indians.

You and I have seen this happen many times in western movies. Yet modern scholars, citing Newton's Laws of Motion, say it was an optical illusion.

Illusion or not, pioneers taking part in the westward ho! movement were firmly convinced the wagon wheels were turning the wrong way.

It was for this reason that they stopped outrun the Indians and started circling wagons up in a circle.

The latter technique, as we know, kept wagons from being picked off one at a time. Thus was instrumental in the western West.

Today, if I read the message in the blurbs correctly, we need to rediscover myth, which gave us strength, and use it.

In other words, we need to revise the idea of drawing our wagons up in a circle to danger threatens.

It is true we don't have many covered wagons any more. But surely we could circle swagons, and maybe our Datsuns as well.

There is, I figure, only one important rediscovering this myth. If the Federal Safety Commission sees the wagon moving backwards, they will order it recalled.



It's your turn

Government intervention questioned

Editor:

As I was reading the Wall Street Journal last week I noticed an article that mentioned that Britain charges a death tax. The absurdity of this caused me to examine the taxation system in the United States.

The United States as well has a death tax — after all what else is an inheritance tax? While a person is living, he or she may distribute his wealth with freedom among his friends and relatives (up to certain amounts). But should the same person die, his wealth is subject to taxation. Does it seem correct that a family should suffer the loss of a relative and monetary loss at the same time? From the point of view of a monstrous federal government facing a \$60 billion deficit, I assume it seems entirely fair.

I do not intend to argue that taxation and government should be abolished, simply that a question of limits has arisen. There scarcely exists in the United States today a field, endeavor, or action that is not regulated, taxed, or federally influenced in some form or another. In some areas government involvement is totally necessary, in others it is grossly inappropriate.

I argue that it is long overdue that the informed citizens of the United States question the extent of government intervention.

Does the government have a right to tax my generosity, which is what the gift tax implies? Should the government benefit monetarily from the death of one of my relatives? What is next in line? Will there be a tax on all Christmas gifts, or perhaps a terminal illness tax is next? Maybe there will be a tax on all items colored red (to discourage Communism) or a tax on left-handed persons. The absurdity seems apparent to me, but then the federal government needs \$60 billion to cover its deficit and it must come from some place.

Gary Barker

Criticism is tradition

Editor:

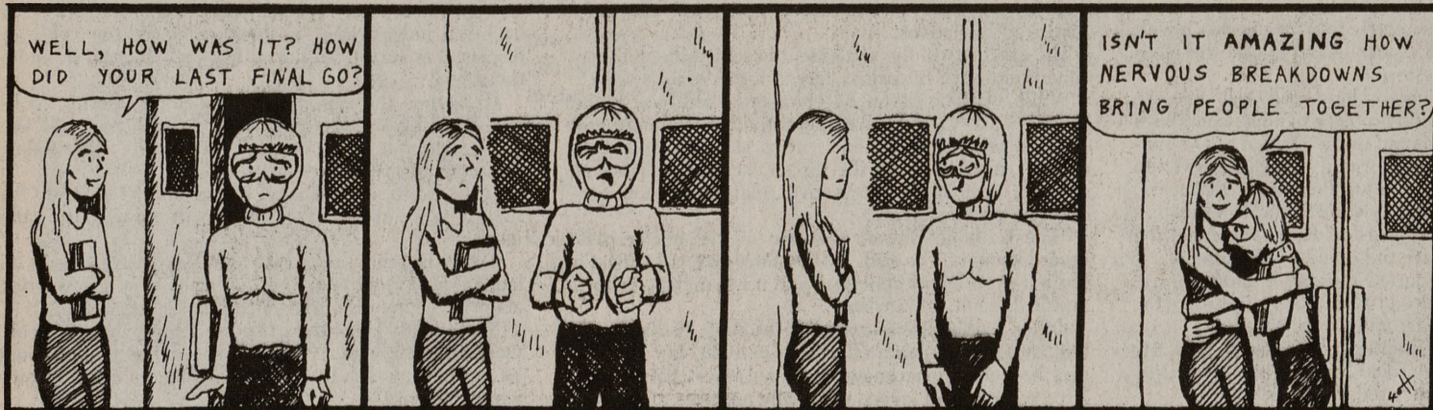
This letter is in response to Gerry Barker's Criticism, even self-criticism, is part of our

centuries-old American tradition: free speech and expression. The reason we have free speech is to promote relevant

change. Criticizing Aggie traditions would be appropriate for a "100-percent" criticism of the freedom of speech is definitely appropriate for a good American.

Carol Lynn

Warped



By Scott McCullar

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