

Slouch By Jim Earle



"Do you want a haircut or a bid?"

Reagan's opposition begins to find its voice

By DAVID S. BRODER

WASHINGTON — It is plain now that the opposition to President Reagan and his program is beginning to find its voice. The 260,000 people who assembled on the Mall last Saturday at the call of the AFL-CIO and some 200 other organizations to protest the Reagan economic policies was the largest such demonstration since Vietnam war days.

This weekend, the Democratic Party will hold its first major training session for the 1982 campaign in Des Moines and, on Oct. 1, it will parade a number of mayors before the microphones at a dinner here to describe the damage they say will be done by the Reagan budget cuts that go into effect that day.

Meantime, House Democrats have recalled that the committees they control are allowed to conduct investigations, and Tip O'Neill has launched a number of them into regional hearings focused on the effects of high interest rates and scarce federal dollars.

As a result of all this, the Republicans are getting shaky about their support of the new round of budget cuts. And Washington, a city whose inbred discussions produce violent swings of opinion, has — in its typical fashion — gone from thinking that Reagan is king of the world to thinking he is a political fall guy.

What everyone needs to do is step back one pace and take a deep breath. Otherwise, we are about to jitter ourselves into serious trouble.

We have been down this road before — exactly twelve years ago. Then, the Republican President with nine months in office was Richard Nixon, and the issue that brought thousands to the streets was Vietnam.

The troubles in today's economy are, thank goodness, a lot less ugly a mess than Vietnam was twelve years ago. But there are certain similarities in the situation. The basic problem in both instances is one the Republican administration inherited from its Democratic predecessor. "Curing" the problem is the basic mandate each Republican President received from the voters.

In both instances, the Republican President put in place by the fall of his first year a long-term strategy for extricating the country from its bind. And in both instances, the opposition has gone to the streets with the claim that the program is not really as advertised in the previous campaign and,

even if it is, it is not producing results as fast as they are needed.

There was plenty to criticize in Nixon's Vietnamization, and there is plenty to doubt about Reaganomics. But it seems to me that any fair-minded appraisal has to conclude that there is greater political legitimacy to Reagan's current effort than there was to Vietnamization, and therefore a more compelling case for caution in condemning it.

While lives are being hurt by the Reagan economies, the human damage cannot be compared to that which resulted from Nixon's decision to attempt a gradual pullout, which prolonged the agony of the Vietnam War.

The Reagan plan — to a much greater extent than Nixon's — was suggested in fairly explicit terms by the President's campaign statements. True, he dodged the painful truth about reductions in entitlement programs and the shift of responsibilities to state and local governments. But anyone who did not understand that Reagan was proposing a major trade-off — lower taxes for fewer federal government services — was not listening.

But the most significant difference is that Reagan's plan has been given explicit approval by Congress, while Nixon's represented purely executive-branch decision-making.

Moreover, it was given approval by Congress as a long-term policy, not a quick-fix expedient.

As readers of this column know, there have been grave doubts expressed here about the pace the scale of the reduction in federal responsibilities and the manner in which programs have been handed off to states and cities, or just abandoned. I have been even more skeptical about the size of the tax cuts, and the promise of future tax indexation is one I thought no prudent Congress should make three years in advance.

But this policy was approved by majorities less than two months ago. It has not yet been put in place. To consider scrubbing it now — or replacing it with an invisible alternative — strikes me, not as a sensible political judgment, but as a reaction of pure panic.

There will be time — and need — for mid-course corrections. But to attempt them in the waning days of a congressional session, rather than in the 1982 consideration of the Reagan budget, entails even greater risks than the gamble implicit in Reaganomics.

Put a pool and TV in every cell

By DICK WEST
United Press International

WASHINGTON — A concerned citizen identifying herself as "Mildred the Muggler" informs me that a western motel chain has opened a new computerized reservations center in an Arizona prison for women.

According to published accounts she enclosed, the service is being operated by 30 inmates paid by the company to train as reservations agents.

Although the program was said to provide excellent postpenitentiary job opportunities, Mildred seems to feel it also offered another type of opportunity for any inmate who might be unrepentant.

Such information as credit card numbers and names, addresses and travel dates of people about to be away from home could be of great value to burglars, she pointed out.

Maybe so, but I can foresee the program branching out in legitimate ways whose benefits would far outweigh any negative

potential it might have.

By coincidence, Mildred's letter arrived shortly before the Senate voted this week to confirm Sandra O'Connor, herself a former Arizona judge, as the first woman member of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Also by coincidence, the letter touched indirectly on one of the legal programs about which Mrs. O'Connor was questioned during her confirmation hearings — namely, overcrowded conditions in prisons.

Prison populations throughout the country have grown so much faster than penal facilities, there is talk of reopening some old military bases and using them as detention points.

The root cause of the problem is easy to isolate and identify. Simply stated, it boils down to this: overbooking. Judges like Mrs. O'Connor are sending more people up the river than available accommodations can accommodate.

Just as motels occasionally are swamped by conventioners, prisons are being swamped by convicted felons. Some sort of

efficient reservations system is needed and badly.

Here is where the skills of prison inmates trained as motel reservations agents could be used to good advantage.

Before a judge hands down a sentence he should call the prison reservations agent and determine what or whether space is available.

I mean, what happens if two lawbreakers arrive at a given prison simultaneously and only one cell berth is empty? Someone obviously is going to be turned away.

If one of them has confirmed reservations, the choice will be easy to make. Now arises the question of what to do with the prospective inmate who does not have a reservation.

Possible answer: The cell clerk gets the phone and calls around to nearby military bases in the area to see whether they have any vacancies. If not, the alternative may be to send the prisoner to a motel.



The White House 'working herd'

By DONALD A. DAVIS
United Press International

WASHINGTON — To a reporter new on the beat, covering the White House is like trying to report what's happening in a fish-bowl.

If the fish don't want to talk, getting information about what is really going on is difficult. Meanwhile, the fish smile and the people watching don't realize how far away they are.

From a distance, seeing the White House press corps at work conjures up visions of instant access to the top brains in the land, meaningful conversation with the men and women who run the government, and pearls of wisdom from the president. Don't bet on it.

The reality sets in quickly for a new correspondent. It means being herded around at a gallop to get to a spot and wait (amid shouts of "down in front") for the president to walk past; standing in the rain to interview a senator who won't venture to shelter because the television cameras are set up in the open; and being bombarded with briefings and news conferences every day on subjects that can range from inflation to religion to geography.

It does not mean being able to walk up and ask President Reagan what's going on. That sort of thing is discouraged.

The president cannot be matched in his delivery of prepared material, but off-the-cuff comments are different. He muffed a pair of questions called out by reporters last

week during brief "photo opportunities" at the White House, but the answers were obviously so wrong they could not possibly be used. He confused 1981 with 1982 on one fiscal question and jumped the federal deficit by \$200 billion in the other.

Because there always exists a chance that a question could hamstring a president, aides keep a distance between Reagan and the reporters — known as the "word herd."

But photography is different. Reagan still has his Hollywood charisma — a president from central casting — and cameras abound when he steps out of doors with frequent "photo ops" inside the White House. The president smiles for the lensmen and tosses one-liners to the writers. Great picture. Lousy story.

Still, there is surprisingly good cooperation from the White House press office and the people who work there are genuinely helpful. The principal contact is Larry Speakes, the deputy press secretary, who is a slow talker with a quick mind. He's candid without being careless; protective without being surly.

Another big surprise for a reporter is the level of helpfulness from one's colleagues. Correspondents, perhaps drawn together by a siege mentality, assist each other. While the competitive drive is extraordinary, the handful of regulars who cover the White House each day are not giving anything away. The level of professional respect and the level of professional respect among peers is high.

Before one thinks having a White House press pass is something special, one should remember some 1,700 are currently being used.

They put up with the vague statements ("But senator, you say 10 percent, but percent of WHAT?"); finding their story quotes are different than everyone else's who attended the same event (it's not being too exclusive); hassles from security guards ("Officer, you really mean I should look out the window to see if it's raining worms in press room candy bars, and myriads of other problems to wear the headphones looped around their necks to identify them as White House correspondents).

Warped



By Scott McCullar

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