



Teaching about facts of life

Editor's note: Art Buchwald is recycling some of his best columns whilst he and his family soak up the sun and enjoy the soft sea breeze of the Falkland Islands, otherwise known as "Maggie's Vineyard."

by Art Buchwald

This is the time of year when fathers sit down and have heart-to-heart talks with their sons.

"Son, now that you have graduated, your mother feels I would not be fulfilling my duties as a father if I did not explain certain facts about life to you."

"Yes, Dad."

"First, I would like to show you a few things that you will have to deal with in the outside world. For example, this item is called a necktie."

"What do you do with it?"

"You tie it around your neck like this and wear it with a shirt."

"What for?"

"Nobody is quite sure. But when you do go out into the cold world, people will expect you to wear one. It's the Establishment's answer to the peace symbol."

"It sure looks funny. What else, Dad?"

"This, my boy, is a suit — what are you laughing at?"

"The jacket matches the pants. Hey,

that's really crazy."

"Yes, the jacket does match the pants, and you will be expected to wear them together during the daytime."

"But the pants have a crease in the front. What's that for?"

"I'm not certain of its purpose, but now that you are an adult, you are supposed to keep a crease in your pants."

"Man, what will they think of next?"

"Son, I wish you wouldn't take our talk lightly. Perhaps I should have explained these things to you before, but I didn't want to ruin your school days. Yet, what I am telling you now will have a great effect on everything you do."

"Sorry, Dad, but you have to admit wearing a tie and a jacket that matches the pants — what do you call it, a suit? — is a pretty funny idea."

"Can we proceed? These queer-looking leather things are called shoes. Do you have any idea what they're used for?"

"Beats me."

"You put them on your feet to protect them from sharp objects."

"I don't want to wear anything like that, Dad. I'll take my chances."

"I don't know how to break it to you, son, but most places require grown-ups

to wear shoes."

"Look, Dad, if you want me to wear a necktie, and I'll even go along with the jacket and matching pants, those stupid leather things on my feet —"

"Shoes, son, shoes. Believe me, get used to them. After a while you even get to like them and keep them polished."

"You mean I have to polish them too?"

"You don't have to, but they last longer that way and last longer. Here, these socks and then ..."

"Socks?"

"Yes. You wear them inside the shoe so the leather won't rub your feet."

"I thought the shoes were supposed to protect my feet."

"Provided you wear socks. Socks don't make this too difficult for me, not very good at explaining the facts of life, but believe me, I've been telling the truth."

"I'm sorry, Dad. It's just that you've thrown all this stuff at me at once and it comes as a shock."

"Perhaps we've talked enough today. Tomorrow, I'd like to tell you about a thing called a razor."

"Razor? That's a funny word."

Did secret ballot affect amendment?

by Steve Gerstel

United Press International

WASHINGTON — Had the balloting been secret, says Sen. Patrick Leahy, the constitutional amendment mandating a balanced budget would have received no more than 15 votes in the Senate.

Assistant Senate Democratic leader Alan Cranston, agrees.

"It would have failed overwhelmingly if it had been a secret ballot," he says.

Unfortunately for them — and perhaps for the Constitution — the vote was public. With but four months to go before elections, the amendment slithered through 69-31 — two more than needed.

Despite the lopsided figures, there is enough evidence to indicate that under different circumstances — in different times — it would have been easily defeated.

But with the elections just ahead, Cranston said, "it would be difficult to explain a vote against this amendment."

Indeed of the 31 senators — 11 Republicans and 20 Democrats — standing for re-election in November, only 11 took the risk to vote against.

The ones who bucked the tide of public opinion were: Chafee of Rhode Island, Heinz of Pennsylvania, Weicker of Connecticut, Jackson of Washington, Kennedy of Massachusetts, Matsunaga of Hawaii, Metzenbaum of Ohio, Mitchell of Maine, Moynihan of New York, Riegle of Michigan and Sarbanes of Maryland.

But there was also great disquiet among those who voted for the amendment — both for its content and the way it was shoved through the Senate.

For instance, three Southerners — the highly respected Stennis of Mississippi, Heflin of Alabama and Denton of Alabama — publicly agonized over using the phrase "declaration of war" as the trigger for permitting Congress to ignore the mandate of the amendment.

The United States has not declared war since 1941, but two major wars have occurred since then — Korea and Vietnam.

If the amendment had been part of the Constitution then, Congress would

have had the choice of formally declaring war or force-feeding wartime needs into a peacetime budget.

Despite trepidations, Stennis, Heflin and Denton all voted for the amendment, vaguely hoping negotiations between the Senate and House would provide more precise language.

Heflin offered an amendment, produced by the White House, that would have made the trigger "unforeseen or imminent threats" to national security.

But this amendment, as all but one other, was defeated — not on its merits but because supporters wanted to present to the House an amendment identical to the one on a discharge petition which has been garnering signatures for months.

After the Senate adopted a rider that would require a three-fifths vote to increase the debt ceiling, Republican leader Howard Baker was explicit in stating why he did not want that or any other amendment.

Baker said that throughout the process he had been in close contact with his counterparts in the House, who counseled no changes.

Indeed, the debt ceiling rider — due to the parliamentary problems it poses — could be the undoing of the constitutional amendment.

The "declaration of war" trigger was not the only part of the amendment that disturbed supporters and opponents.

Many felt the amendment flawed because it does not require a president to submit a balanced budget, and because it failed to define "national income" — a vital part in the entire process.

Baker's statement that Congress was not really passing a constitutional amendment, but rather just sending it to the states for their decisions, must have added to the misgivings.

The states cannot tinker with the amendment — it is a "take it or leave it" proposition. Perhaps Baker was saying the amendment is so flawed the states — in their wisdom — will reject it.

At least one senator, John Tower, R-Texas, said he would vote for the amendment but once it is sent to the states, would urge legislatures not to enact it.

A strange way to operate, indeed.



Indicators — music or noise?

by Denis Gulino

United Press International

WASHINGTON — The government spends \$1.1 billion a year to listen to the nation's economic symphony — still a recession dirge.

Critics say so many factors frustrate the recording of dozens of economic reports that the exercise can produce less of a symphony score in tune with the business cycle than the clatter of colliding garbage cans.

The economic indicators range from the Consumer Price Index to the gross national product. They deal with factory production, balance of trade, retail sales and personal income — an endless march of numbers across newspapers and television screens.

But by all accounts, people concerned about their jobs are still confused about whether the economy is getting better or worse.

Much confusion seems to stem from the shortcomings of the indicators themselves, reports compiled generally in the same way for decades.

Many government analysts agree with their critics that the system of producing economic information is not as good as it should be, hampered by budget cuts and an absence of basic research into improvements.

Some economic reports may have outlived their usefulness, but not their popularity, while others can be not only misleading but irrelevant, say the analysts.

If there is no grass roots movement for more relevant statistics, it may be because there seems to be an overwhelming surplus of numbers already.

An increasingly visible cadre of professional voices has appeared that — with the help of the news media — tend to

popularize existing measurements. The result can be a veneer of continuity and context applied to figures that often turn out to have been highly tentative.

So those who hear the economic lullabies should not be so surprised when later the music is replaced in midbeat by a funeral march.

And the mass of government figures say little about the information that could be most useful: the life expectancy of certain jobs or entire industries. In fact, with one prominent exception, the government's economic measurements say very little about the future even in the vaguest terms. That is still asking too much of economists, the technicians say.

Consumer Price Index

In an age when retail chain stores across the country can report daily sales and inventories to a central headquarters via a computerized cash register, the government's procedure for determining monthly price changes appears outdated and misleading.

The report is usually issued around the 22nd of each month and often cuts like a clash of cymbals across the murmur of the day's news, especially if the "inflation rate" escalates into that range above 10 percent dubbed "double digit."

Next year the Labor Department will offer an alternative price index using the costs of rents rather than homeownership, a change long recommended by critics who say most people do not own their homes.

— Producer Price Index

Still known as "wholesale prices," the Labor Department's Producer Price Index has been undergoing extensive revision.

But a former Labor Department economist who also was once chief economic forecaster at the Treasury Department, Herman Liebling, groups the index together with many others that need basic improvement.

— Gross National Product

The gross national product figure is issued every three months by the Commerce Department, provides the broadest unifying framework of the economic indicators. It attempts to identify the purchases of all the goods and services the nation produces at home and abroad.

The GNP for any current quarter first estimated about midway through the period by a "flash" figure, actually highly tentative projection for internal government use. After the end of the quarter, the first official GNP reading is delivered, followed by two revisions.

Swings in inventories and exports distort the report, making it appear the economy expanded or contracted differently than what it did. A slight expansion of the GNP therefore does not prove that a recession has ended.

The relentless meanderings of the economy create jobs for some, eliminate them for others. The changes trigger millions of telephone calls from brokers to potential buyers and sellers on Wall Street. And they figure in the thousands of personal and business investment decisions, which together provide future jobs and opportunities for coming generations.

So the beat goes on, an incessantly rumbling of a \$3 trillion economy moving constantly but not telling anything ahead of time where it's going.

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