

# Opinion

## Public opinion is a poor reason for anything

In addition to being a boon for lawyers, the Iran-contra affair has provided an unexpected demand for pollsters and statisticians.



With the Reagan administration pitted against the Congress, Republicans against Democrats, Ollie North against the Constitution, each side is eager to learn who is winning the war for the hearts and minds of the American public.

A few recent polls indicate that the majority of Americans think that North was telling the truth during his testimony and that Reagan is not telling all he knew. Another recent poll shows that the percentage of Americans who favor aid to the *contras* now equals the

percentage who oppose it.

Left alone, statistics are innocuous. It's only when they are the basis for some generalization do they become evil, hated things — the objects of Mark Twain's cynicism. After all, you can argue with people, but you can't argue with numbers.

It's fair to say that more than a few people realize this and use any favorable public opinion to justify their cause.

It's also fair to say that more than a few people in the United States sincerely believe in democracy.

Consequently, they believe that the attitudes and actions of our elected representatives should reflect those of the majority of Americans — or at least the majority in that representative's home district or state.

But this belief rests on the assumption that the public is informed enough to make the right decision. It doesn't take into account that a situation might be too complex for average

citizens to understand. It doesn't take into account that average citizens might not be privy to information possessed by their representatives. It doesn't take into account that average citizens might not have the time, energy or desire to make an informed decision.

This belief also does not take into account that people are moved by emotion and sentimentality, two things that often replace logic and reason in the decision-making process. Neither does it take into account the herd mentality of people who would rather take on their friends' opinions than form one of their own.

So, supporters of North might find solace that the majority of Americans polled believe he is telling the truth, but to argue that what he did was right in the eyes of Americans just because they liked his performance is to assume way too much.

Politicians might feel better knowing that their vote coincided with the wishes

of their constituents, but to cast a vote or form an attitude based solely on which way the wind is blowing is cowardly.

Unfortunately, governments on every level contain representatives who vote their constituents' wishes everytime, whether or not they are in the best interests of the district or country. By carefully avoiding a confrontation with the home folks, they are almost assured of re-election. If voters were smart, they would get rid of these types and phone in their votes. Just think how much money they would save.

But there is one type of politician worse than the public opinion voter, that's the party-line voter. It doesn't matter if the vote benefits the district or not, the party puppet will dance to the leadership's tune. To eliminate the expense incurred by this type, voters need only declare, by majority vote of course, which party their district is.

Columnist George Will called public

opinion a shifting sand, which is not very good ground on which to base a decision. Our founding fathers were well aware of this. A Constitution and court system are just two of the outcomes of this realization.

When it comes right down to it, public opinion is a terrible reason for anything. And to expect our representatives to make decisions based solely on public opinion would be to defeat the whole purpose of representative government. It would also put the future of this country at the whim of anybody who came across on television, which is something the past six years have taught us we should avoid.

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## Dumb, learning disabled are not the same thing

Back when I was an investigative reporter, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew subpoenaed my notes. Agnew, under investigation for bribery and tax evasion, alleged the Justice Department was trying to drive him from office by leaking false information to the press.



Richard Cohen

Like other reporters subpoenaed, I handed my notes over to my lawyer. Unlike the others, though, I was confident no one would ever read them. That's because not even I could read my notes. I was — I am — learning disabled.

When I was a kid, there was no such thing as learning disabled. There was dumb or its middle-class variant, under-achiever. (Poor kids are never under-achievers, since they are not expected to achieve much to begin with.) I arrived at my diagnosis after finding out a bit about learning disabilities, especially those that, for some reason, affect boys more often than they do girls. Mine has to do with small-motor coordination. I can't write.

Of course, writing is what I do for a living. But that writing has always been on a typewriter and, now, a word processor. It is writing with a pencil or pen I am talking about. Even under the best circumstances, I can't do it well. My handwriting is illegible. I write slowly, painfully and always sloppily. I cannot write a simple thank-you note, and it's been years since I've even attempted one. I type everything.

As learning disabilities go, mine is not catastrophic. It did mean that in school I had a hard time with essays. The ideas in my head could not find their way onto paper. I was slow where others were fast. And where neatness counted, as it almost always did, I was judged lacking and told it was my own fault. No phrase chilled like the one teachers invariably uttered before a test: Neatness counts. I simply could not write neatly. I was told I was not trying. In other words, I was under-achieving.

The field of education is resplendent with jargon. But learning disabled is not one of them. It means that accommodations must be made, that rules or procedures must be waived, that a child or adult must be treated as an individual. If he or she cannot learn in the standard way, then new ways must be found.

In my case, a typewriter did the trick. I took a typing course in high school, and it changed my life. Words and phrases that once I could not get down on paper burst from the typewriter. I suddenly found that I could do the writing I always wanted to do. The phrase "neatness counts" no longer chilled, and I wrote and wrote and wrote.

Years later, a psychologist told me I had — have! — a learning disability. He told me things about myself I had not quite realized. (For instance, if while I'm interviewing someone, I concentrate on my handwriting, I'll lose my train of thought; if I concentrate on what's being said, my hand skates all over the page.) At first I was stunned: Me? Learning disabled? Then my shock turned to anger — anger at all the teachers who never recognized my problem, who insisted I do things their way, who thought all kids should have neat handwriting and those who didn't, well, it was their own fault.

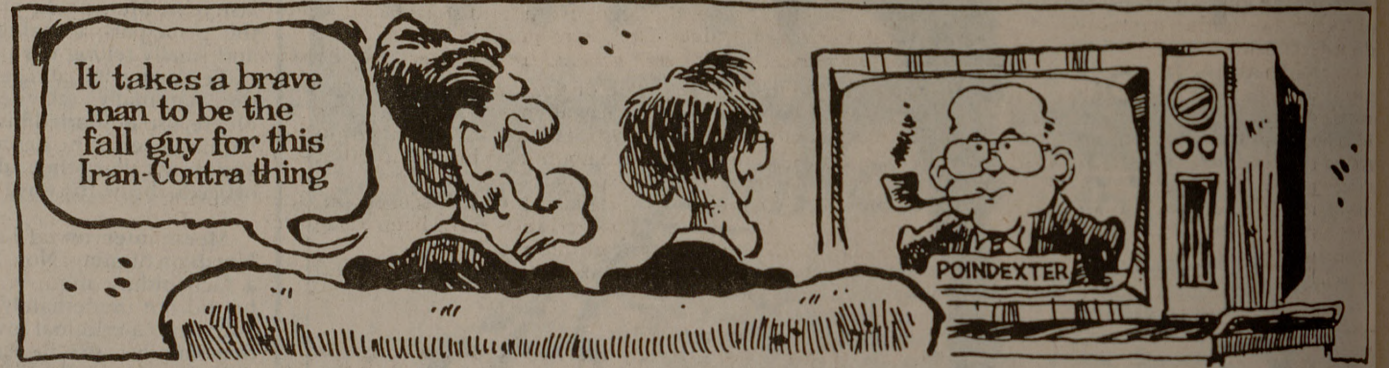
And then I got angry about all those other kids — those with more severe learning disabilities, those who were told they were dumb or lazy when they were in fact learning disabled. In some cases, they were asked to do what they simply could not do. In my case, no teacher noticed that some of my difficulty with math stemmed from an inability to keep columns of numbers straight. In subtraction, addition or long division, I sometimes arrived at an incorrect answer because I added up the wrong numbers.

It is certain that some handicapped kids were made to feel dumb. Call a kid dumb and he'll oblige. Call him an under-achiever and he won't achieve. We often do what's expected of us — kids especially, and maybe poor kids most of all. Their self-confidence is low enough to begin with. Treat them as dumb and they'll think of themselves as dumb. You can learn much from a teacher.

I've written this column for a reason. The other night, I heard two teen-agers refer to a girl as an LD. In their mouths, the term was descriptive, not at all pejorative, and I was pleased that, at least with kids, the concept of learning disabilities has gained acceptance. Naturally, I thought of myself and also thought about how, once before, I had written on this subject. The mother of a learning-disabled boy called to thank me. She had given the column to her son to read and it lifted his spirits.

There are prizes galore in this business, but none better than that.

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## Living with a chili dog addiction

If you're addicted to drugs or alcohol, you can go someplace like the Betty Ford Clinic and get help.

But where do you go if you're addicted to chili dogs?

Yes, chili dogs. Those wonderful hot dogs with lots of chili on them and mustard and onions on the chili that the mere mention of which makes my mouth water, my heart rate speed up and my stomach literally beg to be fed as many of these delights as it can hold.

I had my first chili dog when I was 12. My father took me to Atlanta's legendary Varsity, the world's largest outdoor drive-in.

My father ordered me a chili dog. I took the first bite of it and I was hooked.

During my three years in exile in Chicago, I formulated a scheme to get chili dogs from the Varsity delivered to me.

I started dating a girl I met on a trip back home to Atlanta. Every other week I would fly her to Chicago.



Lewis Grizzard

"And would you mind," I would ask, "stopping by the Varsity on your way to the airport and bringing me 14 dozen chili dogs."

Later, it became clearly evident to the young lady that I looked forward to seeing her dogs more than I looked forward to seeing her.

"It's me or the chili dogs," she eventually said.

I often wonder what ever happened to her.

I had heart surgery in 1982. The doctors said I could have anything I wanted to eat for my pre-operation dinner.

I sent for Varsity chili dogs. Had I died under the knife the next day, at least I would have had a satisfying last meal.

For years I've tried to decide why Varsity chili dogs remain the best I've ever eaten.

The hot dogs are good and so is the chili, but it's the buns that really do it. The Varsity, somebody was telling me, steams its buns. There's nothing better than a steamy bun.

But I must admit my chili dog addiction is becoming a problem.

I can't eat them like I used to and not pay a painful price.

The other night, for instance, I went to the Varsity and had three chili dogs with mustard and raw onions.

I also had an order of french fries and topped that off with a Varsity fried apple with ice cream on it.

I went to bed at 11. The chili dogs hit about 2.

My stomach felt like I had eaten a large box of nails. It made strange sounds like "gooooorp" and "brriiip!"

I got out of bed, took six Roloids, two Alka-Seltzers and drank a six pack of Maalox. Nothing helped.

I'll never eat another chili dog, I said myself.

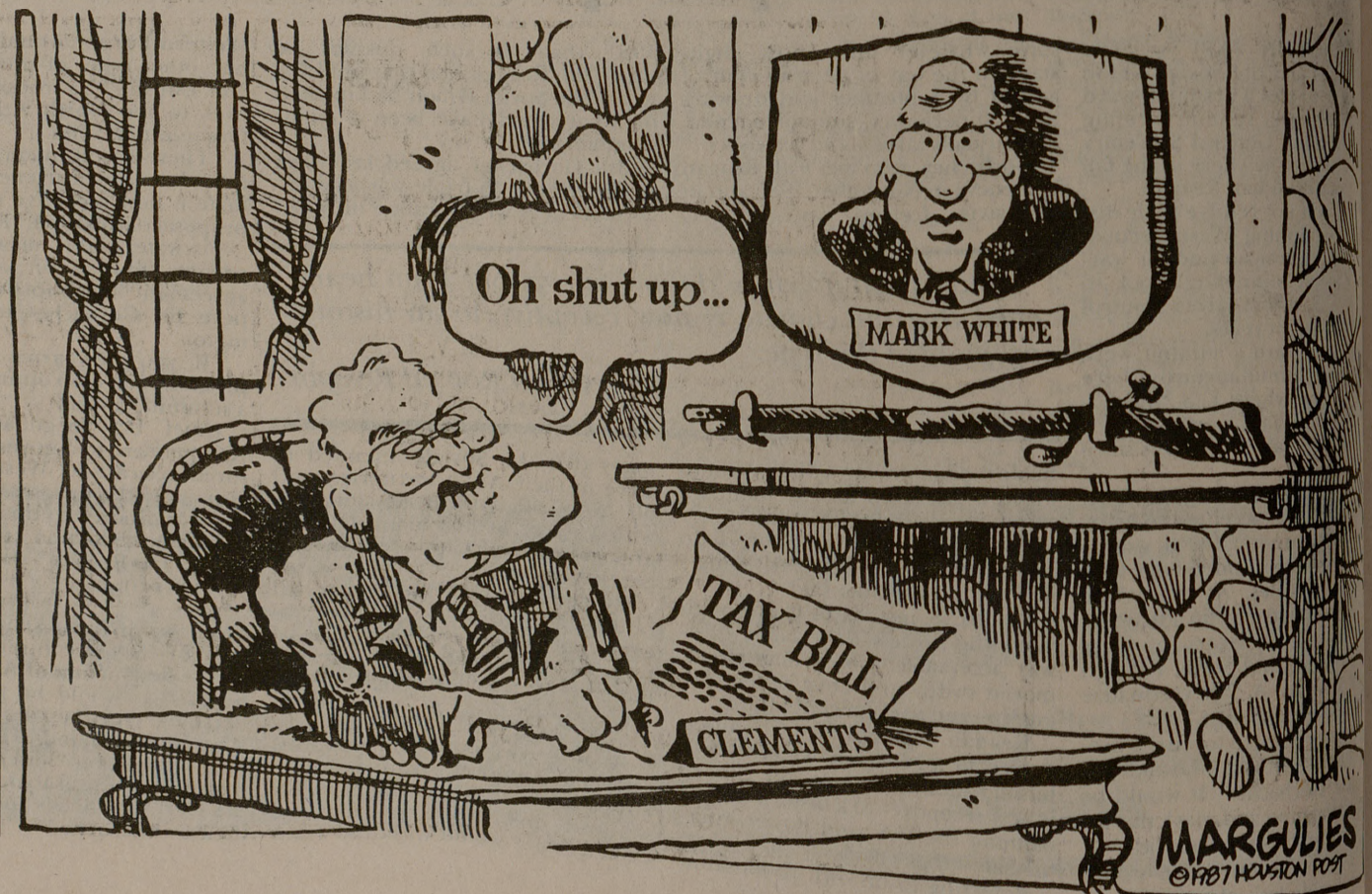
Those addicted to any substance often things like that but they rarely stick to it.

I know I'll be back at the Varsity soon, wolfing down chili dogs. And, later, the agony and the "gooooorfs" and "brriiip" be back.

My stomach and I simply will have to learn to live with a certain fact.

That is, chili dogs always bark at night.

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