

Opinion

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Pettiness prevails

The forces of paranoia have prevailed: Mikhail Gorbachev's invitation to address a joint session of Congress has been withdrawn.

The elected officials who declared the Soviet leader didn't merit the honor of speaking to Congress can sleep well, but perhaps their dreams will be marred by the realization that they have ignored one of the principles of the Constitution they claim to uphold.

Part of our national heritage is the belief that everyone is entitled to have and express his opinion even if that opinion meets with the disfavor of the majority. This is reflected in the First Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech. Although the Bill of Rights applies only to American citizens, it is based on beliefs about the rights of all people. U.S. officials have trampled on these rights by withdrawing the invitation because they don't agree with Gorbachev's ideology.

Too many Americans are quick to extend First Amendment protection to opinions they agree with, without realizing that the First Amendment extends protection to unpopular opinions as well. When our elected officials behave like petty children holding a members-only party, the only reinforcement that attitude.

— The Battalion Editorial Board

Chicago mayor was his own worst enemy

Within minutes after Mayor Harold Washington collapsed at his desk in Chicago's City Hall, I phoned the mayor's former personal physician, who also happens to be my doctor.



Mike Royko

Even before I asked one question, he flatly said: "He's dead."

He briefly explained in medical terms why it was certain the mayor was already dead, although a hospital team would work frantically for two hours before the mayor's death was acknowledged and announced.

Then this doctor's usually calm voice turned angry.

The anger was because he had once been more than the mayor's physician. They had been friends for a long time, political allies for awhile.

And he was angry because the mayor, for a bright man, had been treating himself like a fool.

"I tried to get him in here," the doctor said. "We'd set up an appointment for a checkup, then one of his bodyguards would call and say that something had come up and he couldn't make it."

"So we'd reschedule. I'd set everything up so we could do tests and he could be in and out in the briefest time. But it would happen again. They'd call and say he can't make it. This went on for months."

"Fat? That's not the word. He'd become massive. He gained at least 50 or 60 pounds since he took office. He ate junk food. And when he ordered something to eat, it was double everything. And he seldom had enough rest."

Every deadly sign had been there in previous checkups. Blood pressure, a disaster. Cholesterol, a disaster. On again, off again, and on again with the cigarettes.

"He wouldn't even take the medication I wanted to prescribe for him," the doctor said.

But why does someone, when they know that they're flirting with death, ignore the obvious signs and the obvious precautions?

"I don't know. Sometimes I think it's because he wanted to be in control — it's as if he didn't want to surrender control to me."

So Harold Washington, at 65, died in much the way that he lived. On the one hand, brilliant and hard-driving. On the other, careless and indifferent.

He had the brains and ambition to overcome being a black man in a time of

black subjugation in this country, and to become a lawyer, a state legislator and a congressman.

And when social change and more than a bit of luck thrust him from obscurity into the role of leader of the blacks in Chicago, he had the drive and political savvy to rise to the challenge and be elected mayor. And to be re-elected.

Yet, there was this other, puzzling, self-destructive side to his nature.

When he first ran for mayor, much was made of his past violations of tax laws and a brief time he spent in jail for failing to file returns for several years.

There were some who saw this as evidence that he was a crook with his hand in the public till. But that wasn't what the tax violations were about. They were about carelessness, indifference. He didn't fail to pay taxes. The taxes had already been deducted from his paychecks. It was even possible that he might have been entitled to a return if he had taken the trouble to itemize and file.

But he didn't bother. He never explained why. But it was as if he didn't want to be bothered by what he considered trifling details.

It was much the same when he temporarily lost his law license for failing to perform legal work for clients. These were trivial cases, representing small sums of money. It was never suggested that he did it for profit. Instead, it was his tendency to neglect details, to walk away from the cluttered desk.

In both these legal matters, the real victim was Washington himself. For lack of attention to minor matters, he brought big troubles on himself.

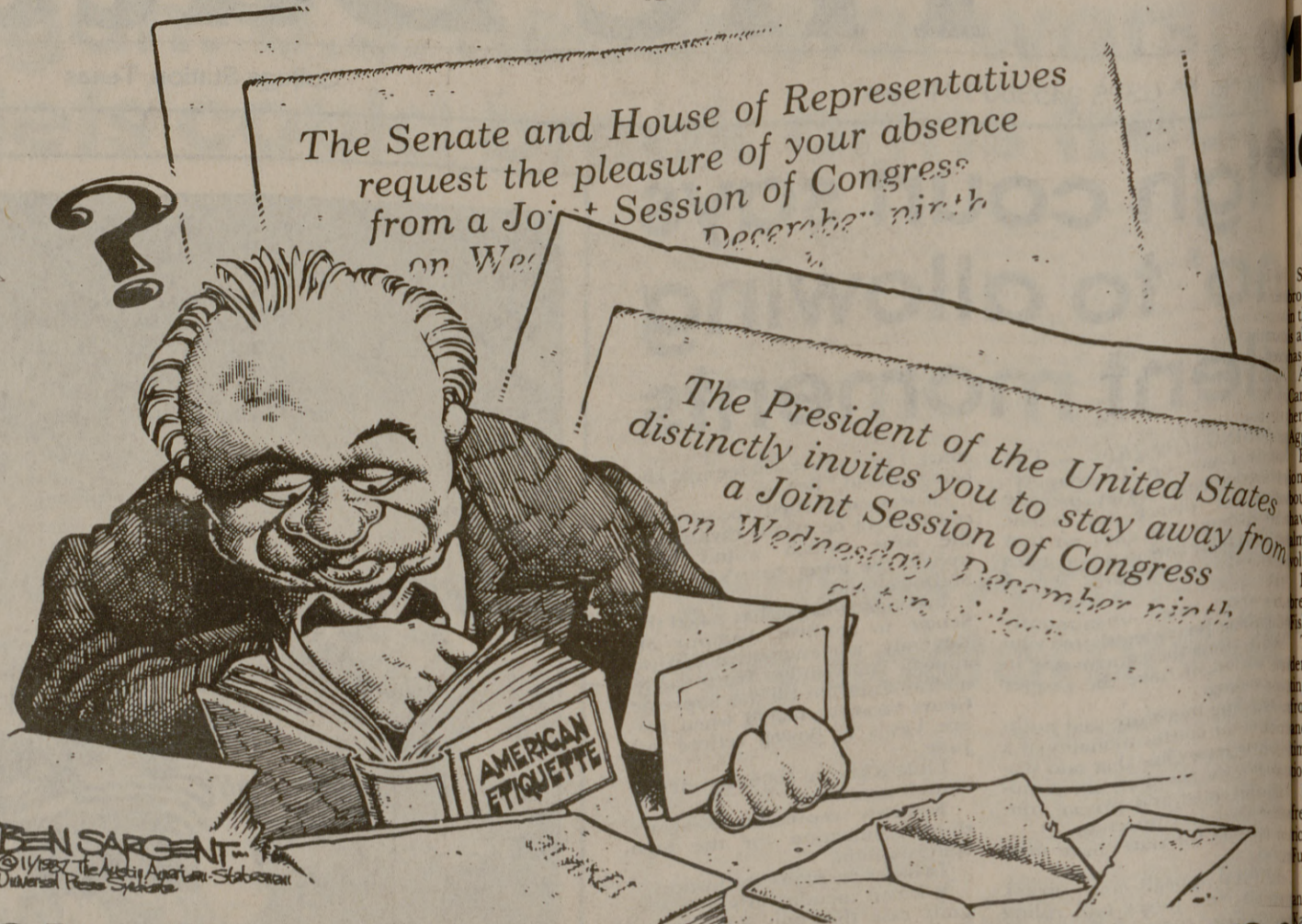
I doubt if we'll ever know why there were such sharp contrasts in the mayor's personality. Despite being a gregarious public figure, he was a very private person. A bachelor most of his life, he had many political associates but few close friends. And those few friends aren't inclined to say much.

But it's obvious that there were two Harold Washingtons. One, a man with the intellect and organizational skills to rise to great political heights and power. The other, a man who couldn't or wouldn't fill out a simple tax form and drop it in the mailbox.

A man who could boast that he intended to live long enough to be mayor of Chicago for another 20 years. And then tell his driver to stop at a fast food stand so he could wolf down a couple of greasy hamburgers that would make a doctor cringe.

So I suppose that all we really know about Harold Washington is that he was human. And ever since humans got up on their hind legs, they've been their own worst enemies.

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Students must try to escape the horrifying 'herd instinct'

Tracy Staton
Guest Columnist

The herd instinct. It's been bothering me for quite some time now. I see it lurking in every corner, behind every door of each room of every building on this campus. But I wasn't sure anyone else noticed it — until I went to the R.E.M. concert in G. Rollie White Coliseum.

Serious thought had been banished to the back of my mind for the first time in weeks. Then Michael Stipe, the band's lead singer, started grinding the gears in my brain. When one of his comments received the traditional Aggie hiss, Stipe was not impressed.

"For all of you who just made hissing noises with your mouths, your assignment for the weekend is to look up 'herd politics' because that's what you just participated in," Stipe said. Surprisingly, everyone clapped.

Did people clap because they know what "herd politics" means and agree with Stipe? Or did they applaud because the person next to them did because the person next to THEM did (and so on and so on)? I couldn't decide.

When I allowed serious thought to reign o'er me again, I realized the same type of random applause occurred at the Dukakis teleconference on Nov. 15. The audience of about 800 people clapped most profusely for two of the candidate's opinions: no Star Wars and no Contra aid. Wow. I never expected THAT from "conservative" Aggies.

So, the question again: Did people clap because they oppose Star Wars and Contra aid? Do they know what Star Wars is? Do they know where Nicaragua is? Or did they applaud because the person next to them did because the person next to THEM did (and so on and so on)? Hmmm.

Well, let's give these people the benefit of the doubt. If they clapped because they agreed with Dukakis, there are some closet liberals — or at least semi-liberals — at A&M. Why haven't we heard from them before? My theory is that the people who don't conform don't speak out because they don't want to rock the slow-but-steady conservative boat.

What about the audience at R.E.M.? Let's give them the benefit of the doubt, too. If they agreed with Stipe, they have obviously noticed this evil Presence. So it's time to come out of the closet with

my crusade to rid the world of gratuitous conformism — starting with Texas A&M.

Realistically speaking, the crusade against the herd instinct has been struggling in the face of overwhelming odds for several centuries. Whatever you call it — herd politics, the herd instinct, herd mentality, conformism, the bandwagon phenomenon — it's been around since tribal warfare.

In 1859, John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty" castigated English society for blindly adhering to custom. He did not oppose custom in itself; he said "an intelligent following of custom, or even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom, is better than blind and simply mechanical adherence to it."

Let this be a lesson to the tradition-mongers who scream "it's a tradition!" each time one of their sacred rituals is even questioned. Tradition has its place. But doing something just to follow custom, without thinking about possible consequences, is not just blind — it's stupid.

It's difficult to make an independent decision, especially one that may conflict with the majority. It's much easier to go along with the crowd. As Mill says, "He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the apeline one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties."

Take voting. It's time-consuming to gather the information required to make an informed decision. It's much easier to say "Well, Suzi likes George Bush, and my dad's a Republican, so I'll vote for him" or "Paul Simon has a cute bow tie — let's vote for him."

But, as Mill says later, "But what will be his comparative worth as a human being?" What is the value of a person who acts a certain way or does certain things just because his best friend or girlfriend or boss or parents or favorite movie star does?

And for those people who make it difficult for others to admit that YES, they oppose Star Wars or NO, they don't like Madonna — Mill has even more advice.

"The general average of mankind are not only moderate in intellect, but also moderate in inclinations: they have no tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to do anything unusual, and they consequently do not understand those who have, and class all such with the wild and intemperate whom they are

accustomed to look down upon," he says.

In other words, the average person doesn't have enough intelligence to be eccentric, and if they do, they think it's too much trouble. And those people who break through the barrier of moderate intellect and inclination receive only ridicule for their trouble.

If this sounds vaguely like something Galileo experienced, it's because he did. He endured the teasing of his fellow scientists because he believed the Earth was not the center of the universe. What about the Wright brothers? If they had listened to their friends, we wouldn't have the convenience of traveling across country in just a few hours.

I read "On Liberty" this summer about the same time the Iran-Contra hearings started. Since the hearings were televised, I had the opportunity to watch present-day citizens use their "ape-like faculties." People formed opinions after watching a half-hour of the hearings. Others quickly adopted the views of friends who watched the hearings between classes in Blocker.

Very few people truly understood what the hearings were about. So fewer religiously watched the hearing. But by the time they were over, they thought they were experts on the Iran-Contra affair.

It was bad enough when the "On Liberty" T-shirts blazed onto the market. But when I saw a woman on CNN say "But he looks cute in his uniform!" I couldn't take any more. I turned off the television and went back to reading my English assignment.

Respect for others' opinions is important — if the opinion is carefully conceived and rooted in fact. If someone spouts an opinion with nothing to substantiate it, their view does not deserve respect.

And if an informed opinion deviates from the norm, it deserves serious consideration. It does not deserve instant dismissal to Goonville.

It's time for us to stop playing follow-the-leader. Take a look around. If you honestly agree with the status quo, don't think it's a crime to conform. But if you don't agree, don't be afraid to speak up.

Someone, somewhere will be clapping for you. And not just because the person next to them did.

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by Berke Breathed

