



EDITORIAL

Unreasonable seizure Rights denied in name of drug war

Forfeiture laws, a serious infringement on the most basic rights of Americans, are running amuck. These laws allow the government to seize property allegedly used to "facilitate" a crime. In the last seven years, the total assets from federal seizures swelled to \$2.4 billion — an increase of over 1,500 percent.

The perversion of modern forfeiture laws lies in the fact that they are applied indiscriminately regardless of the guilt or innocence of the owners. Property need only be allegedly involved in a crime for seizure. Proof of innocence is shifted to owners before entitlement of their property is returned.

For instance, a family residence would be at risk of seizure if a relative or friend of the owner were to use a phone at the home to pick up

drugs. A few states including Texas apply forfeiture law to any kind of criminal activity, drug-related or not, on the sole basis of probable cause by anyone present to use property unlawfully.

Since informants usually receive a percentage of the seized goods netted in this manner, they have an incentive to "create" crimes in which property was employed to facilitate a crime. The burden of proof needs to be shifted back onto the state and the presumption of innocence shifted to the defendants.

While forfeiture laws create a deterrent to crime, there is a crying need to balance this by penalizing only those found guilty by a court of law — and not those who may only be circumstantially involved.

Libertarians: third party in limbo Party platform can make sense; it isn't making waves

Some of you reading this are libertarians; you just don't think you are.

It's not because you necessarily disagree with their platform. How many of you college students agree that raising the drinking age to 21 was a mistake?

Don't you conservatives feel that government has grown too much and has taxed us too heavily to pay for programs we don't need? Do any liberals out there share the Libertarian Party's belief that federal government seizures of homes and cars in drug-related cases — before defendants are given any due process — is terribly unjust?



JASON LOUGHMAN
Opinion editor

Come on, admit it — many of you have been thinking libertarian thoughts, perhaps without even realizing it. The Libertarian platform is in many ways an amalgam of conservative and liberal principles.

Not only do many voters agree with at least some of the libertarian agenda, but the American public is disgusted with the scandal-plagued and often inept leaders that the two ruling parties have offered us of late.

What, then, can explain the spectacular failure of the Libertarian Party, third largest political party in the United States, to attract voters, increase membership, raise money, and gain media attention?

One factor, the only one over which the Libertarians had no control, was the popularity of Ross Perot. Perot attracted the disenchantment vote, more of which might have found an alternative in the Libertarian Party had Perot never appeared.

However, the Libertarians have far more fundamental problems, problems which, left unaddressed, will prevent them from ever becoming a serious force in American politics.

The first of these, and the most serious, is their extreme idealism. It is represented best by the statement prospective members of the party must sign to the effect that they do not support the initiation of force in order to achieve policy aims. In fact, this test is applied to all questions of government and legislation to determine Libertarian Party positions.

Thus, in the libertarian view, income taxes, which re-

quire that the government coerce its citizens into payment, are wrong and should be abolished. Apprehending murderers and rapists is not wrong, because it is the criminal who initiated the use of force; and the police, as an agent of the government, would be second to use force.

The rule, as far as I have seen, is inflexible.

A Libertarian representative once explained that one can support the party to the extent that one wants without subscribing to pure libertarian thought. The point he missed is that nobody wants to be a half-Libertarian, or a half-Democrat or half-Republican for that matter.

Most voters are far too pragmatic to support the outright abolition of the income tax. Many, however, would support its reduction.

The initiation of force test used by the Libertarians thus prevents the full support of those who feel that they are libertarians, but at the same time, realists.

The last thing the Libertarian Party can afford is to cause prospective members to feel alienated. The party must, if it wishes to grow, temper its ideals with at least a measure of realism — they must make their statement about force a guide instead of a test.

The next most serious problem for the Libertarian Party is the lack of media attention given them. It's hard to find the media here. More coverage of the Libertarians, without the 30-minute infomercials Perot was able to afford, would have amounted to editorializing by agenda setting. Affording them coverage disproportionate to their actual impact on the campaign would have been unprofessional.

The insidious thing here is that without money, the Libertarian Party will remain unable to attract such attention. Without the attention, they will remain unable to attract money. Catch-22.

Why discuss them then?

America needs a viable third party. Democrats and Republicans have demonstrated that their main interest is staying in power, and though Perot at one time was a strong challenger to them both, he has no political party, no organization that will last beyond this election.

It is ironic that the idealism of the Libertarian Party, the idealism missing from the dominant parties, is their fatal weakness. For those of us who are part Republican and part Democrat, who feel that government long ago overstepped its bounds, the irony is also a shame.

Loughman is a senior journalism major

Vice President missed a stop on A&M visit; also missed the point

I hope you are pleased with your visit to Texas A&M last week. As you now know, we like to give people a good welcome.

I wish, however, you had had the time to visit our history faculty coffee room to chat with a few of us. Admittedly our oratory skills cannot compare with a few thousand screaming Aggies, but I think we all would have benefited.

You do remember faculty lounges, of course. In your June 9 follow-up to the famous May 19 "Murphy Brown" speech, you claimed "to appeal to our country's enduring, basic moral values is to invite the scorn and laughter of the elite culture." One bastion of that "elite culture," according to you, was the faculty lounge.

I cannot speak for my colleagues in agricultural economics or physics, but I can assure you that we have never met in the history coffee room — lounge is too kind a word — to sneer at the simple but hard virtues — modesty, fidelity, integrity." Indeed, we often mourn how seldom we encounter them in our professional and private lives. Our conversations do not revolve around practicing witchcraft, destroying "family values," or engaging in other activities deemed un-American by the Republican National Convention in August. Faculty family concerns are more prosaic: How are our parents doing? Can the car last another year? Will there be enough summer school teaching for everyone? Fortunately, unlike some 37 million other citizens, we do not personally have to worry about health insurance.

Our coffee room, contrary to the implications of your speeches, is filled with discussions about our children. The exception is Monday, when the televised sports of the weekend usually dominate. We are proud, but honest and worried parents. Two major concerns are day care and education. Unlike your wife, none of us have staffs to assist, so professors and spouses, like millions of other citizens, juggle schedules daily to ensure parental availability.

Of great concern to us are our students. We worry where our graduate students will find work after they re-

GUEST COLUMN
DR. JONATHAN COOPERSMITH

ceive their doctorates. We try to locate funding to keep them alive while completing their education. We may be part of the "cultural elite," but that certainly does not imply wealth; perhaps we should have become corporate lawyers.

We also worry about undergraduates. Hiring freezes have increased class size and prevented us from offering some courses and may have forced some students to take longer than four years to complete their degrees. Most of all, we try to give all our students the best education possible.

Teaching history has several purposes, the most important of which is to give students a sense of where they and their societies belong. Another goal is to familiarize students with other cultures across time and geography, which also creates greater understanding of their own society. One joy of history is showing students how interpretations and analyses evolve over time together with society.

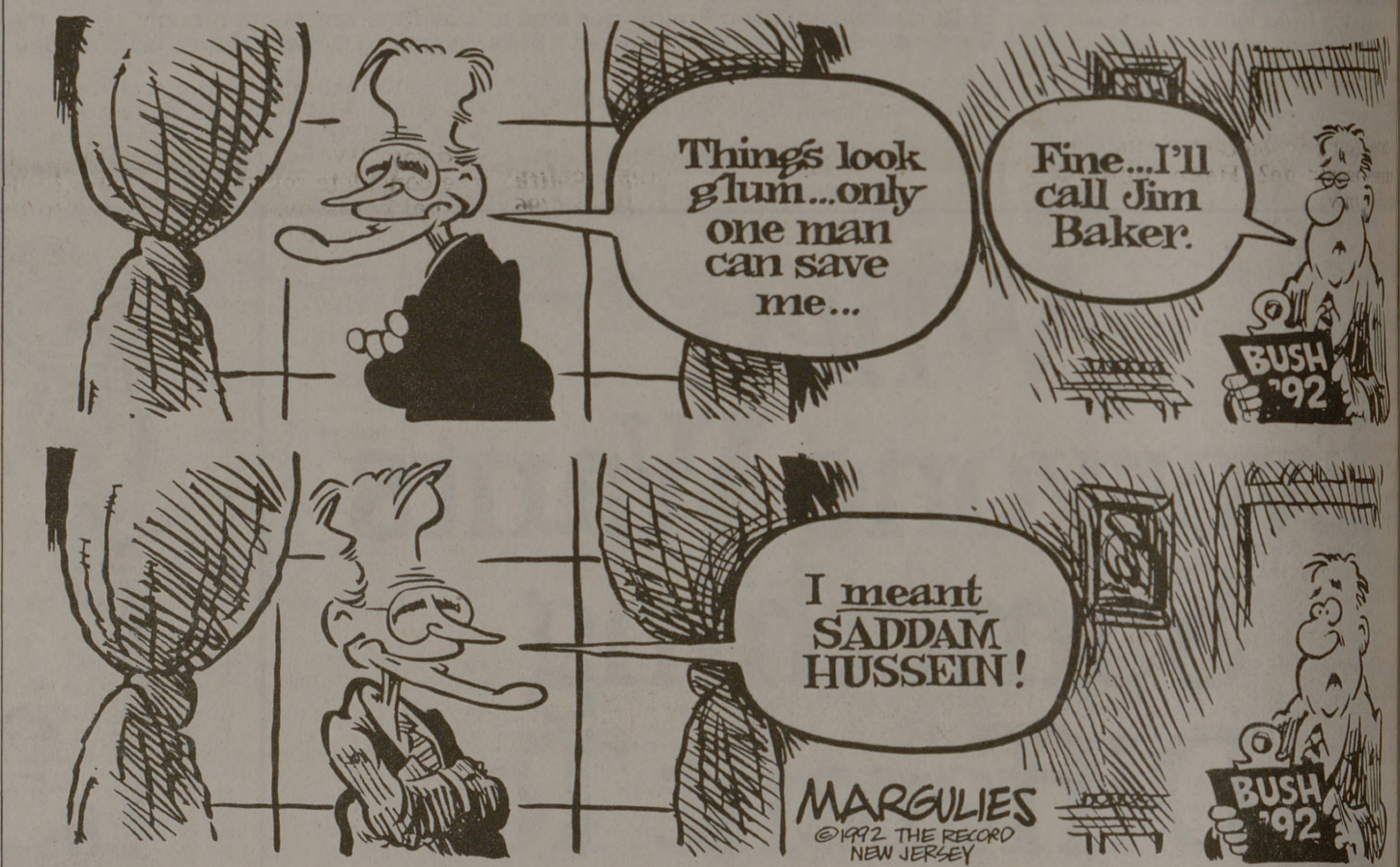
A good historian teaches his or her students to think independently. This means, unlike many a campaign, looking at issues in all their actual complexity and uncertainty. Ideally, thinking independently means not prejudging ideas by their origin or automatically assuming that foreign equals bad. Thinking independently also means a tolerance and respect for dissenting views.

We try to defuse student intolerance and replace it, if not with understanding, at least with comprehension and knowledge. Some student impressions about varieties of Christianity, let alone other religions, would scare you with the vehemence of their ignorance and bigotry. They certainly scare us.

Change, as you noted, is a permanent part of life, but it has ever been so. Change has many components — ideological, political, economic, social, technical, and ultimately, personal. I teach history of technology. I like to think that my students leave the classroom not only with a solid understanding of how technology and society affect each other, but also as better citizens who realize the importance of individuals.

I am sorry you did not visit our faculty coffee room. The coffee is good, the conversation stimulating, and my colleagues and our staff very proud to help educate a future generation.

Dr. Coopersmith is an assistant professor of history



MAIL CALL

Did The Battalion do something right?

I'll admit it. I'm a Mail Call junkie. I pick up my Battalion every afternoon, skim the headlines, check out our #5 football rating if it's Monday, and then I turn to the back page to read the letters to the editor.

So you can imagine my delight on Tuesday when I found a page and a half of letters just waiting to entertain me.

I found letters on everything from dry ice looking like a melted frog to yet another complaint on Feducia to an Ag turned t-sip giving our Greek system a friendly warning.

It's always entertaining, and sometimes informative to get my Mail Call fix for the day.

Thanks, Batt staff, for giving us Mail Call junkies a large dose of entertainment on Tuesday, and please keep it up!

Andi Davis
Class of '94

Investigation kills melting frog myth

As a chemistry graduate student, I like to think that I do my part to broaden the public's awareness of chemistry through teaching my freshman labs.

Imagine my surprise when I read in the Oct. 22 Battalion that, in fact, I was promoting animal torture by using a lab manual that features a frog being dissolved in acid on its front cover. Just what we need, I thought. Animal rights activists firebombing my office. Lawsuits. Disgrace.

But wait — am I not jumping to conclusions? Why not utilize that most powerful of logic weapons, the scientific method! It has four steps: observe, hypothesize, test, and explain.

Having thus observed that our freshman chemistry laboratory program was being accused of cruelty to animals, I hypothesized that Newman was, at worst, on serious drugs; at best, misinformed.

I decided to test the latter theory by contacting the lab manual's author, Dr. M. Larry Peck.

He said that to the best of his knowledge, the beaker on the cover contained no such frog and no such acid.

After I insinuated that he might be part of some evil subliminal plot to warp the minds of freshmen, the publisher confirmed his story and

stated that the picture was merely yellow light behind a beaker of water into which some dry ice had been dropped.

When I first read Newman's letter, I laughed, but then I was upset because not everyone thinks highly of the chosen field and his letter might be one of the rare things that people would remember.

"When I was an undergrad at A&M the fish chem lab manual had a picture of a frog being dissolved in acid — alive! — and you could see the gurgling out and the little eyes popping everything!"

A college myth in the making.

Julie L.C. Thomas
Graduate student

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We reserve the right to edit letters for length, style, and accuracy.

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