

A SPECTER IS HAUNTING AMERICA

A weekly column dealing with issues of politics and ethics,

By: Richard Curtis

This section (all from 1997) contains material from after I regularized the column as a weekly. At this time the column began receiving wider circulation and I wrote for a wider audience.

The Free Market and Flat Earth (12/30/96)

I was reading a commentary by Georgie Anne Geyer the other day and got to thinking about the Flat Earth Society. These are people who maintain, for reasons of humor (I hope), that the Earth is in fact flat. Most of us have lived with the round Earth paradigm since about 1500. In addition to being a brutal slave trader, Columbus also proved to us that the Earth is round.

Turns out, some people had known that the Earth was round for one thousand, seven hundred years before Columbus. In fact some people had calculated the circumference of the Earth to within 15% of its actual size. But those people were Greek, and we all know Greece hasn't had much of a role in the world since two hundred years before the Common Era. So nobody of any significance believed that the Earth was round for another 1700 years.

No matter what evidence was presented to European pundits in the Middle Ages, they would claim that the Earth is perfectly flat, and would point out how marbles sit very still unless placed on a hill, which must prove that the Earth is flat, because if it were round the marbles would roll no matter where you put them.

To you and me this seems perfectly stupid, but in 1300 if you suggested that the Earth was round you would likely be chased out of town, and maybe burned.

Georgie Anne Geyer is like those people in the Middle Ages who claimed, regardless of the evidence, that the Earth is flat. I say this because Geyer seems to have a hard time with reality. She writes about world affairs and always seems to not quite get it. I have often read her stuff and been thinking, this is interesting, but then she'll stumble and fall into some tired cliché about the rightness of the "Free" Market. It must be really frustrating being her, always on the verge of a critical insight, but just when she almost has it the insight evaporates like a mirage in the desert of bourgeois ideology.

Last week Geyer wrote this column about the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Army in Peru, whom she correctly understands are an inevitable product of the brutal realities of life in Central America. But the nature of those realities are completely beyond her. The fundamental dynamic of life in every country is the class struggle. This is fairly basic: rich people who own factories and other businesses hire people to make or provide products or services which the rich people sell. For their efforts the working people are compensated with a small percentage of the proceeds from the sale, the rest is called "profit" and is kept by the rich people so they can become richer. Sounds like your life doesn't it?

Profit is the surplus value between the cost of a good or service and the amount customers pay. Without exploited labor there can be no profit. Geyer, like those before her who desperately held onto the flat Earth concept, believes that every society must function on the principle of private profit. So to her way of thinking, the Tupac Amaru are simply confused about their goals because the only way for the people of Peru to bring themselves out of

desperate poverty is through encouraging the Japanese and others to invest in their country -- to come in, exploit Peruvian labor, and take their profits home.

Geyer knows that the violence of poverty will generate a violent response from the peasantry, but due to her unshakable faith in flatness she believes these peasants are simply resisting the inevitable "progress" of the "Free" Market. After all a rising tide lifts all boats. Which is to say, a growing Capitalist economy will supposedly raise the standard of living of everyone, not just the owners.

This is just as foolish as believing that the world is flat. All available evidence from the last 200 years indicates that a rising Capitalist tide actually floats a token small boat or two and, of course, the really, really big boats. The first law of capitalism is the concentration of wealth. The "Free" Market has the immutable effect of concentrating wealth into fewer and fewer hands.

Anyone who suggests that this is not the case is either desperately uneducated on the facts or, more likely, is lying. And I am sure that it is only coincidental that the people who make the most fuss about the supposed benefits of capitalism are already rich, and therefore more likely to get richer as the rest of us get poorer.

Those are the facts. The world is becoming less stable. Everywhere you look living standards are declining, while poverty, violence, and misery are increasing. If the capitalist pundits were correct the world would have grown more stable with the end of the Cold War, but, of course, it didn't and cannot.

Until people like Georgie Anne Geyer learn the actual facts of economics, including the inevitable concentration of wealth, and the persistence of the class struggle against this unjust accumulation, they will remain forever confused and befuddled by world affairs.

Gulf War Syndrome (1/6/97)

According to news reports last week, it would seem that there really is a Gulf War Syndrome -- three of them actually. How many of us are surprised? Evidently the people in charge of the military and government are still claiming to be surprised, or are claiming that the results of the most recent research are flawed. All those people who got sick as a result of their experiences in the Gulf War are faking it, seems to be the implication.

Of course the other possibility is that the government doesn't want to admit that it simply uses and throws away working people where it is convenient.

Ten years ago next month the U.S. Navy and I officially separated, on their terms. The Navy refused to recognize my terms for our separation, although things worked out without prison time. So, perhaps I shouldn't complain. But I do find myself wondering about those people who have the "If You Love Freedom, Thank a Veteran" bumper stickers.

The historical record would indicate that the freedoms Americans enjoy are the result of concerted political pressure by citizens, especially unions, upon our government. The freedom of the American people has not been at issue since the War of 1812. Now it is certainly true that World War II represented the interests of all people and not just the ruling class. Although, every other war this country has fought has actually been at the expense of working people, for the sole benefit of rich people.

If you love your freedom thank a union member!

Let's think for a moment about Vietnam. I believe it was in the decade after that travesty of justice that these seemingly "pro-veteran" bumper stickers appeared. During the war in

Vietnam our government conducted the most brutal bombing every conceived, as well as treating our troops as callously as the supposed "enemy." Our government decided that its goal of defoliating someone else's countryside was more important than the health and safety of the troops fighting the war. Thus lots of veterans of the Vietnam War needlessly came down with various and previously unknown neurological disorders as well as various forms of cancer.

During the War in the Persian Gulf the same kinds of decisions were made. To the U.S. Government ordinary American people are disposable. American corporations sold Iraq chemical and biological warfare agents, American planes bombed the bunkers housing these agents, and inevitably American and other troops were poisoned. And not to be out done by another supposed enemy, the American military decided to give our troops cocktails of so-called preventative agents in combinations that had never been tested. So our troops became guinea pigs for these chemical warfare tests -- and lo and behold many of them are now suffering debilitating diseases.

The issue is not whether our troops deserve or don't deserve support from the rest of us. The real issue is the nature of our support that those who serve in the military deserve. Having been one of them, it seems to me that unquestioned support for the warmongering of the U.S. government and its complete disregard for the lives of human beings is the greatest disservice we can do to all current and former members of the military.

In my home town there is a leader of the local VFW who writes in to the local paper every few months to make some point about supposedly supporting veterans. I have always found the reactionary tone of these letters disturbing. Many people seem to think that supporting veterans means unquestioned support for the imperialist policies of the government. I wonder if this guy has figured out yet that the military doesn't support veterans, so veterans are foolish to support the military.

If we had all rejected the Gulf War, imagine how many thousands of our previously healthy young men and women would have been saved. Imagine how many millions of Iraqi children would have been saved. And what would have been lost? The profits of some oil companies and the power of a dictator called Emir in a puny little country called Kuwait. It was not worth even the loss of a night's sleep to me, let alone my life or health, to reinstall a dictator called Emir. This was the general line of my disagreement with the Navy.

And, screw the oil companies -- who were after all the real financial beneficiaries of the Gulf War. Let them send their own children off to kill and die. The lives of American troops are far too valuable to be sacrificed in this way.

But of course that is not how the ruling class thinks. They send the children of working people off to kill and die to protect their profits.

You know, if you really love your freedom thank a trade unionist! If you really love your country, keep it from going to war to protect the profit interests of an increasing minute group of corporate owners.

If Jon Bennet had been born poor... (1/13/97)

Here in the heartland of the Ramsey Murder Mystery people have been talking about what it all means since the beginning. The IT in question, though, is the spectacle. And the aspect of the spectacle that people in Boulder County have been discussing most is the treatment

of the Ramsey family and how that treatment would have been different if the Ramseys had been working class.

The local Op/Ed pages have regularly featured editorials and letters to the editor expressing shock and dismay at the state of justice in America. Keep in mind, Boulder, Colorado is not Los Angeles. In LA people have grown jaded by a corrupt police department and legal system. In LA the police have had a reputation for abusing people and justice since at least the 1950's. But this is Boulder, where we have a reputation for liberalism and sensitivity.

Yet in this bastion of seemingly progressive values the issues of owners and workers are the same as anywhere. Boulder is very much a city run by and for the rich. Workers and the poor are there to keep the streets clean, to do the actual work, and, of course, to pay for the party.

In case you have wisely chosen to not pay much attention to the Ramsey case, it involves the murder of six year old JonBennet Ramsey, a family with lots and lots of money as well as questionable values, and a complete lack of official suspects. From early on it was clear to the people of Boulder that the Ramseys were treated differently -- better -- by the local police, the local media, and then the national media than regular people would have been in similar circumstances.

Lately, this different, favorable, treatment has been called "classist." This is a new word used to describe inequality, in the same way that racist describes a bias. The assumption in both cases is that all people are equal and deserve equal treatment by society and government. I have trouble with the word "classist" myself because the people using it are implying that it is possible for working people to be treated equally in this society. Of course, all people should be treated equally, but we live in a class society, a society of rich and poor, of owners and workers. Such a society is by its very design unequal, immoral, and biased against those outside of the circles of power -- those without money or capital.

It is good that we talk about injustice wherever it is encountered, but the naive assumption that our society can be just in its present form disturbs me. When Boulderites write in to their local paper to express "disillusionment" with the class based bias in the media and police I can only wonder what planet these people come from. Of course rich people are treated differently than the rest of us. Of course rich people are of interest to the media when the suffering of ordinary people goes unnoticed, and of course the rich have a significantly better chance of committing the most heinous crimes and never being brought to justice.

For anyone to be surprised by this state of affairs is, to me, shocking in and of itself. Where have these people been? The father in this murder case comes from the ruling class. This means that he has more money than the rest of us, and got that money through the exploitation of other human beings. Profit is ultimately the difference between what workers produce and what they are paid, the rest being called profit which is kept by the rich people. So Mr. Ramsey is rich because the rest of us are poor.

Our society is run by and for rich people. So when the police interact with Mr. Ramsey they are interacting with one of those in charge, not just an ordinary person. The ruling class has more rights than the rest of us by virtue of their position. We often don't think about things this way, but all recognized human rights are enjoyed by the rich, while very few are actually enjoyed by the rest of us. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has never been ratified by this country, recognizes a human right to housing, food, clothing, and education as well as the more traditionally recognized rights of speech, association, and so on that are familiar to us from our painfully class biased Constitution.

The rich people who run the country all have homes -- the Ramseys have three. Rich people have food -- starving people are always poor. Rich people have clothes -- usually much nicer than yours or mine. And rich people have access to education and health care because these things are rationed, in our society, by dollars. Those with the dollars have health care and can afford tuition. So the struggle of ordinary people to attain these things has never been an issue to the ruling class. Our society values competition, the freedom of commercial speech to deceive, and the rights of corporations to exploit, pollute, and lie. Why would anyone think that such a society is not going to treat rich people involved in a murder mystery, and every other kind of crime, significantly differently than the rest of us. Working people in this society are locked up at a rate twice that of the people in even the most corrupt and abusive countries in the world. Wait, I guess that makes our's the most corrupt and abusive society in the world. Oh, the joys of Free Market Capitalism.

A Real Populist Proposal for Relations with China (1/20/97)

There has been a bit of a fuss lately about the nature of U.S.- China relations. The business community, a.k.a. the capitalist class, has been divided about the issue. Some want to do business with China, which is after all the largest market in the world, as a way of undermining Chinese socialism. Some want to isolate China, supposedly because of human rights abuses, as a way of undermining Chinese socialism. Some working people, even many of those who call themselves progressive or populist, have also called for us to boycott Chinese products.

Ronnie Dugger, of The Alliance for Democracy, has written; we ought not "... trade with dictatorships like China that use slave labor and shoot down, jail and torture their dissenters."

While I think we can all agree that economic policies must have a moral component -- this is what separates progressives from reactionaries -- ethical judgements must be made in their global and historical context and not just as a reaction to a few isolated incidents. Dugger's veiled suggestion that the U.S. blockade of Cuba ("shoot down") is somehow in the interest of working Americans, or is in some abstract way just, is wrong because he fails to take into account the global context of the people's historic struggle against imperialism.

The ethical dimension of any international policy must factor in the goals of the societies with which we trade, and not just the reactionary proclamations of the enemy corporate class. In the real world, we all have a moral obligation to support countries whose general aim at least appears to be improving the lives of their people. Taken in this light, we must encourage trade with Cuba and China as a means of promoting the interests of working people everywhere.

I find it ironic that a so-called populist like Dugger would single out socialist states like China and Cuba for condemnation. Socialism is not an enemy to working people. And supporting socialist states is most definitely in the interest of working people. I submit that if The Alliance and other populists are intending to have a positive effect on the lives of working people in this country that part of the strategy for accomplishing this goal must include supporting governments which are dedicated to the same goal in their own countries, even if we disagree with particular aspects of their approach to the issues.

For example, to the degree that the Chinese actually make use of slave labor then those particular industries ought to be boycotted by American consumers. To propagate a blanket boycott based on a few problematic areas serves only the interests of the enemy, who clearly

recognizes that socialism in China and Cuba is a threat to capitalist interests. Even if Dugger and his ilk do not share the Chinese and Cuban peoples' goal of socialism they ought to at least respect those nations' right to self determination, not to mention recognizing the general political strategy that My enemy's enemies are my allies.

I believe the heart of this issue is that many well-intentioned people in this country fail to understand that the struggle to improve the lives of ordinary people takes place in history. The current, and increasing, awareness of most people that global corporations are dictating our lives is not an accident. Rather, this awareness is the result of a Post Cold War global onslaught against us by these corporations -- or more precisely by the owning class which controls the corporations. All of us in the world share this common enemy. Fighting amongst ourselves over what are, in the end, minor details is counter productive and gives aid and comfort only to the enemy.

Some may feel that by taking what they believe to be a moral high ground with regards to internal problems in Cuba or China insulates them from the complexities of life. Not only is this not true, but hostility toward the socialist world is morally unconscionable because such a position fails to appreciate the interconnections we all share and the common struggle for justice, the class struggle, which affects all the people of the Earth.

It is time for "Real Populists" to stand up and take on the challenge of living in solidarity and struggle in a morally complicated, and at times ambiguous, world. If we set our eyes on the ultimate goal we all share -- the goal of universal justice -- and resolve to work together to achieve this goal then we will one day succeed. Divided we remain forever defeated, united we will triumph.

Are Cubans Smarter Than We Are?(2/3/97)

I think I figured out why the problem of Cuban Socialism is so daunting to American politicians and business owners. The people who run our country are just not as smart as the people running Cuba. It is kind of sad really, we have all of these resources -- which are of course concentrated in the hands of the wealthy -- and yet their best and brightest are still just simpletons compared to even run of the mill Cuban leaders.

Take for example the Helms-Burton law, which is the latest in a series of simple-minded attempts to isolate Cuba in the world community. Helms and Burton are not even among our best or brightest, so I guess we shouldn't be surprised that they came up with a law which is rejected by everyone in the world. In Canada, the people and the government seem to be having a kind of contest to see how much they can support Cuba just to spite our stupid politicians. Helms-Burton was so foolish that even the president who signed the law had to delay its implementation because of legal problems.

In Cuba, I think to highlight how much smarter they are, the Cuban Parliament passed a law which recognizes U.S. citizens' right to restitution for property nationalized after the revolution. But, the law also specifically exempts anyone who files suit in the U.S. under Helms-Burton from making any claims in Cuba. So only an idiot would try to take advantage of law that no one in the world recognizes (Helms-Burton) and thereby exempt themselves from protections offered by a law everyone in the world will recognize. But such is the intelligence of the ruling class in the U.S.

And while we are talking about official U.S. stupidity, we might mention Radio and TV Marti. These are illegal propaganda programs run by the U.S. State Department to broadcast lies and disinformation to Cuba from Florida. These projects are recognized the world over as being illegal. But that is not enough for our government. No, we spend tens of millions of dollars on these broadcasts and they reach no one. The Cuban government jams the transmissions.

But even that is not the height of the stupidity of TV and Radio Marti. The argument in Congress is that the Cuban people need access to information about ... I don't know something to do with the State Department's fantasy life. For some reason the fact that Cubans watch and listen to the commercial media from Florida is not sufficient, they special information.

Is it just me, or is our government run by bumbling fools? Now some people would point out here that I am being foolish myself for expecting more from them. These are the same people who spend tens of thousands of dollars each for military toilets and wrenches, but don't seem to mind that a quarter of our children live in poverty. Are my expectations really too high? Should we expect our government to act with the same level of intelligence and principle with which the Cuban government acts? Silly me, I do.

To be fair, though, I suspect that our government is not really quite as incompetent as it appears. Sometimes, I think they just act stupid to cover their real intentions. And maybe TV and Radio Marti are instructive here.

You see, Cubans do watch our TV and listen to our radio, so they know what's going on here. They hear about what is happening in the rest of the world. I suspect that on average Cubans know much more about the world than Americans do. They see Miami TV and know how shallow, violent, and cruel our society is. Cubans read and hear about what has happened to the former Soviet Union, the poverty, violence, and hopelessness that inevitably accompany the Free Market. So is it really much of a surprise that Cubans would look around the world today and choose to maintain their system over ours?

So perhaps the purpose of Radio and TV Marti is not to offer information to otherwise uninformed Cubans, rather the purpose is to provide lies and disinformation to a population that is exceptionally well informed about the world and their options.

If people in the former Soviet Union had the foresight to jam Radio Free Europe and provide rebroadcasts of American commercial TV and Radio how would things be different today?

Pessimism (2/10/97)

“The rights of people are not a gift of nature, nor a legacy from past history, but the reward of a struggle against the accident of birth and against the privileges which history has hitherto transmitted from generation to generation.” -- A 19th Century European Philosopher

Last month a Virginia professor reported a study of people's attitudes towards government (AP 1/26/97). He discovered that only 32% of his more than 2,000 respondents had confidence in the Federal government. And 78% believe that political leaders are more concerned with their images than people's problems.

The researcher, Davison Hunter, remarked, “The pessimism, the disaffection, is not held mostly by the poor and minorities, but by the white middle class.”

I found this observation telling. Perhaps oppressed racial minorities and the very poor have become accustomed to government ignoring their concerns. So while they are part of 78% who have no confidence, they are not surprised at this situation. People on the bottom have a long experience with the class bias in government and long ago realized that government serves the wealthy, not the rest of us.

Colorado's own Rep. David Skaggs has suggested (last month) what government needs to do; "We've got to get beyond the current skirmishing and pull together to get the nation's work done." Thus echoing the president's claimed intention to work for a new spirit of "bipartisanship."

What does bipartisan mean to you? I'm just guessing, because I am part of the 78%, that it means the Democrats and Republicans have decided that they can work together to improve their images, and to help the rich get richer.

None-the-less, Hunter concluded, "There is a great deal of idealism that remains in the public imagination. In a word Americans love America. This is not a population straining toward revolution."

But I wonder if this is really true. After all if disaffection has overcome the sensibilities of the stabilizing force in society, the middle income working class, then what does the future hold? One would quite naturally expect that without "middle class" tolerance of the system there would be revolution because the poor have no interest in maintaining a system which brutalizes them. The rich have a great interest in maintaining a system which benefits only them, but they are a very small minority. Revolution is the rising up of the masses against the tyranny of an oppressive minority. So if there remains a stable middle that is exploited but their survival is not threatened, then this middle class acts as a mediating force between conflicting tendencies of revolution and reaction.

Yet Dr. Hunter found that the real pessimism among his subjects was not among the poor but among the middle class. Is this not the very sign that the revolution is coming? The injustice and violence of our society cannot survive if the stabilizing force itself becomes a force for change.

Does any of this surprise you? Of course we are moving towards revolution, in spite of Dr. Hunter's protestations. Recently I was speaking with a friend of mine who is from a Catholic family in New Jersey. My friend, like his father, is an educated professional. Both work in fields where a college degree is required, and more is expected for one to advance. The father, beginning his career over thirty years ago, was able to provide a comfortable single family home in a nice suburb for his wife and eight kids. My friend's mother did not work, she didn't need to. Mom worked at home taking care of the kids, and the details of the home.

Now, thirty years later, my friend is a few years into his career, at the point where his father bought a home. Yet my friend will never be able to afford to purchase a single family home, let alone provide clothing, food, or entertainment for nine other people on just his salary. The lifestyle my friend's father had is so far out of reach as to seem fantastic, unreal. Does this surprise you?

And the problem is not that there is less wealth to go around. If educated middle class workers are looking at a future in which no matter what they do they can not even come close the lifestyle their parents had, is it any wonder that pessimism has become the defining factor of white, middle class experience?

As the great labor leader and poet of a century ago, Joe Hill, said upon his murder by the State of Utah, "Don't morn, organize!"

Planning (2/17/97)

Last week Congress voted to release already budgeted funding for family planning services overseas. This funding was supposedly being held up because some people wanted to pull support from organizations that also provide abortions. What was unique last week was the intensity of the lobbying. "Buckets of cash are being poured in," Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) remarked.

Why do you suppose so many people get so uptight about birth control? Some would say that the anti-choice, anti-family planning circles are just sexist -- often in the extreme -- hell bent on taking us back to the good old days of the 1300's. Which may in fact be true, but how do those kinds of deranged people manage to get buckets of cash?

Are people with money just misogynists? Do they hate children? Maybe, but probably not. The really big bucks come out when rich people's profits are threatened. So if buckets of cash are opposing family planning measures in the Congress then family planning is probably a threat to profit somehow. But how?

Well, if the issue is profit, then perhaps we should look to economics. If we step back from the issue of individual reproductive rights and look at the social effects of family planning, what do we find? Family planning is the control of rates of fertility. Fertility rates are one significant factor determining population. High fertility rates mean there are lots of people, lots of workers, and thus lower wages. So, it would seem fairly obvious that if fertility is controlled all over the planet we will have less people, less workers, and therefore higher wages -- less profit.

All of us who work for a living live in a global market for labor. If labor is really cheap in Mexico, for example, because there are so many people looking for work, then capitalists will locate factories there to take advantage of the higher profits which result from lower labor costs. The further result being fewer jobs here, which then lowers labor costs, because there are more workers competing for fewer jobs. In the end, family planning messes with the world market in labor, and decreases profits.

The ruling class would never admit this, no, they brought out some supposed experts to make a pretend moral argument before Congress. One Dr. Stephen Karanja, an obstetrician from Kenya, said that family planning was "a comprehensive and highly organized campaign to kill off as many of our people as are necessary."

Which just goes to show that the standards our Congress uses to decide issues is so low as to not even register in the realm of rational discourse. There is something deeply and profoundly wrong with our system of government. Do any of you actually believe that providing condoms and information about how to use them is part of a subversive plot to kill Africans? Do you believe that anyone who would believe such a thing is obviously, and perhaps irretrievably, insane? Yet this insanity is the level at which policy decisions are being argued in Congress.

Of course the real question is, do you believe that our Congresspersons actually buy into the argument that distributing condoms is a plot to kill Africans?

No, they may be obtuse, even foolish, but very few Senators or Representatives are actually insane -- and there are even less insane ones now that Dornan was voted out. The reactionaries know what they are doing, but they do not necessarily want to talk about it in public. This is the reason people like Dr. Karanja are brought out to obscure the discussions.

What would happen if Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), for example, just admitted that he did not support family planning because it mucked up the free market in labor around the world? That is the kind of discussion people could really sink their teeth into. But Trent isn't going to say that -- he'd never admit publicly that people starving is of no concern to Republicans because all they care about is the profits of their wealthy benefactors.

There are important issues being decided by our government, great issues that will effect the lives of millions of people around the world, you would just never know it from the things Republicans say in public. And, in this case we should probably hold Planned Parenthood partially responsible for failing to point out the obvious -- the assault on family planning is more about labor costs than women's rights.

In the words of Public Enemy, "Don't believe the hype!"

Death and Democracy (2/24/97)

The headline in the local paper February 17th read: "Convict slain for views, family claims."

That one just reaches out and grabs you doesn't it? The story concerned a man who was knifed to death last month in one of the most secure prisons in the world, the control unit prison in Florence, Colorado.

It turns out some racist nut named Maynard Campbell was stabbed and died in prison. The militia fringe has, quite predictably, claimed that Campbell was assassinated because the government feared him.

This position is ironic because it is true that Campbell's death serves certain interests -- but not the interests the right wing talks about. It seems quite possible to me that Campbell was allowed to interact with other inmates who would predictably be insulted by the ignorance and arrogance of his white-separatist line. So perhaps Campbell was not actually murdered by the prison system, but a murder was allowed to happen.

Campbell's attorney, one John DeCamp, a former state senator from Nebraska, is "suspicious" about the timing because Campbell had shortly before his death filed papers which DeCamp claims would prove the government did not have jurisdiction in the original case that landed Campbell in prison.

How is it that someone claims to be persecuted by the government but everywhere you look there are government officials espousing the same line?

The right-wing nuts running around the country are not a threat to the government because they are not a threat to the class interests which control the current government. Government is a kind of imperfect, constantly changing compromise between the interests of the rich, who run the country, and the rest of us -- labor laws, income taxes, environmental protection, etc, this is called class struggle. Rich people don't want government telling them they have to pay overtime, or can't just dump toxic waste wherever they want.

The right-wing pretends that somehow they stand in opposition to the government, to the ruling class. But their attacks on government are just a veiled attack on the democratic control of society.

So I read the headline, which concerned me at first, and then I relaxed. It is tragic and sad, of course, that the prison system might be allowing racists to self-destruct in their interactions with the rest of a prison population -- the rest of any prison population being mostly

black because the ironically termed "justice" system is so fundamentally unjust, and in particular, racist.

I just have hard time taking seriously the protestations of people who are, in the end, the shock troops for the ruling class. If Campbell was allowed to be murdered it was to encourage his point of view, not to crush it. Working people who support anti-government tendencies are just pawns for much larger interests that they refuse to understand.

Campbell had threatened a war if he were to be killed -- like many right-wing nuts he had a messiah complex. If such a "war" were to take place who would benefit?

Societies are complicated creatures, and the means by which decisions are made is significant. These days there exist two main approaches to this question. One line suggests that private interests should make all the decisions. We should all be isolated monads running around our plot of land or whatever, deciding what we want to do for just ourselves. By this way of thinking everyone else is sort of the enemy, their interest in accumulating wealth being in conflict with mine. The other suggestion for society is that we work together, cooperate, and use mechanisms such as government, so that decisions are made democratically in the spirit of making the world a better place for everyone.

In fact, Maynard Campbell's murder has nothing to do with suppressing his demented point of view because his associates have reacted just as one might suspect -- lobbying for the disintegration of democracy in America. Campbell and all working people who support fascism, white supremacy, and religious fanaticism are fighting against democracy, against themselves, and against the rest of us, not really against those who benefit from our suffering. In the end, the ruling class' agenda is the same as the Maynard Campbells of the world.

Private, that is undemocratic, control of land and production is the principle mechanism for injustice today, working people as a group must come to terms with this -- or not at our own peril.

A TALE OF TWO MUSLIMS (3/3/97)

A couple of weeks ago, Sidney Poitier presented Muhammad Ali with the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage at the fifth annual ESPY awards. In remarks to the press after rehearsals, Ali was asked which moment in his life had tested his courage most.

Muhammad Ali, who may very well be the greatest boxer in history, a man who now struggles with Parkinson's disease, said that the moment which tested his courage most was "Resisting Vietnam." Poitier remarked, "Ali paid a price, emotional, financial, and professional. But isn't that what courage is all about?"

I was touched by these words, not least because my own grandfather suffered from the debilitating effects of Parkinson's disease for the decade that I was privileged to be old enough to remember my visits before he died. Ali is a brave man, to a significant degree, because he still is active and visible in spite of Parkinson's disease, which strips its victims of motor neuron control such that simple tasks become impossible, walking, talking, eating, everything.

Yet it was resisting the forced participation in mass murder that was Ali greatest challenge. "Hell no! I will not go and kill my brothers and sisters in Vietnam," was how he phrased it.

When Muhammad Ali converted to Islam, he joined a movement seeking justice not just for African-Americans in the United States, but for oppressed people the world over. This is the

ethical core that many African-Americans, in particular, see in Islam. When Ali made that choice he lost his heavyweight title, champion of the world.

Some people were critical of Muslims for refusing to fight in Vietnam. Some called them cowards for refusing to serve their country. History has shown us that these men were not cowards, but heroes who correctly saw that the war in Vietnam was not a war to protect our country, but rather it was a war to rob another people of their land and their dignity. Justice triumphed in Vietnam, the people won, the Vietnamese people, and all those who fought a different kind of war to resist the terrorism of American Imperialism won.

Islam made Muhammad Ali a hero.

Three decades after Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali, Benjamin Chavis -- former head of the NAACP -- has become Benjamin F. Chavis Muhammad. Last week Chavis announced his conversion to Islam (sort of) and his joining of the Nation of Islam.

Many people are perplexed by the Nation. The Nation of Islam is an American variant of Shi'ia Islam which focuses on Black separatism and a philosophy of African superiority. The Nation of Islam continues on in spite of the fact that the original leadership, in the son of the founder, renounced Black separatism and moved the original group toward traditional Islamic belief. The Nation of Islam today is a splinter group of the original Nation of Islam, most widely known as the original organizational home of Malcolm X. Malcolm X himself left the Nation shortly before his death to convert to traditional Sunni Islam, at which time he took the name Malik El-Shabazz.

The Nation of Islam today preaches Black enterprise, Black business, and an inherent inferiority and thus a jealous rage of Anglo peoples. I have a personal problem with the suggestion that white people are inferior and that racism arises out of a desire to suppress the superior Africans. First, it is simply absurd to suggest that minor genetic differences between races could lead to superiority or inferiority within a single species -- human species or any other. And second, to suggest that racism is the product of an inferiority complex is to hide one's head in the sand. Racism is about profit, to suggest otherwise is to be part of the problem, not the solution.

When Muhammad Ali converted to Islam, he rejected the Vietnam War because of an analysis of capitalism, not of genetics. When Benjamin F. Chavis Muhammad says he continues, "...working in the civil rights movement to build black unity," does he realize that the problems of Black America are essentially the same problems as every other victim of capitalist exploitation, or does he just want a bigger piece of the illusory capitalist pie for himself?

Free Market Science (3/10/97)

"Any discovery which touches upon human creation is not simply a matter of scientific inquiry. It is a matter of morality and spirituality as well." -- President Bill Clinton, 3/4/97

There is something vitally important in the president acknowledging that human genetics research could become dangerous. Genetics is a moral issue. Which is just to say that if we let something immoral like the Free Market get its greedy little paws into the stuff of life, that the greed heads everywhere will undoubtedly come up with some extremely objectionable way to make money.

But why is it that the president doesn't say that medicine, which touches upon human creation, is also not simply a matter of scientific inquiry, it is a matter of morality as well?

And what about food production, we have to eat?

Of course, the issue is not really about science. Scientific inquiry is a good thing, and in principle should be encouraged unfettered by politics AND economics. But herein lies the rub, science, like the rest of society, is held hostage by greed, by the so-called Free Market.

The president also said, "Each human life is unique, born of a miracle that reaches beyond laboratory science." Or so some people would like us to believe, but the fact is that human life is cheap -- very cheap. This situation is unconscionable, but inevitable in the world today.

How then are we meant to decide which issues are a matter of morality and which are not? Can it be the case that any issues affecting the lives and well-being of human beings are not matters of morality? Justice is the issue which leaps to my mind in this context. Aren't issues of justice and fairness matters of morality? And what about health care, education, housing, clothing, food, and jobs? Are not these also matters of morality?

My point here is that the president is being awfully selective in his judgement about what is and what is not a matter of morality. Why do you suppose that is?

People do tend to get a little unnerved by cloning, and by a lot of genetic research in particular. Is this because people do not think scientists should "play God"? I don't think this is the real issue, because we "play God" with people's lives all the time -- condemning some to degradation and suffering, others to opulence, some to death and destruction, others to prosperity.

The problem with cloning is that nature took about a billion years to make people the way we are. We have discovered over time how complicated and various this arrangement is. We also know that there is something vitally important about variety for life. Cloning offers the potential for mind boggling abuses, not the least of which is eugenics, let alone extinction.

Cloning, though, is not really the cause of problems. Cloning can be the technology which is exploited by certain people or interests who really are the cause of problems. Science is just knowledge, and knowledge can be used wisely or foolishly. Greed usually makes people foolish -- just look at the rainforests, if you can find one. Left unchecked, declining bio-diversity will be the end of us all.

The real issue is greed. So, just how long can the president's restrictions on human cloning last? At what point will one of the private interests researching cloning for purposes of private profit take the president to court and assert that restrictions on science are restrictions on Free Trade, and thus illegal under the rules of the World Trade Organization? Or, perhaps, a private interest in laboratories in Chile will sue the White House claiming that restrictions on cloning are violations of Super NAFTA.

Actually, all of that speculation is unrealistic. The president's ban on cloning research is merely a ban on the use of federal monies for cloning research. Private interests can and will do as they like. According to press accounts of the extent of cloning research going on in the world, most of the research is done for private gain.

In the new world order of Global Free Trade, even the president of the United States is powerless to prevent problems that he acknowledges are serious. And when the issue is life, then we all ought to be concerned about how the greed heads will exploit any technology. We live in a world where money rules, free trade is the religion, and profit is God.

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," ... or maybe they do.

Planned Distractions (3/17/97)

I must be out of the loop, lately. You see, I work -- sort of -- in the media, but I seem to have missed the memo that explained why we are all supposed to get worked up about these political fundraising scandals. Have you ever noticed that the media seem to all get excited about things at the same time? Its like there is some sort of trend clearing house that lets us know what the hot topic is supposed to be. I figure the PR people at ADM, Bechtel, and the Rand Corporation get together to make these things up.

Anyway, I seem to not be on the distribution list because I don't get it. Why is everyone so concerned about the Vice President making fundraising calls from his office? Oh My God, you mean corporate funded politicians actually use every opportunity they can find to raise money? No, tell me it isn't so! And now we are supposed to be concerned because China, as in the country, may have donated campaign money.

What are those Chinese thinking? Our politicians may be for sale, but not to foreigners. If you want to buy an U.S. Senator or the president you better damn well be an American.

I just can't get too concerned about these campaign finance scandals, because to do so would be an admission that I thought the whole system was not corrupt already. The particular mechanisms used by rich people to control the government is not the real issue. What is at issue is a basic contradiction between the so-called Free Market and Democracy.

Any system which equates power and right with money is fundamentally unjust, and undemocratic. Most people are not rich and if you have to be rich to fully participate in governance then, by definition, we live in an oligarchy, not a democracy. The foolishness about the White House soliciting campaign contributions is quite simply irrelevant because that is the nature of the system. There is no point complaining about the details of a system that is fundamentally unjust if one is not prepared to scrap the whole thing and start over -- in our case with publicly funded campaigns, real democracy.

You may have noticed that the newspapers, TV, and radio are all filled with stories about investigations into questionable campaign fundraising practices. We all know both corporate parties use objectionable practices for all sorts of things, and are not liable to stop anytime soon. So, if the people making the accusations, the Republicans in this case, are not really interested in democracy anyway, why do you suppose they are complaining at all?

When I first started college I learned an important fact about politics, which is widely acknowledged by reasonable people everywhere. So much so that acknowledging this fact is often taken as an indication that one is a reasonable person. And here it is: Most of what happens in Washington D.C. and in the corporate media is an intentional distraction, it is not really important. Last year the "defense" of marriage was the distraction. Which you may recall ended up being the defense of marriage against everything except real threats to married people and their relationships. This year we have the campaign finance scandals, which will ultimately address everything except the real problem, the undemocratic financing of campaigns.

The people conducting these investigations have no interest in actually correcting injustice -- they live off of injustice. If we actually had democratic mechanisms for electing politicians, do you really think any Republicans could get elected? Of course not, that's why the Republicans have fought tooth and nail against every attempt in history to make the process more democratic -- motor voter, eliminating poll taxes, literacy tests, etc.

And then there are the Democrats, the ones who at least have the decency to pretend they care about ordinary human beings and the principle of democracy. Of course, they don't. The

Democrats need the distractions even more than the Republicans, lest people figure out that they aren't doing squat for us. Both parties serve only the interests of the people who actually own the country, not to be confused with the people who ought to own the country. Anything they happen to do in the interest of working people is a compromise designed to allow them -- the rich and their puppet parties -- to keep power.

So until my memo arrives explaining why I am supposed to get worked up about the minor details of the corruption in our system, I'll just stick to worrying about the system itself. The minor details are how they suck us in to thinking they are addressing problems, when actually they're just jerking us around.

HEMP AND THE DRUG WAR (3/24/97)

The legislature in Colorado has backed down, again, on a chance to do something good. Does this surprise you? Many people thought this would be the year that the legislature would allow small farmers to grow hemp. The only thing at stake is the future of the planet -- but the fools decided it is more important to keep locking most of us up than to preserve the environment and the family farm.

It is easy to just say that the legislators and police are a bunch of evil jerks. But what would that accomplish? And is it really true? The news always gets reported that the police claim that farmers growing hemp would mean an increase in the illicit cultivation of its cousin marijuana. The police make money when we follow irrational social policies like locking everyone up rather than growing environmentally sound alternative fibers.

Sure, the legislators are fools, at least many of them are, because they are sacrificing our future to the so-called war on drugs. And the real force behind the drug war is not the police -- the police are just stupid enough to support the continued illegality of hemp, and to be public about. The real interests behind keeping alternative fibers off the market are those interests which produce the products that would have to compete with hemp.

Hemp is the most useful plant in the world. It can be grown in a short time. In Colorado, some have estimated it would be possible to produce up to three crops a year from one piece of land. Hemp can be used for nearly everything -- really -- textiles of all kinds, food, fuel, and paper, and more.

The reason people think we should grow hemp is that hemp is an environmentally sound alternative to plastics and wood products. The use and production of petroleum and its derivatives is destroy the environment. The harvesting and use of wood products is not only unsightly, it is also destroying our environment. So, who wants us to keep using petroleum and wood? Really, really big corporations that thrive in a value system that sacrifices family farmers and the environment on the alter of private profits.

But the drug war is more complicated than that. Sure, the drug war preserves the profits of forest products companies, but it is also a means of social control. The million non-violent offenders in jail on petty drug charges are people that the economy cannot provide for -- we don't have jobs, job training, or other social services for these people. Everyone has to be somewhere, and if the non-violent offenders were on the street they might be demanding jobs at decent wages.

Further, the drug war serves as a support system for the alcohol and tobacco industries. If we decriminalized pot, for example, we would need and way of classifying it. Obviously this

would be done with mechanisms very similar to alcohol. But, we wouldn't want slick TV ads or billboards trying to entice kids to take up pot smoking the way the alcohol and tobacco industries do with their products. And, if we were going to decriminalize pot but outlaw advertising it then we would have to outlaw all advertising for beer and cigarettes as well. Advertising drugs is just not acceptable.

If that is not enough, the drug war also allows the CIA to raise funds for its human rights abuses all over the world through the sale of heroin and cocaine. Despotism is propped up by the CIA and the sale of drugs

The growing of hemp is a direct challenge to the entire drug war mentality -- and it is a direct challenge to the profit interests of Exxon, Dow Chemical, Phillip Morris, and Georgia-Pacific. Threatening the drug war is also a direct challenge to the CIA's covert action capabilities, not to mention the governments of Columbia and Peru.

But the tide is turning. People are starting to realize that the drug war is more destructive than the drugs themselves. People are starting to realize that the future of our children and our children's children is more important than the profits of Dow Chemical. Someday people will realize that there are just no good reasons for not growing a miracle plant like hemp to make our lives more comfortable and to protect the environment for the future.

Someday people will see that the purpose of the so-called war on drugs is to keep us down, and to support someone else's profits, not to protect us. Hopefully, our society and environment will not have already been destroyed when this time comes.

Soccer, a Contact Sport (3/31/97)

Evidently some really obsessed Dutch soccer fans got together recently to beat the stuffing out of each other. One person died in the riot just outside of Amsterdam.

According to the BBC, several dozen fans from two rival football clubs, IRC and Ajax, have had it in for each other, and secretly arranged to meet in an empty lot next to a shopping center one Sunday to beat each other. These fans had a reputation for misbehaving inside the stadiums but have now taken their show on the road. The police, who had no idea this was happening, showed up after the fact and thus far have made no arrests.

The news people got to the head of the Dutch Football Federation and gave him a hard time about this disturbing new development. For their part, the Federation does not know what to do, and has suggested that the problem is beyond them. When fans are disruptive or violent inside the stadium that is one thing, but this fight took place more than ten miles from the nearest match. And while both teams were playing at the time of the riot, they were not playing each other.

Is it just me or is there something really weird going on here?

Like most problems that involve crime or violence, the first impulse is to ask about crime prevention and the police. What are the police doing about this? But this approach, the reactionary approach, to crime fails to solve anything. The more important question is why are such things happening? Why would soccer fans, even fans from rival teams, feel it necessary to resort to gang fights? What kind of dispute could soccer fans possibly have that would require chains and knives to solve?

The answer, obviously, is that soccer fans do not have the kinds of disputes which could, by themselves, motivate dozens of people to conspire to commit assault, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder. Clearly, something else is going on.

People having a gang fight over issues which are of no material concern to them are expressing frustration. These people must feel tremendously alienated in their lives, powerless to change the situation, and helpless in the face of the factors that are causing the alienation. I'm sure the right-wing pundits would say that these fans need religion and strong families to discourage this antisocial behavior.

The right-wing pundits are, quite predictably, full of it. But this is not a new situation either. The global economy has been in a state of decline and depression. It happens every six decades so there is no point acting all surprised about. Unemployment rates, even in Europe, have been at record levels for most of the nineties. The social safety net that people in the developed world struggled for in the 1930's, the last global depression, have been under assault by the owning class around the world. Owners are greedy and have decided that workers do not actually need decent jobs at decent wages. Wages have been falling around the world, profits have been skyrocketing, and working people have been suffering as a result.

The most disappointing thing about this riot is the reaction to it. When people ask why the police didn't know, they are assuming that the police should have known. Which may on the surface seem reasonable. However, the more important question is why aren't government officials coming up with programs to create decent jobs at living wages?

This kind of sociology is not a mystery. The basic facts of social life can be anticipated from the circumstances. When companies can and do fire people whenever they want, cut human beings off from their means of subsistence, with no regard for people's lives, those companies have broken the social contract -- shredded it. People without a social contract, and without a way to survive, are less likely to feel any kind of social bond with the society at large. They are likely to feel a great deal of hostility.

It is lucky for the ruling class that thus far these people have vented their frustration on each other. That situation will not continue indefinitely.

"And so begins the final drama, in the streets and in the fields."

CLASS STRUGGLE ON THE RADIO (4/7/97)

People don't understand that there is a trade off between equality and freedom. I favor more freedom even if people may end up more unequal. Freedom is my moral principle.

-- Cliff May, 3/27/97

I was on a talk radio show with Cliff May, Associate Editor at the Rocky Mountain News and talk show host, recently and it became clear that he and I don't have very much in common. You see, I am a socialist and May is a capitalist. I am a state leader in the Communist Party USA and May is becoming the National Communications Director for the Republican Party. May values freedom above all else, I value equality. But I value freedom too, just not May's kind.

I got to wondering, why can't May and I come together on anything. He is not crazy, or spiteful. He is passionate about his beliefs, as I am about mine. May is a true believer in capitalism. He argues that wherever capitalism doesn't work it is because of faulty government policies, government intrusion. He does not believe that capitalism is inherently unstable, nor

does he acknowledge that people becoming more unequal necessarily creates instability and that people will revolt against what they -- rightly, in my opinion -- perceive as injustice.

Michael Eisner may make more money than I can ever dream of, but he has only one vote. He has a lot more say over where he goes on vacation than I do, but that's about all. -- Cliff May

It seems to me that Eisner (the CEO of Disney who makes around \$2 million per year) really is free where most of the rest of us aren't. People who work for a living are, in the end, slaves to their wage. We must make a living, and even if the job we do is repulsive, perhaps dangerous, insulting or whatever, we still must make a living. Having the opportunity to quit and be unemployed, to search for months or years on end for a decent job, while lacking resources for food, shelter, or clothing is NOT freedom. Working people are much more like slaves than we are like Eisner.

However, it is the distinction between property rights and human rights where May and I really diverge. I think he would like it if I could reassure him that socialism is not a threat to property, which really means a threat to privilege. But I cannot. It is just true that the socialist analysis is that the privilege inherent in the private ownership of the means of production, factories and large land holdings, is the real threat to human rights and to real freedom. Just because rich people can do as they like, move their money wherever they want, does not mean that the rest of us are free. More importantly, the freedom of capital to seek the greatest profit anywhere in the world is very often in direct conflict with human rights. So, while I cannot agree with May that one must choose between freedom and equality, I will concede that one must choose between the freedom of capital and human rights, including equality. Equality is my moral principle.

The point that really drove me batty about May's ideas is his suggestion that Mussolini and Hitler were not supporting capitalism, because they didn't fully respect private property. The part about this that I find most mystifying is that May is Jewish -- he ought to be more aware of history. In the real world, which exists outside of and separate from May's fantasy world of property rights without class distinctions, fascism is a political tool of capitalism in crisis. In Italy, Germany, and Spain the fascists came to power to protect the state, the state which represented the interests of capitalists, and people like Cliff May, a Jew, and me, a Communist, were exterminated.

Public control of the means of production is a nightmare world, because public control of the means of production means government control. -- Cliff May

For all their protests, the ruling class is really afraid of democracy. Democracy means control of society by the people. Economics is just one part of society, the democratic control of which is required for any successful application of democracy more generally. Capitalists are, at the heart of it, anti-democratic because they think they know best how to run society -- property rights, their rights, above all else -- above and against the human rights of the rest of us.

This fear of democracy goes all the way back to the beginning, you know. The people who wrote our Bill of Rights gave many more rights to property than to people. Madison, for example, knew that if ordinary people had power they would vote for a fair redistribution of wealth -- since all wealth is in the end a social product, private accumulation is fundamentally unjust. The ruling class then, and since, has gone to great pains to limit democracy, to keep working people from just voting for justice.

I predict that Cliff May will be wildly successful in his new job -- he is like a preacher for capitalism. However, I also predict that this system he worships won't be around all that

much longer. Someday, hopefully soon, working people will run the country. Someday democracy will triumph over the privileges of the owning class.

Justice for Janitors, and the Rest of Us (4/14/97)

On a recent trip home I had to fly into the airport after midnight. At that time of night there are not a lot of people around, and it appeared that ours' might have been the last flight in for the day. They start up again pretty early in airports, so the cleaning crews were out getting the place spiffy for the next day.

In our society, divided by race, one becomes familiar with the faces of new or relatively new third world immigrants doing the dirty work -- sweeping and mopping airport bathrooms at midnight. Who would otherwise choose to do this for a living but those forced into it?

Yet, someone must do the dirty work -- sweeping, landscaping, picking up the trash. There is no good reason why these jobs can't be dignified, because they are essential to any society. But, of course, in our society, where money rules and profit is god, the big issues for the people who work behind the scenes are the same issues of survival that face the rest of us. The people working behind the scenes just have the worst hours, and face some of the greatest exploitation.

Anyway, the people cleaning up this big airport were not what one might expect. As a matter of fact they looked more like the women from the TV show "Golden Girls" than like the more defenseless non-English speakers who often have no choice but to accept that kind of work, in those kinds of conditions. These airport janitors were mostly 50ish, white, and female.

It was the age that really bothered me, I suppose. A few years back my own parents looked like that. My folks are older now, but the women sweeping the airport walkways at 2AM could have been my mom. Even more disturbing is the likelihood that these women, slaving away in the middle of the night, are somebody's grandmothers.

If we respected human beings in our society we would, of course, still have people who cleaned, but those people would at least make a living wage -- in fact they would make an above average wage -- because of the sacrifice they make to help us all. But this is not the case, and it seemed to me that these average, over 50, middle class looking people were there because they had been downsized, laid off, or had retired but our society does not have any sense of human decency. So instead of enjoying what we call the golden years, these people were slaving away behind the scenes.

In the end, some might say, it is just self interest which motivates my disgust at the way people who have worked for decades end up being treated. I do not want to end up sweeping and mopping bathrooms in the middle of the night in the autumn of my years. Do you? And I resent that I must be a party to this kind of treatment of anyone.

Certainly someone must do the dirty work, someone must work in the middle of the night and on weekends and holidays. But we have far too many people who are forced to take jobs with these kinds of hours just to survive. And that is not right, it is not dignified, and we should feel ashamed that instead of enjoying retirement many, many people are forced into difficult jobs at slave wages just to survive.

There is more to life than money, than making or, more importantly, buying things. There are more important things in life than markets and status symbols. Far too many of us are not left with any time in the day, or in our lives, to really live. We are slaves to a system of

private profit which provides for the luxurious treatment and lifestyles of a few, while the majority live in degradation and, more and more, in squalor.

I heard on the news a while back that the highest paid person in the world, that is someone whose income is measured in a salary including bonuses, is the head of an international bank. This man made more than \$31 million in 1996. Think about that, while some people in this country have to work two jobs just to reach the official poverty level, other people are making that much money every single minute of the year.

How can it be that one human being's labor is worth one amount for a year of service, and another human being's labor is worth even more than that amount for a mere minute's service? I'll guarantee you that there isn't a banker alive who accomplishes as much in any minute as a janitor accomplishes in a year. In fact, I would hazard a guess that the reality is completely reversed -- that most janitors accomplish more every minute than any CEO of a bank accomplishes in an entire year. Certainly the janitors work harder every minute than the bankers do in a year.

But this is the difference between owning or managing, and actually working. And it is a disgrace for which we as a nation, and as citizens of the world, ought feel outraged and insulted, because we are being insulted.

The FBI Lab (4/21/97)

"I became a Special Agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1951. I did not know, when I joined, that I would learn the expertise of burglary, or that former Director J. Edgar Hoover would instruct agents to violate extortion and kidnaping laws. I did not know then that FBI agents would plot assassinations of American citizens and put innocent individuals in jail just because their skin is black or because they are Native Americans." -- M. Wesley Swearington, author of the book, "FBI Secrets"

The recent revelations about the incompetence and deceit of the FBI's crime lab got me thinking. Do some people still actually believe that the primary purpose of the FBI is to fight crime? Lots of people have said for over six decades now that the FBI's primary function is that of political repression. Those of us on the political left have known this all along, but some on the right have recently joined the bandwagon.

The left has had trouble with the FBI because the FBI exists to protect privilege -- class privilege. The right has recently drawn the FBI's attention, presumably because of their capacity for violence. The organized left has never had a real terrorist component, while the principle activity of the organized right-wing opposition is essentially militaristic.

So, two very different sectors of society under assault from the FBI -- that's not really a surprise. But these two sectors' purposes, methods, and goals are radically different. After all, the right-wing wants to maintain, and even extend, property rights -- a goal they share with Clinton's "vital center." The left proposes elevating human rights above property rights.

The right-wing seems to think we are still in the 18th century. They think Clinton is like a king -- all powerful, running a loyal bureaucracy which profits from his rule. This analysis is flawed on a number of levels. Not least of which is the fact that no ruler in history has really ruled by his own hand. Rather, the people that run a country come from a similar background, what we call class position. They run the country in service of their collective interests. Under the kings the ruling class was the landed nobility. After the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th

century the monarchies were overthrown by the new capitalist class. The capitalists used property rights, as opposed to the so-called divine right of the king, to secure their position. The capitalists broke up the nobility's strangle hold on wealth. The new ruling class amassed their fortunes through skimming the profits workers generate, rather than through the raw productive value of land, as the nobility had done.

The right-wing, today, naively thinks it is engaged in a struggle to protect property. Property is already protected, it is people who are not. Working people who think that protecting their pittance of property will protect them from the greed of the capitalist class with its enormous property holdings, wealth and power are just deceiving themselves. The significance of property rights is that these rights are used to overcome the will of the majority, to overcome the pressures of democracy. It is democracy which is the real protection of the rights -- the human rights -- of the rest of us.

The government does not work in service of its own interests, this is the fundamental mistake in the right-wing analysis. In fact, most of government is just working people doing what their bosses tell them they must do to keep their jobs. The government bosses, the elected officials, work to protect the interests of their class -- the capitalist class -- against the rest of us, against democracy. Without the compromise the current government actually is -- a compromise capitalists make with the rest of us -- the ruling class would ride rough shod over all of us.

Government is not the enemy because property is not the answer. Fairness and democracy demand that property rights be limited, be held accountable to the interests of the whole country, the whole people. To abdicate democracy is to roll over and accept the ruthlessness of the ruling class, and accept their claim of the legitimacy of putting privilege over human rights. The brutal reality of what would transpire in a world were only property had rights should be familiar to us all, because right and left, by their own accounts, have both experienced it at the hands of the FBI.

Those on the political right are fighting against themselves and against the rest of us. Victory will be found in the unity of the working class. Justice will finally come with the final victory of working people and democracy over the privileges of property and class position.

Victory is just over the horizon now, we need only come together. Workers of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but our chains!

Paper and Greed (4/28/97)

I ran into an old friend the other day, a friend who has spent most of his working years doing recycling. Jack is a disciplined, committed, intelligent, and articulate environmentalist. In his current position he directs the recycling efforts of a major state university -- the largest such program in the country.

So, I asked Jack how things were going. He told me, "Not well." After years of increasing collections, and sustainable prices from industry, in the last few years prices for recycled paper have been dropping. "How could this be?" I asked. Well, it turns out that the big companies that deal in recycled and virgin paper have been doing more of their business in virgin paper -- they are deforesting Siberia.

For Jack this situation is incredibly frustrating. After years of building consciousness on the campus of the need to collect recyclables, building a program with equipment, staff and

volunteers to do the collections, and finding markets to sell the collections, all of a sudden events on the other side of the world could be threatening his program's financial viability.

On a different note, I caught a news blurb, recently, that said satellite data from a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration study indicates that the growing season in the Northern Hemisphere is a full week longer this year than it was ten years ago. Some scientists say that this is clear evidence of global warming. Other scientists say that, well yes, there is warming but it is probably the result of natural fluctuations that occur over the millennia.

All the scientists agree that the average temperature of our home planet has gone up one degree Fahrenheit over the last hundred years. What they disagree about is the cause of this increase, and therefore the long term effects of our relationship with the natural world. Some say we are doing fine, even if nature is going to flood coastal areas -- what with glaciers melting more than usual because of the temperature increase. Other scientists say that the changes we are seeing now are the result of long term damage, and that these changes are going to grow more extreme.

I have to concede that the argument made by the "Don't Worry, Be Happy" crowd could very well be correct. When they trot out the argument that since weather changes over thousands of years, it is impossible to know if the changes we are seeing now are the result of our poisoning the planet or just the result of natural cycles. If the changes are natural, then there really isn't much we can do but brace ourselves. If the changes are the result of our actions, our conscious disregard for the interconnectedness of the natural world, then we may be committing suicide.

However, the thing the "Be Happy" crowd ignores is the other side of the argument, it is impossible to know how severe the effects of pollution and deforestation will eventually be. And, we are negligent for not taking seriously the possibility that these changes may in fact be caused by human activity. Even if that possibility is minute, the risk is substantial, and could threaten the survival of humanity. It seems to me like this is something we ought to take seriously.

In which case, at what point are we to seriously consider indicting the entire Republican Party on charges of conspiring to commit genocide in their intentional, coordinated, long term plan to gut environmental protections in this country and across the planet? At what point should the military take action to destroy the headquarters of Mitsubishi to stop their genocidal quest to deforest Indonesia and the rest of the Pacific islands? When will we see the CIA destabilizing Weyerhaeuser to prevent it from deforesting Siberia?

What is the CIA doing these days to protect us anyway? They have the intelligence gathering capabilities, perhaps they should infiltrate Georgia-Pacific to see what it knows about plans to debilitate the Earth's ability to cleanse the atmosphere. Rivers and forests are the way that the Earth cleans itself. If we pollute the planet AND destroy the natural mechanisms for dealing with this pollution then we may be doing irreparable damage -- at least from the point of view of human survival.

Or more significantly, perhaps the CIA could just destabilize Wall Street generally, bring down the entire self-centered, short-sighted, greedy, egotistical, cruel and destructive economic system known as capitalism and replace it with a human and nature oriented system that will have the foresight to save the species and our ecosystem. The military and CIA are floundering for a purpose -- here it is, save humanity from greed.

Besides, my friend Jack, not to mention the rest of us, need someone to eliminate the competition from virgin paper mills.

Who's the Terrorist? (5/5/97)

On April 22nd, 140 Peruvian Army commandos burst into the Japanese Ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru. The soldiers killed 14 members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, or MRTA, and freed 71 hostages who had been held there since late December. One hostage and two soldiers were also killed. The Tupac Amaru were demanding the release of about 400 of their members currently held in the world's most cruel prisons, in Peru and Bolivia.

During and after the crisis, Peru's President Fujimori, parroted by the corporate media pundits up north, referred to the Tupac Amaru as Terrorists. We hear that word an awful lot these days. According to my dictionary, a terrorist is one who uses extreme fear as a means of coercion. So, are the Tupac Amaru really terrorists? Did they take the hostages in order to instill extreme fear among some sector of the Peruvian population? Did the Tupac Amaru engage in systematic violence and cruelty to make their point? Did they brutalize or murder any of the hostages?

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding No. The Tupac Amaru is not now a terrorist organization. However, there are terrorists in Peru, and they are the government. Peru is, in point of fact, a terrorist state. Why is this never mentioned in the corporate press?

According to human rights groups, law organizations, and independent observers, Peru has the worst, most corrupt, and abusive legal system in the world. Now, this is no small accomplishment, the world's worst legal system. Why would any country have a legal system which provides virtually no legal protections or rights for its citizens?

In Peru, the legal system is a mechanism of state terrorism. The government of Peru uses extreme fear, through the police, army, courts and prisons, as a means of coercing the populace.

During the hostage situation, the so-called terrorists were cordial to their captives, and in the long months of negotiations never harmed a single one. Even as the Peruvian army was bursting in and assassinating the rebels, some as they tried to surrender -- every rebel was found with a bullet hole in the forehead in addition to their other wounds -- the Tupac Amaru did not even then harm any of the hostages. Most likely, Fujimori knew that the Tupac Amaru had no terrorist leanings, no intention of killing the hostages, and this allowed him to overwhelm them with violence.

The governments of Peru, Japan, and the U.S. have all said that the situation shows that they are not going to tolerate or negotiate with terrorists. These claims ring all the more hollow as we find out more and more about the brutality and savagery of the Peruvian government -- one of the best funded terrorist organizations in the world.

It is a fact of life that even the best funded terrorist organization in the world cannot keep the people of an entire nation oppressed forever. There are two revolutionary armies in Peru. One has a long history of violence against people and the state. That is the Shining Path. The Tupac Amaru has a history of bold thefts, but surprisingly little violence. The Shining Path has always been critical of the Tupac Amaru for this reason -- its unreasonable civility in the face of state barbarism.

The brutality and poverty which created the Shining Path and the Tupac Amaru remain, and are intensifying. The revolutionary forces will continue on in spite of their losses. The Shining Path and Tupac Amaru will grow, in spite of the state terrorism, because Peru is ripe for revolution.

However, what was once the Robin Hood of revolutionary groups, the Tupac Amaru, may as a result of its direct experience with the real terrorists in Peru, now turn to violence and terror. If Fujimori is comfortable using such obvious terrorism against his people, then the people may decide that they also must use terrorism against Fujimori, and his ilk. The chickens of violence and terrorism will come home to roost.

The war in Peru is far from over, in spite of what some would have us believe.

Four dead in Ohio.... (5/12/97)

Twenty-seven years after the deaths at Kent State the chief of police in Boulder, Colorado was preparing to spill blood, to kill students to stem the tide of minor riots just outside the University of Colorado. "And we knew [if the riots continued] that we had to ... engage the students and that a lot of police officers and a lot of students would be hurt, and probably, some people would be dead," Chief Tom Koby said in public meeting, May 6th.

The mayor of Boulder telephoned the governor of Colorado to advise him that she might be calling for National Guard troops if the riots went on another day. After the second day, tens of thousands of dollars in tear gas had been used by hundreds of cops in riot gear, firing rubber bullets.

Four dead in Ohio....

Community reaction has been varied, but some have said that the police response was appropriate. After all, 1,500 students were burning furniture, throwing rocks and bottles, and breaking windows. Order must be maintained, but at what cost? In fact, the rocks did not begin to fly until the police arrived, responding to reports of a bonfire and fight.

Some people have said that the students were irresponsible for rioting in the face of ordinary police response to the bonfire incident. This is true, on the surface, but there is more going on here.

Students setting a disused sofa onto a fire is an annual occurrence in Boulder. Students gathering in a large crowd late on a spring night towards the end of classes, and getting rowdy is also an annual occurrence in Boulder. Why were there riots this year?

According to one observer, quoted in a local paper, "The root of the riots was the ongoing violation of civil rights that so many of [the students] have endured." Some have said that demanding the right to drink underage, to drink in public and what have you, do not constitute valid civil rights claims. This sentiment may be true, but it is irrelevant. What is at issue is the motivations of a crowd and the question of how the authorities then deal with that crowd.

Killing students, as Chief Koby suggests, is not an answer to antisocial behavior. The breaking of a few windows, the removal of some parking meters, and a confrontation with police are not grounds for state sanctioned murder. For these events to coincide with the state sanctioned murders in Ohio 27 years ago should give us all pause. Where are we going?

The claim that the value system of the students is at fault for the riots has become the chorus of those supporting the police. But the students are not on the city payroll, so if anyone can be held responsible for preventing a recurrence it must be the city authorities. Democracy relies on the consent of the governed, just as community policing relies on the consent and involvement of the policed. In this case, the students feel -- rightly or wrongly -- alienated and

to some extent abuse by the system, by the police. What is at issue is whether the police are to encourage or discourage the students' feelings of alienation.

Four dead in Ohio....

The other claim put forth by what has become the fascist mainstream is that order must be maintained. These people claim that students burning things in the streets, throwing rocks or bottles, and tearing up parking meters are all acts of destruction -- the destruction of other people's property. So what? What kind of demented value system would hold that it is better to kill people than to tolerate the destruction of a few thousand dollars worth of things? These same people, presumably, hold themselves forth as models of the kind of moral behavior the students should aspire to -- state sanctioned murder to quell what is in the end insignificant property damage. These would be murderers are the model of moral behavior?

Beyond the quality of the students' immediate interactions with police, we ought keep in mind that Boulder is a town in which murderers go free -- so long as they have enough money. And Colorado is a state where corporate criminals go unpunished -- so long as they are large enough. And, we live in a nation where one branch of the government uses the profits from smuggling cocaine and heroin to pay for murder and torture all over the Third World, while other branches have locked up hundreds of thousands of non-violent so-called drug offenders.

Is it any wonder the students have no respect for the police or for that which the police are actually protecting?

Four dead in Ohio...what next for Colorado?

TAX THE RICH! (5/19/97)

Evidently, the so-called Tax Freedom day was May 9th this year. The anti-tax forces take note of this day as the day after which the average American has earned the amount of their tax obligation for 1997, and from there forth earns the equivalent of their after tax income.

Some outfit called the Tax Foundation noted that this year the day is four days later than it was in 1994 when the Republican dominant Congress promised to lower taxes, and it is two months later than it was in 1940. This same group notes, as evidence of the increasing tax burden, that people in the top 1% income bracket pay 30% of the taxes.

For some unknown reason these statistics are to be taken as evidence of an increasingly unfair tax burden on wealth. I found this very odd. The tax burden on the wealthy is, indeed, unfair, but it is unfair to the rest of us. The wealthy continue to make out like bandits.

According to Holy Sklar, as of 1996 the wealthiest 1% of the population controls as much wealth as the bottom 95% of the population. This means that in a country of 250 million people, the richest 2.5 million people are as rich as the poorest 237.5 million of the rest of us. On average rich people are 100 times wealthier than the average person. Does this strike you as fair?

In terms of income tax, this means that the super rich 1% of population ought to be paying more than 90% of the income tax. According to these anti-tax people the top 1%, the very wealthy, pay a whole 30% of the tax. Which means that these very wealthy people are avoiding a full two-thirds of their tax obligation.

The reason, then, that tax freedom day comes so late in the year -- May 9th -- is because the average tax payer is being held responsible for double their fair share of the tax obligation. The problem with taxes in this country is not simply that they are unfair to ordinary people, the

average tax payer, the problem is that rich people are cheating us to support their greed. We are told that services to working and poor people, environmental protections, civil rights prosecution are all too expensive -- and yet the very wealthy are paying only a third of their fair share of the income taxes.

There is something insidious about the way in which the Tax Foundation presents its information. And one right-wing nut in Congress has decided that the so-called tax freedom day should be set by law as April 15th -- a Republican from New Hampshire, I am sure you're not surprised.

John Cunniff, of the AP, has noted that because of the pseudo progressive nature of the income tax system, with economic growth tax freedom day will necessarily come later and later year by year, because people will generally move into higher tax brackets over time. Of course, he doesn't bother noting that if the tax burden was distributed fairly, and taxes for working people were cut to their fair level, that tax freedom day would actually come earlier and earlier each year -- this because the greed of the very wealthy causes them to amass increasing wealth. So while income as an absolute may be rising, its distribution is more and more unjust.

Further, I am sure that it escapes Cunniff's attention that real wages for working people have been declining for the last twenty years. And what with the current assault on working people by the very, very greedy global imperialist class, the real possibility of working people's wages even keeping up with inflation is a joke. The actual likelihood is that working people will pay less tax over time because their corporate bosses are keeping more and more of the wealth working people generate through our labor. Which means that taxes are likely to continue being out paced by the cost of providing services, let alone the obscene costs of the military-industrial complex. Which you might guess will result in lower levels of government services, less environmental protection, less civil rights protection, more misery, sickness, injury, and death for us.

Using the measure of the average tax payer is simply absurd because it tells us nothing of how taxes are levied and collected -- it tells us nothing about tax equity.

Sure the taxes working people pay are excessive, but the answer is not eliminating capital gains taxes, or lower taxes on corporate profits, the answer is fair taxation on wealth. Make the rich pay their fair share!

The Empire and the Peace Dividend (5/26/97)

Recently, the new Secretary of Defense, one William Cohen, announced that not only is there no Peace Dividend now, there will never be one. I guess we are supposed to believe that there was actually a small Peace Dividend for a week or two because Cohen described the Dividend as being over. The Secretary wants us to spend even more money on bombs and guns - - really fancy ones, of course.

There is no Peace Dividend because the fundamental dynamics of American society remain unchanged since the end of the Cold War. People like to pretend that we had to have this huge military, rather than feeding, clothing, and educating our children, because of the Soviet menace.

Well, it turns out that, the real menace all along was the United States and its military conquest of the world. These days we call this process of conquest Capitalist Imperialism. The

U.S. is the mightiest empire that humanity has ever known. Our empire is so strong that most people just take it for granted.

The truth is that the ruling class in the U.S. uses the military might of our armed forces to impose their profit lusting will upon everyone else. If anyone challenges our capitalists' right to exploit every human being on the planet, our rich people will have those naive, independence minded fools bombed into eternity. We all know this to be true, but we like to pretend that the military is actually extending Democracy around the world.

The same truth holds for our Cold War history as well. There never was a Soviet threat, nor was there ever anything even remotely resembling a Soviet Empire. The purpose of an empire is to extract wealth from the periphery and bring it into the center. In our case, the wealth of the Third World is forcibly extracted to make American capitalists even richer. As we know from the rhetoric about Cuba, the Soviet Union actually had a net outflow of wealth to its periphery. Cuba, for example, did not allow the Soviets to own anything in Cuba. And the Cubans benefited from favorable trade terms that cost the Soviets money. In the American Empire, we also provide aid to the periphery, but the profit extracted by the few is many times more than the aid paid for by the rest of us.

Why do Americans think, then, that the Soviet Union was a threat? Nuclear weapons? It is true that the Soviet Union built and maintained weapons of mass destruction, with the purpose of defending themselves from us. But we said the same thing -- we were supposedly just protecting ourselves. The fact that the Soviet Union never even tried to develop a first strike capability -- this according to the CIA itself -- seems to get overlooked. The country that continually tried to develop newer and better first strike capabilities is US. Who is the aggressor?

Thus Secretary Cohen tells us that we still need to spend even more money on even better weapons, and we must be prepared to fight two wars on different continents simultaneously. Why? This part he is a little vague on. He says something about drugs and terrorists, both problems created indirectly by our military domination of other people, and directly by the CIA working with drug smugglers to fight illegal wars -- isn't that convenient?

The Secretary says the world is unstable, but does not say that this is because of the U.S. government installing and maintaining dictators, U.S. corporations exploiting the wealth and resources of most of the Third World, not to mention the coordinated efforts of the CIA and Third World War Lords smuggling cocaine and heroin. So, of course, we have to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on very, very profitable weapons systems -- which may or may not actually work. All of this to protect us from an enemy of our own creation. Although, to be fair, he also wants to continue the active suppression of the human and democratic rights of people all over the world. The lack of even a pretend threat, from the Soviet Union or any other military power, has not even made him blush, he just asks for more money.

Worse yet, the one benefit that the military provided -- incidentally -- to ordinary people was a kind of Military Keynesianism -- which means using military spending to regulate the economy and employ people. These days, the Secretary of Defense wants to close military bases all over our country -- he still needs the ones in Asia and Europe. So, not only is there no Peace Dividend, but the bloated military that remains will be one which provides significantly fewer jobs than before, and will cost even more money!

Defense Secretary Cohen is either a complete idiot, or he thinks the rest of us are.

The Bombing Trial and Justice (6/2/97)

By the time you read this, Timothy McVeigh may have been convicted of the various crimes associated with the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Personally, I do not have much doubt that McVeigh is guilty of being involved in those murders. But like many people, I do have some significant doubts about the case that was developed by the government to prosecute the suspects.

At the time of McVeigh's arrest I wrote that it seemed a little too easy to arrest him and then just one other person. A little too easy because clearly McVeigh is not smart enough to have committed such a crime without some help behind the scenes, and not stupid enough to have simply filled a truck with fertilizer and dropped it off expecting not to be caught. After all, what sort of an idiot commits the crime of the century and then drives away in a get away car without licence plates?

As I understand it, the people involved with the Patriot and Militia movements also think the trial was something of a sham -- but for very different reasons. The right-wing thinks that McVeigh should not, rightly, be convicted because: one, the reasons I have mentioned above -- there is clearly more going on here; two, the government is so corrupt that it cannot be trusted to try any person accused of such a crime; and three, the whole course of the trial avoids the larger issues raised by bombing -- such as what should the government be doing differently so that it does not treat people in such a way that they come to think that blowing buildings up is a necessary course of action.

We need not discuss the failures of the government's case at this point, there would seem to be much left for the people to discover in the future. What is more interesting is the right-wing claim that the government should be behaving differently, and that its treatment of McVeigh and handling of the case are indicative of the failures of government. This claim is complicated, and at some level simply true. Working people in this country are no doubt aware of the myriad of ways in which the government has made their lives more difficult, or at least has failed in its obligation to provide some benefit for taxes paid.

Here in the west these claims against the government have often involved land disputes, property taxes, and property rights. In short, small ranchers, farmers, and those who just wish to have a little space are being squeezed to death by the government and its regulations. Some of these people also believe that there exists some sort of conspiracy by the United Nations to take over the world. Some people are clearly insane, but that's another column.

It is true that the little people are being removed from their land, losing it to tax obligations and other debts with which they cannot keep pace. And it is true that the government has been the immediate source of many of these problems. And yes, some of these problems do actually involve government regulations that are senseless, although some are necessary but seem like an imposition upon the individual small property owner, like environmental protections.

The other concern about the trial raised by the right-wing is the whole question of the legitimacy of this government bringing a would be revolutionary (of sorts) to trial. Some on the right have claimed that McVeigh's actions were justified and necessary. I cannot agree with this point of view -- mostly because it is devoid of moral logic. But it is important to be aware of these tendencies in the population.

Even that portrayal is not quite accurate. Many people would agree that the current government lacks the moral authority to try anyone. And certainly it lacks the moral authority to

condemn those who reject its authority. But the right-wing does not phrase the issue in quite these terms. The Patriot and Militia types have bought into an ideology based on individual power and right which sees government itself, which also means democracy itself, as the problem. So to these people it is not just the current government, but government in principle which causes people trouble.

The right-wing analysis is, of course, fundamentally and deeply flawed. The real problem facing all working people, including small farmers and ranchers, is the class bias in the government. The current government is a problem, not because democracy is a problem, but because the this government serves the interests of the enemy class -- it serves the interests of the very wealthy to the detriment of the rest of us.

That which the ruling class calls democracy, the dictatorship of the wealthy, is the problem. Real democracy is the solution.

THE DEBT IS OWED, BUT BY WHOM? (6/9/97)

So, there is this guy running around the country, or at least Georgetown University, suggesting that White Americans owe a back debt to Black Americans for unfair financial gains made as a result of slavery. This debt, according Business Professor Richard America (his real name) is between five and ten trillion dollars.

Prof. America bases his numbers on the gross income of white people. And this got me to thinking. I agree that African-Americans are owed a very large debt by the people who profited from slavery. And, I am not in a position to put a dollar figure on that debt but am happy to use Prof. America's numbers.

However, it strikes me that this debt is owed by the people who profited from slavery, not from everyone who simply happens to be white. The distinction here may seem fine, but it is actually very significant. You see, the issue needs to be understood in terms of power and responsibility, in terms of class interests, which Prof. America is probably not allowed to acknowledge as he works for a business school.

Anyway, my point is that there is something obscene about suggesting that the rest of us are liable for a debt incurred by the people who owned slaves, and therefore profited from the slaves' unpaid labor. Just because someone happened to be white does not mean that they profited from slavery. In fact, the opposite is more likely true.

When the price of a commodity is low in one place the net effect is for prices everywhere to drop so as to stay competitive. Our labor exists in a market, that is the price of labor is determined by market forces. This was also true, even if it was on a smaller scale, a hundred a fifty years ago. So, if some labor costs only as much as a slave holder spends to keep slaves alive, then the wage other laborers can demand from owners is lower. This is true because wage workers were in competition with slaves.

We don't like to think about our labor -- our time, creativity, and energy -- as existing in a market, but it does. We are all degraded by being forced to live with this arrangement, but let us not avoid the reality simply because it is insulting to our humanity. The reality is that slave labor, like child labor and prison labor, is cheap. When employers are allowed to make use of cheap labor they increase their profits by driving down wages for everyone else.

In the case of the U.S., slave labor was used in all kinds of fields, from skilled to unskilled depending on the situation. Thus the net effect was to keep wages lower for non-slave

workers. Karl Marx once commented that as long as labor in the black skin is enslaved, labor in the white skin will never be free. Now that labor in the black skin is not enslaved, but still underpaid and super exploited, we have won half the battle.

Race is used to keep working people divided. Some white people think that they somehow benefit personally from the fact that racially oppressed people make less money than they do. Fools! The reality is that white people live in the same market for labor as racially oppressed people, even internationally now. When wages are kept artificially low for large segments of the working class because of our history of racism, then wages for the rest of us are inevitably lower. White people are not in a position of privilege by virtue of the fact that they are white, and therefore paid, on average, slightly more than other workers. White people's wages are kept down by the same system of racial oppression that keeps non-white's wages even lower still.

Therefore, Prof. America's suggestion that white people, as a group, owe a debt to the descendants of slaves is absurd and terribly misguided. This is so, not because the descendants of slaves are not owed a debt, both financial and moral -- they are -- but rather because this debt is owed by the descendants of the people who actually owned and profited from slavery. Most white people were themselves oppressed by the system of slavery, in the form of lower wages, and are thus owed a debt as well.

It is the owning class which owes African-American people, in particular, and all working people, in general, a great debt for the exploitation, suffering, injury, and death with which we as a class have suffered for hundreds of years. The fact that this debt is greater to the descendants of slaves should not be glossed over, but neither should we ignore the reality of the increased exploitation of all working people which slavery enabled, and racism today perpetuates.

The Future of Religion (6/16/97)

Mircea Eliade, who was perhaps the most important theorist of the history of religion in the 20th Century, has described human beings as essentially religious. Eliade was a believer, but what if there really is no god? The non-existence of god does not answer the great questions in the history of religion, but asks more. If there is no god or gods, why do humans behave in ways that many people describe as essentially religious?

If we take Friedrich Engels at his word, and he was not a believer, the fundamental nature of reality is material and dialectical. If reality is the material world and it moves dialectically, that is in very complicated ways, perhaps, what we have previously understood as religious behavior is simply the behavior of humans trying to cope with a mysterious world. We may speculate that our world is mysterious, not because of the elusiveness of a god or gods, but because of the complexity of its dialectical motion. Religion has always expressed our sense of awe in the face of mystery and beauty.

From the position of this new evaluation of religion without god or gods, there is a great deal to be learned from religious behavior, theology, and the ritual practices of human beings around the world. From the dialectical materialist point of view, there are in fact three levels of religious expression which are necessary to all societies: these three are the Social, the Existential, and the Aesthetic.

We observe that our biology delimits certain possibilities and imposes certain necessities. Among these is the fact of our being social creatures, animals that live together and must of necessity cooperate to some significant degree. Then there is the complexity introduced by thought, which results, in particular, in the need for collective consensus about our societies and selves. We need to know how we fit together, and what we are to make of our lives -- this is the Existential. We also find, and must incorporate, the fact that being human ultimately involves an Aesthetic sensibility, which includes the capacity for wonder and even awe. This Aesthetic level is the one we often think about first in describing religion, the poetic side of being human. Religion, even understood without idealism -- without god and god talk -- must still take into account these three very different, but very integrated, levels in which being human expresses itself.

Religion, most significantly though, addresses the question of how human beings fit in the world, and fit together. Engels taught that this level of reality, too, is determined by the material world and moves dialectically. The Sociologist Peter Berger has argued that religion forms the basis for social constructions of reality. Even though these constructions may have been attributed to a god or gods, societies are the creations of human beings. These creations are complicated, and have relied upon religious understandings of reality, as Eliade described, for their justifications. Berger's analysis implies that even after humans have progressed to the point of recognizing these social constructions as being our own profane creations, the complexity remains, and the necessity for intentionally creating meaning in society remains.

In a fully democratic society, the decisions regarding the ways in which society should be constructed fall to everyone rather than remaining the domain of a ruling class. Our future socialist society will construct social definitions of reality more freely than before, but these constructions will inevitably draw upon the religious language and forms of the past -- even though the content will have been divorced from notions of the sacred or divine.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that Marxism, especially since the Soviet Experiment, has been seen as cold and lifeless, science without enough poetry. Marxists themselves may resist this formulation because they have an experience of the human or poetic side of dialectics. However, the demands of revolutionary struggle, most especially including the struggle against religious ways of subverting class consciousness -- fighting the narcotic effect of idealist religion -- has forced an emphasis on the scientific side of Scientific Socialism. However, socialism is about the free expression of human beings, and therefore will inevitably recapture its poetic side. It is hoped that the present discussion will contribute to an early rediscovery of this fuzzy and human side of dialectical materialism, and to its fuller articulation.

As Marx put it in the "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," religion is an expression of humanity's imperfect self-awareness: not human as abstract individual, but as social being, collective being. Thus far, religion is a distortion of human existence because society has been distorted.

Charen (6/23/97)

Every once in a while the right-wing pundits that fill the editorial pages of the corporate media actually say something which is true. Oh, I know you think I am just making this up to be friendly towards our more intellectually disadvantaged and valueless citizens, but I tell the truth.

A recent case in point is one Mona Charen, whom I have never met but regard as being intellectually inferior to garden slugs. Charen and her mentor George Will have noticed that when society has arrived at a point where 18 year old girls are giving birth at their high school prom, and then simply leave the newborn in the trash, that society has reached a moral meltdown -- in Charen's term.

The interesting part of this observation is that it came from the right-wing pundits. Yes, we have reached a point of moral meltdown. Charen thinks this is because the corporate media seek out psychiatrists to ask them why would someone do such a thing, rather than seeking out priests who might simply suggest that this person is going to hell. Now, 18 year olds going to hell when they are not able to cope with the various trials of their lives is a uniquely unhelpful idea, so it should not surprise us that Charen came up with it.

Charen has no interest in actually discovering why society has reached this point of moral meltdown, but she does seem interested in punishing the children in question when they reach these crises in their lives.

Personally, my opinion is that we have reached a moral meltdown because so many newspapers are publishing the views of Mona Charen and George Will, as if either of them has ever had anything intelligent, helpful, or ethical to say. We have no moral standards left because the people who are setting a public example are ethically bankrupt. Of course, the question then becomes why have our media become obsessed with the views of the intellectually inferior and morally bankrupt?

I have a theory about this problem of public morality. The one big thing that the corporate media and the morally bankrupt who make up the right-wing have in common is that they both support a completely unrestricted free market economy. That is, they all believe that capitalism should be completely unfettered by the demands of democracy, or that ordinary people should have any kind of say in the way our economy works, not to mention even asking in whose interest it works. Charen, Will, and the big media outlets that run their verbal effluence all agree that rich people should do as they please without regard for ethical standards or public accountability.

We have reached the point of moral meltdown because the views of people like Charen have come into vogue. Capitalism is inherently immoral. Yet, Charen's column regularly features her extolling the virtues of capitalism unfettered by moral responsibility, and now, of course, she notices that when these values of hers filter down to the rest of society they look ugly. I suspect that what really bothers Charen and Will is not that a newborn human being is dead, neither of them has shown any remorse for the millions who have died because of CIA sponsored Coups, assassinations, and Death Squads, rather they are bothered that some little girl decided for herself that she was not ready to be a parent and handled the situation in the only way that she thought she could. This girl made a choice to determine the course of her life -- quite a disturbing choice indeed, but it is the act of choosing which really bothers Charen. If the girl had been rich, well then, I am sure that Charen wouldn't mind if the girl in question killed other people's infants as well as her own.

When children fail to meet our expectations for socially responsible behavior it is not their fault -- as Charen would have us believe. And further, putting this troubled girl to death for murder, as I am sure Charen will be advocating in the near future, does not set any kind of moral example. The problem in our society is that the adults with power are not setting any kind of example of moral behavior. In Charen's case, they are advocating a system in which corporate

bosses can kill at will, and can destroy entire towns in their morally bankrupt quest for the greatest private profits at any social cost.

Our society has reached moral meltdown because we have been forced to live in the system advocated by Charen herself. It is a cruel, evil, vicious system that sucks the life out of everything it touches. We have no morality because Charen has no morality, and all those that she represents live without regard for other human beings.

The chickens of free market morality have come home to roost. We should all be terribly disturbed at this course of events and must endeavor to do everything in our power to resist the world desired by Charen and those morally bankrupt individuals who control the system she pimps.

The Key to Encryption (7/7/97)

A controversy is brewing in and around Washington regarding the encryption of electronic messages. You see, it is possible to encode email and other types of electronic messages using mathematical equations so complicated that they cannot be solved without a key. Maybe you've seen Robert Redford's movie Sneakers?

Our government has this nifty new idea whereby they will require computer manufacturers to build into their encryption systems a means for people's keys to be held by some third party. They want to be able to have access to the keys so they can read people's email, to combat crime and terrorism, or so they say.

On the other side, privacy advocates have said that the government doesn't really need our encryption keys, would abuse its access to the keys, and Americans would lose our right to privacy if such a system went forward. At this point it is not clear that it is even possible, but Congress is looking into legislation.

Now, I should say right up front that I am not concerned about possible threats to my privacy in the future. I don't really have privacy now, so why should I worry about losing something I don't have? And you don't have privacy either.

There is this outfit called the National Security Agency which boasts that it monitors international communications, maintains a level of technology twenty years ahead of what is commercially available, and measures its computer capacity by the acre. Can you image the power of acres of computers? You probably think the Dual Pentium is fast.

What they don't say, although many people have heard, is that they actually monitor communications inside the country as well. The best information is that the NSA uses advanced voice recognition technology to monitor every phone call made in the country. They scan phone conversations for particular words, phrases, or whatever, and if detected by the computer, recordings of these calls are forwarded to human agents.

Most people who look into this sort of thing assume that the NSA is also reading every fax sent, and all of our email. Computer experts tell me that all of this is easy, it is the voice recognition technology which is complicated.

Anyway, it is already possible to encrypt email. The only way for the government to be able to read it is if they somehow get your key. Do you believe that if the government wanted your encryption key that they could get it? Me too. So encryption is really just a way to keep secrets from people who are too lazy or disinterested to really want to read your email. Which is

all well and good, but if all of the rest of our communications are unsecured, what is the point of worrying about it?

To me the real issue is not the security of the communication but the motivation of the government in reading it. They, of course, claim that they are interested in fighting terrorism. However, historical experience tells us that they really use their ability to spy on citizens for more nefarious purposes -- to suppress various movements seeking justice in America.

Our government represents the interests of the rich -- you've noticed this by now. The government protects and extends the power of the wealthy. This is the purpose of government in any class society, the government is like an executive committee of the ruling class. And it is this purpose to which I object.

This is significant because the Privacy Lobby is concerned about government intrusion generally. This is senseless, because it is too late. The government is already intrusive, it is just not as intrusive in some people's lives. Most privacy advocates are not involved in the fight for justice, and if they were they would know it doesn't matter what they do, the government will be spying on them. There is no point worrying about this now. What we should be worrying about is why the government is spying on us.

As long as we allow the country to be run by big business, big business will spy on us, and this government that represents the wealthy against the rest of us will spy on us too. Now, if the government actually worked to protect the public good, to improve the lives of the citizenry in general, instead of just protecting wealth, then the government wouldn't have an interest in spying on us.

The capacity to spy, in and of itself, is not really the concern. After all, democracy requires some sacrifice of privacy -- it requires accountability and consequences. A motivation to spy and to use that information to repress, that is the real concern.

So, if you're concerned about your privacy in principle, then your time is best served by changing the government's class allegiance which motivates it to spy on you in the first place.

The End Time (7/14/97)

Beware, the end is near! The end of the two party system of pretend democracy has begun.

You may have noticed that the hacks in Washington, D.C. have begun a process that they call investigating campaign finances. I am certain, that in the end, we will not have learned much at all, save confirmation that privately financed campaigns are an exercise in oligarchy not democracy.

The Republicans and Democrats, aka Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, have reached the point of ideological synergy -- they are now in essence one party representing the interests of business against the rest of us. They used to pretend that they actually had substantive differences, but no more. Even the Democrats don't mind a quarter of our children living in poverty. There was a time when only the Republicans would be that mean spirited and cruel. But the logic of the system of private profit is that there is no profit in caring for children.

These ideological similarities do not mean that the two Tweedles don't still compete for votes. They do, and the competition has simply become more and more absurd as they struggle to find things to pretend to disagree about. All they have left anymore is abortion, and even there some Tweedle Dees support it and some Tweedle Dums don't.

What the two corporate parties can do in the struggle for electoral superiority is call each other names and pretend to investigate abuses of power or influence. They cannot really investigate because they are both maintain the same level of corruption, but people are getting fed up, so they pretend.

It is this pretending to investigate campaign financing that signals the beginning of the end for them. People know that the primary factory in determining electoral success is money, the one that can raise the most money wins. Most people don't even bother voting anymore because it seems like an absurd waste of their time. And they call it democracy!

The investigation will, of course, be controlled so that any actual information is buried in so much fluff that no one notices it. But in the end this very fact of acknowledging that an investigation is called for will be their undoing. It is no longer possible to pretend that our system of privately financed elections is in any way similar to democracy. Democracy means rule by the people. Private financing of election means rule by those with the most money. And we call that oligarchy. Welcome to the Middle Ages, except they all wear blue suits.

And if that is not enough, the Tweedle Dees are claiming that the Chinese attempted to influence the 1996 elections. Any sane and reasonably well informed person should find this to be among the most outrageous examples of hypocrisy. As you might recall, our own country has quite overtly bought a number of elections in other countries. When we do it we don't just slip a little money to the sleaze bags that serve capitalist interests, no we go all out and flood the country in question with American money. Two instructive examples are the early post World War II elections in Italy where the CIA and State Department hand picked the government on the theory that the Italians could not be allowed to choose their own. And not even ten years ago now, the State Department flooded Nicaragua with American campaign money. For the Chinese to have even come close the level of financial corruption we had in Nicaragua they would have had to have spent Eight Billion (that's Billion with B) dollars.

And thus the spectacle begins -- the Tweedle Dums and Tweedle Dees will bicker with each other, fiddling as our version of Rome burns. Burn baby burn! The end is near, we should all prepare the fireworks, for democracy is at hand.

True they will rage and rage at the dying of their oligarchical light, but such is the movement of history. Some things are unavoidable, delay able perhaps, but not avoidable. We will have democracy in this country. And it will be a democracy that lives up to the promises of this great nation.

One person, one vote. It is time that we the people take the influence of money, take the overwhelming and unjust influence of the rich out of politics. Democracy demands it, and if we can do it now, our grandchildren will thank us. For the planet cannot heal until the scourge of capitalism and its dictatorship of wealth is once and are for all relegated to its rightful place on the rubbish heap of history.

It is time for democracy, time for publicly funded elections!

Let's All Boycott Disney (7/21/97)

I can't say that the Southern Baptists and I agree on much, other than that we are all carbon based life forms. But there is one thing that we agree upon, and that is the moral imperative to boycott Disney. We have very different versions of that imperative to be sure, but boycott we will. And you should too.

Oddly enough, Disney has a reasonable corporate attitude towards homosexuals but not workers. This brings out an interesting contradiction with employees of theirs who happen to be gay. These employees have benefits for their partners, but no job security.

In case you haven't heard, the Southern Baptists decided recently to boycott Disney and all of its myriad of subsidiaries because of Disney's tolerant attitudes regarding sexual orientation. The Southern Baptists, not to be confused with their more reasonable cousins the American Baptists, are bent out of shape because the Southern Baptists favor persecuting people who happen to be gay or lesbian. Those of us living in the post Dark Ages world may find this anachronistic, if not senseless, cruel, and therefore unchristian, but those are the facts.

People on the whole other side of politics are also boycotting Disney. Ironically, Disney attracts this attention because of its success. When Disney grants partner benefits, their size means that this benefit policy effects the labor market. On the other side, when Disney subsidiaries are trying to avoid actually paying these same employees, or when Disney's merchandising arm produces products in Haiti and pays workers thirteen cents an hour, then those policies too effect the labor market.

Now, don't get me wrong, I have mixed feelings about this state of affairs. I applauded Disney's decision to grant partners of their gay and lesbian employees benefits equal to heterosexuals. And I applauded Disney when its subsidiary ABC decided to carry a show with an openly lesbian star. But I have a hard time with them constantly trying to lower pay and benefits for their workers in general, not to mention the Third World sweatshops and child labor. Michael Eisner, the CEO, is just not a moral person. Anyone who profits from the forced labor of small children is evil.

The fact that Disney decided that their bottom line is furthered by gay friendly policies just shows the state of the country. Except for the Southern Baptists, the rest of us seem to be developing much healthier and productive attitudes about homosexuality. Disney has figured out that they can profit from this. So that struggle continues.

Southern Baptists aside, you should boycott Disney to help the Communications Workers of America out, and probably help yourself out a bit too. Disney is a very destructive force in the world today. This is nothing new, but their success has called more attention to the deviations from moral behavior engaged in by the company.

Disney has a long and sordid history of propagating reactionary ideas and anti-labor activities. Disney was the last major Hollywood studio to be organized. A feat accomplished by Walt Disney through his other contacts and a willingness to cheat workers. It is this willingness to cheat workers that has defined Disney corporate policy from the beginning. Though, perhaps that is an understatement as Disney personally seemed to believe that it was his calling to further the goals of right-wing politicians, which include the violent suppression of labor and the protection of corporate profits and assets.

Some may not appreciate the ongoing significance of this history. But I would remind you that even as the total value of the stock market and the profits of a very few owners of large corporations continue to climb ever upward, the real wages of working people have been in decline for at least the last 20 years. The class struggle is real, and it is for keeps -- the owners want to keep everything. It is this value system that Disney represents, glorifies, and in which it vigorously participates.

The world according to Disney is a world in which corporations rule unchallenged, workers have no rights, and children, at least the ones not in Third World sweatshops, learn only the points of history and, more likely, popular myth which support the capitalist system of

domination and private profit. We are very nearly there, but, thank God (though not the Southern Baptists' version of God) we are not there yet.

So get out there and make up a boycott Disney sign, put it in your window and help make the world a better place. Your children, and their children will thank you. Be sure to let people know that you're not a homophobic nut, though. Let people know that you are boycotting Disney in support of human rights for children in Haiti and electrical workers in New York and California.

What kind of a society have we become? (7/28/97)

The latest news out of New York City is that the deaf/mute people seen frequenting subway trains selling trinkets or begging were actually slave labor for some demented individuals who figured they could take advantage of these handicapped people because they, the slave labor, had been illegally smuggled into this country and would be unable or unwilling to approach the police.

That last estimation proved to be incorrect, as a few of these poor people got up enough courage to challenge the reality in which they found themselves.

Who would do such a thing? In this case, take would-be immigrants who not only do not speak the language, but cannot speak at all, pack them into a couple of small apartments and then send them out each day to scrape a few dollars together to enrich the ... capitalist.

Mayor Gullianni may not put it this way, but that's the truth isn't it? Some cruel bastard got some money together -- capital -- which enabled him or them to bring these immigrants to New York City, invest in some trinkets and a couple of apartments, and then sit back and watch the money roll in. Admittedly, it is not the best investment scheme, but it is the essence of capitalism.

According to the head of the New York City Red Cross, which immediately took the immigrants in, the Red Cross intervenes in cases such as this two to three times a month. When asked by Pacifica Radio if having 57 immigrants cramped into unfit housing, working as slaves, was unique, the guy from the Red Cross simply said, No. What is unique is that the city has postured itself as a champion of the downtrodden that will bring the villains responsible to justice. The city has not said why it ignores the 30 or more other cases each year. We might assume that the international media, which broke the story first, had a role. Around the world people have been outraged that deaf/mute people, in particular, would be exploited this way.

I hope that you also have found this incident shocking and disturbing. The state of our nation has been in decline for some time, and I doubt that we have made it all the way down to rock bottom yet, but things have already gotten seriously ugly out there. The greed, selfishness, and cruelty are exploding. Which you knew already.

What interests me about all this is the question of where the line is, the line between acceptable and outrageous. It isn't a fixed line because different people have different standards. I have this friend who works in an office. He is on salary and is forced to work 50 or 60 hours a week, with a great deal of responsibility and stress. Because of the level of this salary and the local cost of housing my friend lives in cramped accommodations with others in similar circumstances. This friend has no other options, in part because of the impossibility of changing medical insurance companies, so he must work in this job and must tolerate his living conditions. If one works at a job and is not free to change then is one a slave? Is the issue one of freedom

or compensation? After all, even slaves are compensated in the sense that they are kept alive, and so is my friend. But neither can leave their job.

To my way of thinking the situation I described above, and hundreds of millions like it are all unacceptable because of the exploitation and suffering endured so that the individuals in question can barely survive such that someone else gets rich. But what determines whether or not a particular capitalist arrangement is officially acceptable or not? In New York, it would appear that simply holding immigrants in bonded labor, stored in unfit housing, is not unacceptable because the legal authorities usually choose not to do anything. The Red Cross gets involved but has no authority over what cases are prosecuted.

All working people live in this boarder line between illegal and immoral. The situations in which we work are not moral, in that one individual -- the owner -- cannot ethically dominate others, which is the essence of capitalism -- yet these situations are legal, usually. And even when they are not legal, abuses by capitalists are just part of life in America today. Even the police and district attorneys won't help. So where is the line? Is it okay to keep able bodied, non-immigrants in virtual slavery because they are free on the occasional weekend, but not okay if they are handicapped? Is it slavery if a person works but does not even make enough to pay for shelter, food, and clothing? What if this person is free -- to work a second job -- every weekend?

Where is the line?

Error! Bookmark not defined.POLLUTION WILL KILL US ALL (8/4/97)

Driving out of the Denver International Airport recently I saw one of the most disgusting sights I have ever seen. Its not that I have been through a major war or anything, but I have seen some pretty disgusting things in my time. But this one particular thing really disturbed me.

The view from DIA towards the west is breath-taking. The view should be breath-taking because of the majesty and beauty of the Rocky Mountains, which sit hunched over stretching from the horizon in the north to the horizon in the south off in the distance west of the airport. DIA is out on the plains outside of Denver, and headed towards Denver one can see for miles and miles -- sort of.

These days, this view is breath-taking in its ugliness, not its beauty. Looking across Denver and its suburbs towards the mountains one is looking through 50 miles of smog. The view from DIA is a brownish-yellow color, with the mountains -- and these are big mountains -- almost completely obscured by the air. Air is supposed to be clear isn't it?

On a positive note, the pollution has dramatically improved the aesthetic quality of our sunsets. I grew up in Colorado, so I have a sense of what it was like in the recent past. When I was a kid we did have some pretty spectacular sunsets every once in a while. It seems looking back as if a few times a year the sunset would be pink, orange and yellow, like a fire dancing in the clouds. The fact that this happened only a few times a year meant that people would actually stop what they were doing to look at the sunset.

Today, the sunsets along the Colorado front range are almost always beautiful mixes of color -- yellows and pinks, mixing with orange and the whiteness of the clouds. Colorado is a great place for sunsets, but this is because it is not a good place to breath.

The small particles that are some of the pollution cause the colors in the sunset, something to do with light bouncing off of them. This pollution has dramatically increased

respiratory problems among the people and even household pets, including asthma and allergies. So you can look at the Colorado sunsets, but try not to breath.

On a related note, when I was a kid one could run around all day and not worry about sunburn. More recently, a co-worker of mine was complaining about a sunburn she picked up sitting in the sun for less than two hours. The kicker is that she had recently returned from a week long vacation at Lake Powell, and was very thoroughly tanned, not to mention olive skinned to begin with. She figured that after spending a week in the sun (with sunscreen, of course) and developing a very deep tan that she could sit down outside and not worry for a little while. Not true, not in Colorado, not any more.

Even more frightening is the fact that people have been concerned about pollution in the Denver area for more than the last twenty years. My whole life air pollution has been an issue in Denver, because it sits in a bowl and the pollution just kind of collects until there is a big storm. The air was usually see through though. But today it has become opaque.

Recently, the President of the United States acknowledged global warming is a fact, and it cannot go on unchecked. We will reach a point when the air will not be safe to breath and the atmosphere will offer no more protection from the sun. Imagine growing up in a world in which children cannot play outside for fear of melanoma, skin cancer. This is a real concern, the melanoma rates have been rising dramatically in the area. We are all going to die from skin cancer and respiratory failure related to pollution.

But who is responsible?, you ask. Even as the most visible and life threatening aspects of pollution are becoming more and more obvious, the corporate community is lobbying Congress to repeal environmental protection laws so they can pollute even more. I do not fully understand how greed causes people to think so defectively, but it does. Sure, less restrictions means more profit, and the ruling class loves profit. But they will die from skin cancer as surely as the rest of us. They may have the freedom and resources to take more precautions, to use more protection and even live in houses with air filtration systems. The ruling class in Mexico does this now that the air in Mexico City has become lethal.

Even the rich are going to have to go outside sooner or later.

The Evil that (Greedy) Men Do (8/11/97)

Fifty-five deaf/mute Mexicans were found living in virtual slavery a couple of weeks ago now, and the fallout has only just begun. People around the world have been horrified to hear that what appears to be a smuggling ring had brought people illegally into the U.S. and was using them as slaves to make money.

Part of the fallout is the Mayor of New York declaring himself to be appalled and ready to fight these types of human rights abuses. Interestingly, the head of the New York City Red Cross has said that the Red Cross intervenes in situations like this on a regular basis. Chicano news organizations have reported that many immigrants and immigrants' rights groups are unsurprised to hear the news. Conditions, such as this group of immigrants live in, are common. Because of their status immigrants are often taken advantage of in these ways.

The City of New York has also claimed that it will arrange for the group to be allowed to stay in the U.S. while their investigation proceeds. One Congress member has introduced special legislation that would essentially except the victims from U.S. immigration laws which would otherwise require their deportation.

Does any of this strike you as odd?

Additionally, it turns out that the investigation being conducted by the City of New York concerns the smuggling of aliens, not human rights abuses. The crime committed by the slave traders is not slavery, although the conditions are such that those responsible could likely be fined, small fines, for labor law violations. But the big crime concerns immigration law.

Does that strike you as odd? You see, it is not that these primitive capitalists had subjected handicapped labor to barbaric conditions and virtual slavery that is frowned upon by the authorities. Extreme exploitation of human beings, treating them like chattel, is the norm. This has been the experience of millions of Americans. This is essentially the nature of capitalism. The degree to which any workers make a decent living is the fruit of prolonged struggle, class struggle. The capitalists in this particular story only crossed over the line when they smuggled their own labor into the country. Had they simply relied on others, Coyotes as I believe they are called, to do their dirty work they would have been fine, and the deaf/mutes would still be selling those trinkets.

There are no laws against exploiting any labor in these extreme ways. This is the part that I find so ironic. The situation that has appalled so many people around the world is the part that is legal, the mechanics of how these deaf/mute people came to be in these appalling situations is not what motivates the disgust. What is disgusting is the way in which capitalism treats human beings, and it is this aspect of the situation that has attracted attention.

Does any of this strike you as odd?

The fundamentally immoral aspect of treating human beings like slaves or like domesticated animals is not illegal in our country. So when the mayor of New York says that he intends to prevent reoccurrences, does he mean of the smuggling or the essential inhumanity of capitalist exploitation. I imagine he means the former, because the latter is the system of political economy that they mayor has always fought so hard to extend. In spite of his protests, the mayor is actually a supporter of the system that rewards this horrendous treatment of human beings, and he supports the legal structures which, while pretending to be concerned about immigration, actually function to allow and even encourage this exact situation.

Our immigration laws are an affront to humanity because in situations in which illegal immigrants are held in virtual slavery, if they report it, the immigrants are the ones punished. The capitalists who violate immigration law in hiring labor are merely fined. And according to the public radio program Latino USA, these fines are usually never collected.

The latest news, if you have not heard, is that arrests have been made in Mexico City, and part of the smuggling ring is being uncovered. Note that it is a smuggling ring, not slave traders who are being arrested.

According to the New York Times, the Mexican and U.S. governments are engaged in a tug of war to see which will be able to try those arrested first, as if it will really matter. The ring leaders have been identified and more horrendous details have emerged as to how they were treating their slaves. But I still have to laugh. The U.S. government and Mexican government are feuding over who can try these capitalists first, but neither has ever expressed any interest in dealing with the legal structures that encourage capitalists to treat labor in this fashion. These capitalists were even beating and sexually assaulting their slaves.

I suppose the ring leaders were just stupid, because it turns out that sexual assault is a crime in New York, and beating people is only tolerated if done by the police. So there are going to be some consequences, but there will be no change. All of the thousands, if not tens of

thousands, of other immigrants who are treated this way each and every year will continue to be held in virtual slavery.

Welcome to Capitalist America, land of the free.

Corporate Family?? (8/18/97)

The corporation that is Wal-Mart is now bigger (in financial terms) than 161 countries in the world. That means there are only thirty countries whose economies are larger than Wal-Mart. The same can be said about Mitsubishi, which is even bigger than Wal-Mart, or General Motors, and more.

During a recent union organizing drive at one Wal-Mart store the corporate media was aghast that workers would feel the need for collective bargaining. Why, Wal-Mart, we are told, is just like a family. There is no need for the workers to see the corporate bosses as the enemy -- which is implied in union representation. "The corporation that is Wal-Mart is not out to screw the workers," at least this is what we are led to believe.

This same corporate media tells us that societies with a socialist form of economy, collective ownership, are impossible because of human "nature." Yet, they also claimed that this "family" that is larger than 161 countries is doing just fine. Supposedly, people owning the means of production together is not likely to create a culture of cooperation, but the "family" of Wal-Mart does engender cooperation.

There is something odd in this claim. Socialism is about equality, and the corporations tell us this is impossible. Wal-Mart, on the other hand, is organized around a profound economic hierarchy, around inequality. So, if we are to believe the critics of socialism, an economy organized around imbalances in power is somehow better, to a large degree because owners are actually looking out for us. The owners aren't really motivated only by greed, with no regard for the lives of their workers -- any plant closures you may find to take advantage of cheaper labor elsewhere are merely the products of a deranged imagination (which I suppose really is true, in a sense).

Most people, I think it is safe to say, think a profitable plant abandoning its societal obligations in the quest for even more profit is just wrong. Do you really believe that the greedheads, as in the corporate bosses who own Wal-Mart, are looking out for our best interest? Of course not.

Well, if human nature is good enough for Wal-Mart, then its good enough for socialism, right? How is it a just economy based on equality, such as socialism, is impossible, when one based on inequality is possible? Perhaps, this inversion of reality is just covering up something threatening to the owning class' privilege?

That much, we can agree, is all true. There really aren't many sane people left who would actually try to argue, in a straight forward manner, that injustice conditions human nature toward just outcomes. That is just stupid. Socialism is undeniably an ethically superior way of organizing society. So the ruling class is left to imply that injustice, that capitalism, is not just a superior but necessary way of organizing society.

First, it is true that from the ruling class point of view capitalism is better, because the capitalists are the ones who benefit from the injustice. If I take all of your hard earned money and give it to the corporate bosses, you may feel cheated, but they will be pleased. Our entire economy and political system functions in this basic manner. So, you feel cheated, while the

corporate media claim everything is just fine and dandy. Everything is fine, from their point of view.

Our experience flies in the face of their claims, so we are not likely to buy into the notion that capitalism is better, so they have to somehow convince us, working people, that we need them, that they are necessary. In a capitalist economy workers do need capitalists. We cannot work without the capital infrastructure. This is why Wal-Mart pretends that it is family. The real question is how long will we need them?

Capitalists live in perpetual fear of the coming of the time we call the revolution. And they get really uptight whenever workers start talking about alternative organizations of society, and about justice, and even retribution. This is a game that they cannot afford to lose, for if they do we might be inclined to seek justice for all those workers they sacrificed on the job to the quest for higher profits. This kind of talk sets them quaking in their boots.

Actually, we really don't need them anymore. Their usefulness is done, the capital infrastructure needed for a more advanced, more civilized, and above all more just society is in place. The transition has begun. Listen to them -- the capitalists and their pet media -- closely and you will see that they are getting more and more desperate in their pleas to seem necessary, the way a patriarch is in their version of the family.

The lesson for workers at the end of the twentieth century is that if economies can pretend to be successful and just when organized around exploitation, then obviously economies can really be successful and just when organized around justice. The sheer scale of human economic organization shows that we simply don't need capitalism, or capitalists, anymore. And, good riddance to the leeches.

OUR VALUES ARE JUST FINE (8/25/97)

So, let's talk about values. Though, it is beyond me why, I have noticed that right-wing "thinkers" continue to expound the view that the problems this nation faces -- which we working people have seen mounting for years now -- are caused by a problem with OUR values. These deep thinkers are fundamentally confused on two very different, but equally important levels. Actually, I suspect that they know they are wrong, people like the Christian Coalition for example, but they continue to say the things that they say because they are protecting privilege. The right-wing's purpose is to make sure that property rights for the rich are protected above all else, including human rights for the rest of us.

From whence do values come? From our experience of the world. We learn a basic sense of right and wrong from those around us. The right-wing claims that our values cause problems like substance abuse, violent crime, and divorce. This is, of course, fundamentally wrong. The problems of substance abuse, violent crime, and divorce are the result of the strain on many individual human beings added together. Although, perhaps, our values do prevent us from seeking some quicker solutions.

There is an old "Bloom County" cartoon in which one of the regulars, spoofing Donald Trump in a conversation with a character who is young and poor, discusses "quality." The spoof of Trump comments that this is a quality nation because people like the poor person have not strung up the people like Trump by their intestines... yet.

We may have here a weak spot that owners take advantage of. Working people often internalize the problems we experience in our lives as if the problems are our fault. Take for

example a community in which a large number of workers are laid off at a factory because their plant was moved to Mexico. You might have seen the excellent movie "Roger and Me." The community will, inevitably, experience a surge of problems. Well, if the people had simply organized themselves and reopened the plant, by threat of force if necessary, then everything would be okay. The point is that our values often keep us from seeking retribution against those responsible for injustice -- the owners -- and instead we internalize (in our selves and communities) our frustrations in very unhealthy ways, and thus social problems like crime and substance abuse become rampant.

So, you see the only thing lacking in our values is a tendency to be too forgiving of rich people. Our natural tendency to not hack off the limbs of profit-lusting executives who destroy entire cities in their valueless quest for profit often keeps us powerless. If workers had a healthy sense of cause and effect, blame and responsibility, we would hold the guilty responsible.

The working class has always been much more ethical in its conduct than the owning class. And this is the substance of the second great lie in right-wing ideology. In order to succeed in a capitalist system one must adopt the values of the system. If you do not, you will fail. So, it is not that the people who own factories and such are inherently evil, they have just adapted to their environment. Capitalism is about exploitation. The ones who do it the best -- the most viciously -- succeed. So when the religious right claims that we need religion to recapture our sense of values, they are wrong, in part because our values are fine, but mostly because capitalism prevents anything resembling values amongst the ruling class.

Although, to be fair, the ruling class does actually have some very limited values. The tight knit bond that the owning class shares amongst itself is the source of these few values. Social bonds are the source of all values. It is just that the owners think they are superior, and that we deserve only toil and struggle. Capitalists think they are smarter and deserving of their class privilege. They treat each other with great deference and respect, even while they compete. But workers see only the cruelty and unbridled greed demanded by the system. Successful capitalists must of necessity have no qualms about killing workers to keep profits high. Whereas we tend to take seriously the injunction, "Thou shalt not kill."

Our values are universal, because working people are the majority. Our values extend to everyone. It is not just that we think killing owners is morally wrong, it is that we think killing other human beings is wrong. Our values are fine. If the Christian Coalition is serious about making the world a better place they should advocate using the prisons and police to instill values amongst those who really lack them. The jails probably would still be full, but they would be full with real criminals, bankers and corporate executives. And then the world could be a good and happy place.

PROFIT VS. SURVIVAL (9/1/97)

Seems as though we've been reading and hearing a lot of conflicting reports about the state of the economy lately.

Unemployment has shown minor decreases, and wages minor increases. The real wages of working people are still lower than they were in 1989, though, and are significantly lower than 1970. On the other side, inflation is said to be remaining low. So, there have been some minor improvements for working people in the last few months.

In other news, stock prices have fallen in the last couple of weeks. The Stock Market, evidently, is concerned about an increase in inflation.

What is all of that about? Inflation is said to be declining, and there have been small increases in working people's income. So, what's the problem? Working people's income is going up, however slightly. Wall Street is concerned about the cost of labor. So, from the ruling class point of view there is an increase in inflation. While from the working class's, or majority, point of view inflation is down. This is Class struggle.

And why are wages making modest gains after all these years? Probably because of an increase in labor militancy -- organizing and strikes, not to mention the recent election of actual labor advocates to the posts of president of the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters. So there is cause for business to worry about their kind of inflation.

How much business will worry about wage inflation is an open question. Increased wages for working people means increased buying power and therefore markets. This is good for capitalism, it keeps it stable by limiting unrest. If workers make enough to live on, then they do not need to strike to survive. However, labor costs are the single largest threat to profit, so the people who own the companies want labor costs to decrease. They call this "discipline." The owners say labor needs more "discipline." By which they mean that we should work harder for less money. And we have been working harder. Since 1970 productivity has increased dramatically -- we just have less and less to show for it.

The contradiction between the capitalists profit motive and stability, in the form of living wages, is the ultimate threat to capitalism. If workers fight for and receive a living wage then the capitalists lose because their profit rates decline as the economy gradually grows to serve everyone's interests. If the capitalists drive for ultimate profit wins then they still lose. This is because ever increasing profits means that the time will inevitably come that markets disappear because most people will be living on next to nothing, and we will be forced to revolt and revolutionize the economy to serve our -- that is most people's -- interests.

Which scenario, reform or revolution, gets played out is a much disputed topic, that history will eventually decide. But it does seem unlikely that the capitalists will give up on their quest for greater profits. And they do have a few tricks up their sleeve yet. Take, for example, the UPS strike.

It seems reasonable, from the vantage point of today, to suppose that UPS knew that they would not win the strike. After all, the Teamsters had just held their first democratic election in a long time (the source of this problem is another column), and they were in a fighting mood. Given the senselessness of the company's demands, most anyone can see that a strike was predictable. And UPS probably knew, or at least researched quickly, the exact length of time they were comfortable losing business.

But why would UPS force a strike it knew it would lose? Discipline! UPS has astounding cash resources, and was never threatened. Over time they could have lost enough business to threaten to the company. So, they had to know just how long they could resist the obvious. And they did. The Teamsters won on most of the their demands, but at a cost. Discipline. Unions can go out on strike and make advances, but it will cost the individuals involved in lost wages.

So, the Teamsters won and the movement advances. When unions win, we all win. But UPS made the point that they, the owners, still hold most of the cards. And that is why they will likely win the profit battle in the short term, and that is exactly why they will definitely lose the larger struggle -- the class struggle -- to socialism in the long term.

Either way, we can only win. We might as well make it quicker, it will come to that anyway, and save ourselves and lot of head, and other, aches.

THE FUTURE OF THE MONARCHY (9/8/97)

Unless you live in a cave you have probably noticed the HUGE outpouring of emotion in response to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. But if you live in a cave, you are probably not reading this, so that point may be moot. What is interesting is the scale of the public response. Which then begs some analysis about the meaning of the death of "the world's favorite personality," as at least one media outlet has claimed.

Some have suggested that Diana was changing the character of the monarchy in England. They say that she gave the institution a face and contact with ordinary people. Was Diana a savior of sorts? Many have been impressed by her charity work, often with groups overlooked by the English ruling class, and outside of the flow of money. Some say this is because Diana felt the outsider and thus identified with lepers and AIDS victims.

But a savior? That I do not think was the case. Diana came from tremendous wealth and never advocated a position which would have threatened that wealth. She worked with the poor, as did Mother Teresa, but like Teresa never actually did anything which could have prevented poverty. Both worked to help the impoverished while consciously avoiding fighting the system which creates poverty. So, I am not impressed with either of them on that level.

Beyond the charity work there is the more important question of giving the monarchy a human face. What does this mean in the current context? Great Britain is undergoing a process of evaluation which could result in substantive changes in their system of laws in the next few years. One of the possible changes could be the elimination of the Monarchy. Many have begun to wonder if the Monarchy serves a purpose any longer. I say no, but the British will have to decide for themselves.

Some have said that the reason Diana got the cold shoulder from her in-laws is because of her public presence. Some have said that this presence was the only salvation for a monarchy that struggles with meaning in the post-modern world. At present the Monarchy is ceremonial and diplomatic, but wields no real power. They are just really, really rich people. And really rich people run the world, and so it is in Britain.

Diana was open and friendly, her ex-husband is aloof and cold. The Monarchy is perceived to be aloof and cold in general. Which style serves the purposes of the Monarchy best? As I pointed out above, some suggest that the aloof style was the threat that would bring the Monarchy down. I think this is incorrect.

If the Monarchy is open and addressing social problems (to any extent), doesn't that point to its own uselessness? The Monarchy is about class privilege. Privilege is the ultimate cause of most social problems. An interesting contradiction. In being more open and friendly Diana was actually calling attention to the absurdity of her own position. If it were not for the injustice inherent in a distribution of wealth that made her a multi-millionaire she would have had no poverty stricken people to smile upon.

It strikes me, then, that the cold shoulder given Diana by her in-laws was not their resistance to change, but their intuition that what she was doing would eventually spoil the party for all of them. And, they were, of course, frustrated that she persisted and refused to recognize the danger in what she was doing.

Which brings us to today. It is no doubt true that the public fondness for Diana did play a positive role, from the Monarchy's point of view, at least in the short term. Public awareness of the contradiction pointed to above was noticeably absent in the week after her death. But my point is that it has always been there and would only have become more and more pronounced over time. Can the Monarchy go back to being cool and aloof? Probably not, the short term damage has been done. Will they try to be more open? Most likely because public expectations of their behavior have shifted. In the end, it is the public change in expectations which will bring about the end of the Monarchy.

As the British Parliament begins this process of evaluating their government structures a number of things are likely to change, many of them remnants of the old class structure represented by the Monarchy. For example, even if the Monarchy itself survives for another few decades, the only power it did have, the nomination of a few dozen Anglican Bishops to the House of Lords will be eliminated. Perhaps even that name will be among the changes, after all "House of Lords" is hardly a concept that evokes Democracy, it is the dictatorship of the rich, the Lords, and Dukes, and Earls, not to mention Princes and Kings.

The death of Diana will bring the Monarchy down. Not because she could have saved it had she lived, but because it is time. It is time for the English to grow up as a people.

STATE SPONSORED TERRORISM (9/15/97)

So, I got to wondering the other day, just why is the United States government a terrorist organization? A lot of people don't know this, its not out yet, but the U.S. is a terrorist organization, as defined by its use of terror to intimidate political opponents.

This years' examples of U.S. state terrorism involve the tiny island nation of Cuba. You see, the Cubans have shown the ultimate audacity and insult to U.S. business interests by choosing a path that doesn't involve corporate profits. This really gets under the skin of the people who own business and control the U.S. government. So our government, using our money, has taken to terrorizing Cuba.

The latest acts of terrorism perpetrated in our name involve dropping a tiny crop threatening bug over eastern Cuba this summer, and supporting the fascists from the Cuban American National Foundation in blowing up random unarmed civilians who happen to be staying at Cuban hotels. The real tragedy is that state sponsored terrorism on the part of the U.S. against Cuba is hardly new, it goes back nearly forty years now.

Why do we do this to Cuba? Its not like Cuba is any kind of threat to us. I'll grant you that Cuba is a threat to corporations because it proves to other countries in the third world that they do not necessarily need to sell themselves to corporate interests the way the Dominican Republic or Indonesia do.

So, the motive for hostility is clear, after all American business is hardly known for its ethical standards of behavior. But terrorism?

Why does the corporate ruling class feel so threatened by Cuba that they engage in terrorism? And then last week it hit me: jealousy. Last year, the Cuban economy had the highest growth rate in the hemisphere, and our country is falling apart. I think the ruling class here has realized that their years are numbered. They cannot go on like this, raping the Earth and the people of the Earth year in and year out forever. The system of private profit is starting to unravel.

The reason this occurred to me last week is that last week the Colorado Business Commission on Adult Basic Learning issued its report to the governor. The Commission found that 11% of Coloradans are illiterate. Eleven percent! Can you believe that, those of you who can read (or found someone to read this column to you)? The literacy rate among adults in Cuba is virtually 100%.

Last year the infant mortality rate in Cuba -- a poor third world country suffering from an illegal blockade by this country -- was lower than ours. Since about 1965 the infant mortality rate in Havana has been lower than Washington, D.C., but now it is true for the whole country.

Obviously the people in charge here are getting terrified that not just Dominicans and Indonesians but U.S. citizens are going to start to look to Cuba as an example of how to run a country. In this country we can't get health care to our elderly or our children, a quarter of whom live in poverty -- in this the richest country in the world. Our congress is trying to figure out how to gut environmental protections while the Cuban government is leading the world in organic, sustainable agriculture, not to mention new and more efficient recycling techniques.

The writing is on the wall. Our capitalist country is moving ever closer to the abyss and the socialist country of Cuba -- in spite of having none of our advantages -- is putting us to shame in every quality of life measurement used in global surveys. And it is not just the rich who have noticed this, other people have too.

Also last week, in my small hometown we had our third bank robbery of the summer. In a normal year there would be one (if any), so this is a 300% increase in bank robberies. Colorado as a whole had double the average last year, and is well on the way to nearly matching that this year. Bank robberies are the prime indicator that people have given up on the system.

Working people are realizing that something has to be done. The rich are, indeed, getting richer and richer while the rest of us get poorer and poorer. This is not a situation that can, even if we let it, continue for much longer. The system requires that at least some non-rich people have some money so they can buy the things that the rich people sell. Soon that will not be possible and then the change will come.

Thank God for us in this country, the Cubans have been working on the alternative and in spite of our state sponsored terrorism against them, they are more than happy to share what they have learned about building a just and sustainable society.

COPS NEED MORE GUNS? (9/22/97)

In the news last week:

1. "...the typical young family saw its income drop by one-third over [the last] two decades, the Children's Defense Fund said today," (AP, 9/15/97).
2. "Even as America wastes tons of food, people in 12 million households worry about getting enough to eat, a government study estimates. And that doesn't count the homeless," (AP, 9/16/97).
3. "After months of quiet, the five biggest layoff announcements of the year have all come in the last 11 months..." (AP, 9/20/97).

And, what, you may be asking yourself, was the response to all of this news by the Governor of the State of California? Pete Wilson decided to authorize police officers in California to carry M-16 automatic rifles. Evidently, the Israelis have been doing a booming business in California selling small anti-personnel weapons, like the famed Uzi. The U.S.

government's new anti-automatic weapons law doesn't apply to guns like the Uzi, which are sold legally in a non-automatic form and then easily modified to make them automatic.

One California state senator wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of Israel to ask that he put a stop to the exports, which are coming from a state owned weapons company. According to the BBC radio, many people in California have noticed that bank robbers and other criminals are now significantly better armed than the police. Governor Wilson's response is to arm the police better, apparently on the theory that if you must have crime then at least the far west should resemble the Old West. Who needs the movies anymore? If you want to see a shoot out, just go to L.A.

And who said that Pete Wilson is out of touch with regular people? I am sure that you, like all hard working Americans, enjoy going down to the empty lot on the corner and firing off a few hundred rounds from your Uzi after a hard day on the job. If it isn't legal to actually do something to improve one's working conditions -- which I am sure we can all agree an Uzi could facilitate -- then at least we still have the freedom to shoot up the neighborhood.

The people from the BBC were unable to even contain their horror at this turn of events. Wimps! Those British have no sense of fun, not like the fun-loving people down at the NRA. According to the NRA the Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to carry an automatic weapon with cop killer bullets.

Now, I realize that some people have claimed that the folks down at the NRA have tapioca for brains, but that's just not fair. Probably, they just misunderstood the question, what from the hearing loss and related brain damage associated with firing thousands and thousands of rounds of 9 mm bullets into the great California outback.

Although, to be fair, I think we must admit that the one with tapioca for brains is probably the governor of California. That is really the only logical explanation for this turn of events. Obviously, someone in charge of policy is insane. It is simply not rational to look at a situation in which those charged with protecting society have become outgunned by those who have lost all regard for society, and say, "We need more guns!"

To turn back to the news, just what does the Governor think motivates people to take up automatic weapons, body armor, ski masks, and rob a bank? Does he honestly think that these people are going to be intimidated by better armed police? And, even if people are intimidated by better armed police, does this matter if they have no job, no food, no shelter, and no way to survive? What does the Governor think causes crime?

I am guessing that on all these questions and many more like it, the Governor of California would answer in exactly the opposite manner of everyone who studies these problems, or just happens to live on planet Earth. You can't take a society in which millions of people are jobless and hungry and the only way to survive and care for their families is to turn to crime, and expect to not have violence. Of course there is a crime problem in America, there is chronic and growing unemployment and underemployment and cheap guns. Just what does the Governor expect?

And so now he is going to give automatic weapons to the L.A. police? The L.A. police?!

If your travel plans include California in the next few decades, be sure to wear your body armor, and keep that Uzi fully loaded.

TO DIE OR NOT TO DIE (9/29/97)

The headline read, "Study: HMOs make dying more merciful." And yet the people at the Hemlock Society were not jumping up and down. One might wonder why.

The Hemlock Society is an outfit which advocates giving individuals decision making power over when and how they will die. The idea is that terminally ill people need not suffer through tedious, painful, and ultimately futile aggressive efforts to keep them alive. Better to die with dignity, some say.

Interestingly, the insurance industry has figured out that they have a financial interest in letting people die -- 90% of our health care dollars are spent in the last two years of life. HMOs have taken to limiting expensive medical procedures that might prolong the lives of terminally ill patients. And, at least one study by medical researchers has determined that this practice can have the net outcome of making death more merciful.

If the chills haven't been moving up your spine yet then you probably don't have medical insurance, or have very expensive medical insurance. The rest of us are filled with the screaming heebie-jeebies.

There are some people who object to the goals of the Hemlock Society, which I am really unfairly pairing with HMOs for my own purposes here, because the critics say that life is sacred and we should die when we die. And then there are doctors' groups which point to the Hippocratic Oath, which says that doctors must prevent harm from befalling their patients. Death, to this way of thinking, is harmful, so doctors should avoid it. But death is just part of life, we are born and we die. There is nothing that anyone can do to interrupt this cycle.

The issue I have with the HMOs is who makes the decisions. Some people are critical of the "Right to Die" movement because they claim that people can end up being coerced into making end of life decisions that really serve someone else's interests. There is a lot of pressure on dying people, and on some handicapped people as well -- but let us leave this aspect of the debate aside for now.

The dominance of HMOs in the medical community is changing the nature of the debate though, because dying is becoming more of a fad. We have the technology to keep dying people, even parts of dying people, alive for extended periods of time. This raises all kinds of questions about how medical resources are used, whose lives are prolonged, and whose lives are not. In the past the debate has focused on systems of ethics which avoid individual decision making and in effect try to keep everyone alive for as long as their insurance -- or personal wealth -- lasts. But now things have changed and insurance companies are defining expensive options out of the picture.

Who decides?

The HMOs have an obvious interest in letting terminally ill people die without heroic and expensive efforts to save them, but this is not -- I repeat not -- the type of health care policy advocated by the Hemlock Society, or anyone else who advocates death with dignity. It is one of the scenarios pointed to by those critical of right to die decision making. Critics point out that if legislation allowed individuals the right to decide when they had lived long enough, financial considerations -- rather than quality of life issues -- will come to dominate the decision making process. We ought not, morally, allow society to demand that people decide whether to live or die based on financial concerns.

Although this is on the surface a good idea, it is naive because all kinds of people make all kinds of decisions about people living and dying based solely on financial concerns -- Lee Iacoca did it when he approved the exploding Ford Pintos. And now insurance companies are doing it to ordinary people who happen to belong to HMOs.

Who decides who dies?

In a class based society it is not possible to divorce life decisions from financial concerns, this is just one of the reasons why class based societies are fundamentally immoral. But the role and power of HMOs has redefined the debate over end of life issues, because the time when insurance companies are deciding that some should live and some should die is already here.

Citizens must demand that laws, especially consumer rights laws regarding medical care, be brought into line with the new reality. Your HMO just should not have the ability to tell your doctor that it is time for you to die, only you should have that right.

People are deciding who lives and who dies, but they are insurance company executives motivated only by profit. Are these the people you want making these decisions?

CLICHES, TRUTH, AND REALITY (10/6/97)

There are two cliches of the Marxist analysis of society which seem absurdly obvious this week. The more surprising thing is the degree to which these topics are addressed only indirectly in the corporate media. But, then again, I guess that is really the point of the corporate media.

These cliches involve the central question of the class struggle, "Who is to blame?". Capitalist society tends to blame the victims rather than engaging in substantive self criticism, and it draws attention from real problems with insignificant distractions.

As I mentioned, these are cliches, taken by most intelligent observers to be truisms, that is statements which are inherently true because they refer to themselves. The point being that capitalist society, by definition, obfuscates problems and uses smoke and mirrors to lead people away from those responsible.

Before the Promise Keepers gathering in Washington, D.C. last week, one of their founders was going around saying that their point was for the men involved to take the fall for the problems of society. The idea being that the fault of the problems experienced by the members, and obviously to their way of thinking all men like them, lies within us.

I will grant you that all individuals have a kind of existential moral responsibility for their own actions. However, the critical question here is what problems are the Promise Keepers talking about? And, who is the sinner, and who is the victim of these problems?

The problems seem to have to do with the general disintegration of society. This is not mere speculation on the Promise Keepers part, but a fact of life in post-Cold War America. Last year the unjust distribution of wealth in America grew to the point where the wealthiest 1% of Americans control as much wealth as the bottom 95% -- this is about 35% of the national wealth.

Even the Children's Defense Fund, which is not known for its radicalism, announced a crisis in American society last month. The CDF noticed that real wages for working people, that 95% of us, have been declining for the last 20 years. This means that the resources available to ordinary working families to raise their children are evaporating as we are forced to work longer hours for less money.

And those nuclear physicists at the Promise Keepers have noticed the same crisis in American society. The Promise Keepers problem is that it is run by a bunch of incredibly stupid people. Well, it could be that the people running the Promise Keepers know the things they are saying aren't true, but just say them anyway.

The tragedy in all this is that many -- supposedly hundreds of thousands of -- men are involved with the Promise Keepers, presumably because they too have noticed this crisis in American society. It is not hard to understand why working class men get involved with the Promise Keepers, after all their message is one of making America a better place. Obviously the country and our families need help. But whose fault is this?

On the subject of whose fault, whose fault is it that the American political system is run by and for the rich? To read the papers one would think it is Al Gore's fault alone. True, the Vice President did make phone calls from his White House office to raise money. And these phone calls were illegal, in some petty way. But the law the VP broke is one that, ironically, was intended to keep politicians from hitting up staff people for money.

If you aren't laughing at the absurdity of all this yet, it is probably because you haven't thought about the punch line. White House staff people don't have any money, at least not on the scale necessary for American politics. So, while a hundred years ago they may have been subject to pressure from Vice Presidents, this is no longer an issue.

Gore broke a meaningless law which has absolutely no effect on fundraising, politics, or the employer/employee relationship in the White House. Even more comically, the Attorney General is probably going to be forced into asking for a Special Prosecutor to look into these phone calls.

Is the American political system utterly corrupt from the influence of the rich while excluding the rest of us? Of course! Are phone calls from the White House significant in any way to this larger problem? Not at all! Will the corporate media and Republican party spend millions of dollars and countless column inches of valuable news space discussing these phone calls? Yes! Will any of this result in change or will it just be a distraction? We all know the answer.

Sometimes a cliché becomes a cliché because it would be silly to say anything different.

TO BE(G) OR NOT TO BE(G) (10/13/97)

"The standpoint of the old materialism is 'civil' society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or socialist humanity." Marx's 10th Thesis on Feuerbach.

There seems to be a crisis enveloping the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) of late. I am guessing that they are having a hard time defining themselves in the post Cold War world. In internal communications DSA wonders about recreating a political culture which might actually foster democracy -- something clearly needed in the face of declining electoral participation. If no one is interested enough to vote, can it be true that one is living in a democratic society?

These issues are vitally important, but I wonder if some at DSA are going in entirely the wrong direction. I recently heard Dr. Manning Marable on a wonderful weekly radio program called "Second Opinion." For those not familiar with him, Dr. Marable has a long history with DSA and is, perhaps, the most widely known African-American intellectual today. He writes and teaches intellectual and political history, focusing on the experience of African-American people. Marable is an important figure in American society today, but not someone that I, as a Communist intellectual (and politician), always agree with.

In his discussion with Matt Rothschild, the host of this radio show, Marable was making the point that Louis Farrakhan is wrong in two important respects. First, black separatism

inevitably means black capitalism, which really doesn't solve any problems, only changes the color of the faces of the ruling class. I can't disagree with this, look at what capitalism has done for Africa, with the late Mobutu of the former Zaire being only the latest degenerate capitalist oriented ruler to fall.

And secondly, Marable points out that the philosophy of atonement, so popular with the Nation of Islam -- and, I might add, the Promise Keepers -- means seeing the fault of social problems within ourselves, Christian and Muslim, black and white, rather than within the ruling class. As Marable points out, atonement, in this context, means not being able to put pressure on the government to make progressive changes which could benefit ordinary working people -- African-American working people in particular in the case of the Nation. This is all well and good. If we blame ourselves for the structural problems of capitalism and the greed of the ruling class, then we will never see changes that improve our lives and future. Atonement, in this context, means blaming the victims.

Well, it is high time for the victims of capitalism to stand up for their rights, not to mention the future for our children and our children's children. It is at this point that Marable's analysis falls down.

The notion that working people should put blame in the proper place so that we might put pressure on those in positions of power misses the most significant point in the struggle for justice in America. The issue is not putting pressure on those in power, the issue is taking power. We -- working people of all races -- are the overwhelming majority. If the government does not serve our interests then we must change it, not pressure it, begging like the slaves we have all become to global financial capitalist interests. If we don't like the way things are going we must change their direction.

Marable said that he advocates building civic organizations that would be in a position to put the pressure he wants on power. He thinks that since the 1960's, progressive people, including Africa-Americans, have worked in the electoral sphere and have seen virtually no progress. Therefore, according to this way of thinking, it is time to turn to building coalitions of civic groups that represent our wide variety of interests. To which, I found myself thinking, what is he talking about? Who has been working in electoral politics? DSA? I have always thought that DSA's misguided allegiance to the Democratic Party was its way of avoiding electoral politics. By its very design, the DSA position is one of pressure, not power. The problem is not that working class and racially oppressed people have been working in the electoral realm with no success. The problem is that we have not been working in the electoral realm and have been content to plead with the Democrats for a few crumbs.

It is time to wake up, and smell the mist coming from the Democratic Party. We have been deluding ourselves for the last 30 years with the notion that the two-party system is designed to do something other than what it actually does -- protect wealth and privilege. Perhaps, there was a time when DSA's position made sense, and they are not alone, trade unions, progressive intellectuals, and civil rights organizations generally have shared the DSA position of working inside corporate politics. But that time has passed. The future belongs to third party organizations.

If Marable and DSA are serious about working for justice, for socialism, in America then it is time to give up begging and pleading, it is time to take power, time to elect our representatives to all levels of government. Turning away from the electoral realm today is rolling over, giving up, no matter how eloquent the portrayal may be. Working people of all organizations unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains and a world to win!

REFLECTIONS ON THE PUBLIC SPHERE (10/20/97)

The LA Times recently syndicated a column by Bill Bradley in which he claimed, “Two broad issues cry out for attention in American politics; how to deal with the rise of ‘radical capitalism,’ and how to reverse the deterioration of the public sphere.”

In fact, both of these issues have been with us, and crying out for attention since at least the early 1800’s after the German philosopher G.F.W. Hegel proclaimed that the center of social life is in the Civic Sphere. To Hegel the important issue was getting the work of government done, not deciding what that work should be – Politics. Hegel, the consummate right-wing ideologue, believed that the old money capitalists and their feudal allies should rule, unchallenged, and that working people should participate in Civil Society.

Bradley’s point is relevant, because at least in Hegel’s time Civil Society was a public entity, whereas these days many of the functions of Civil Society are performed by the Private Non-Profit sector. The fact that much of the work is still being done, in spite of the retreat of the Public sector, means that the system is functioning on auto pilot, at least for a while.

The Public sector, by which we should understand Politics, is the source of Democracy. The deterioration, as Bradley called it, of the Public Sector is the deterioration of Democracy itself. All other aspects of society are determined by other factors, it is in the act of voting that democracy is affirmed and preserved. Those aspects of our collective lives which are not subject to the polls are therefore beyond the reach of democracy – the private sector, non-profit and for-profit, the so-called Free Market, etc.

Capitalists, for the most part, are the ones who have been pushing what Bradley called Radical Capitalism. Capitalists feel that their activity, regardless of its social implications, should be entirely their decision. In the political discourse of the day this is called Freedom, and our government has slaughtered millions of people around the world to extend it.

Beyond the idiocy of the notion that greed can be a successful organizing principle for society, in the long term, there is the issue of the inherent instability of the capitalist system. This instability is the ultimate threat to capitalism itself, and to the profit interests of capitalists generally. Ironically, these same capitalists are the ones pushing Radical Capitalism, which means unfettering the so-called Free Market. But unfettered also means unprotected, unregulated, and therefore vulnerable. Capitalism has cycles, which every sane economist in the world knows are unavoidable. The severity of these cycles of depression is controllable, but only by government action – democratic control of the Free Market.

Radical Capitalists won the Cold War, but now they are going to lose the real war to determine the long-term organization of society. The problems Bradley points to are significant because they are the issues that will determine how the Class Struggle is resolved. Greed forces capitalists to dismantle the Public sector, and to extend the reach of the Free Market. These actions reinforce each other, and combined serve to eliminate any semblance of the democratic control of society.

Democracy is the ultimate answer to social problems, like the cycles of capitalism – let alone the choice of what kind of economic system society should have. Without democratic constraints on the Free Market the rich will continue to get richer and the poor will grow ever

more numerous and poverty stricken until such time as people decide they have had enough and they eliminate the profit motive from social interactions.

The Capitalists think profit motive is the best way to organize society, yet they have shown that they are unable to restrain themselves so as to allow for the physical survival of working people. And this is where the issue will be decided. When working people have been squeezed to the point where mass survival becomes the issue, then society will change. Until that point the power to decide how soon this point is reached lies with the capitalists themselves. Ironic isn't it?

The Revolution is just around the corner now because Bill Bradley is right. He writes what he writes in a crude attempt to get capitalists to recognize the flaws in Hegel's thinking, but there is no real power to challenge their narrow, misguided view of the world. The Soviet Union served this purpose on a global scale, and we have seen the disintegration into chaos around the world that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. And with the temporary triumph of capital over Trade Unions, the domestic constraints on capital have been eliminated. The ultimate sign of this is a supposed liberal President's support of Free Trade over Workers' Rights.

The capitalists have won, and so they have lost. It is only a matter of time now, because they aren't going to listen to Bradley – greed won't allow it.

JUSTICE AND THE DEATH PENALTY (10/27/97)

"Not in my name" was the slogan adorning T-shirts in the photo on the front page of my local paper a few weeks ago. Not in my name. I've discovered that a great many things are done, or not done, in my name and it is time for a change.

The State of Colorado recently executed someone for the first time in over twenty years. The case was clear cut, unlike many death penalty cases around the country, so the public discussions tended to focus on the issue of the Death Penalty itself. I should probably say right up front that the Death Penalty is a really bad idea. But that is only if one is concerned about maintaining a civilized society. I guess if you don't care about that, which obviously many Death Penalty proponents don't, then the state executing poor, mostly black men may be fine with you.

In this recent Colorado case the convicted killer clearly deserved to die, regardless of his claims to have reformed in prison. Like G. Gordon Liddy, this psychopath found Christ -- or at least a version of Christ. This now deceased Colorado killer brutally raped and murdered a woman he never knew. In older, and we often think of them as more primitive, legal systems, such as in Saudi Arabia, the male relatives of the victim would themselves kill the perpetrator. There is a certain human-ness to this approach. We can all understand that if someone raped and murdered your spouse, you would reasonably think this person deserved to die. However, deserving to die for the crimes one has committed is unrelated to the question of whether the government should be in the business of killing people.

The debate over Capital Punishment, ironically, has nothing what so ever to do with these perfectly human responses to crime. You wouldn't necessarily care if the person who committed the heinous crime is sane or not -- from your point of view they deserve to die, and in some cases you might handle this personally. But you are not the government, and the government does care if the perpetrator is sane. Our system of justice is based on the notion that someone must be

culpable to be guilty, that is they must have acted with criminal intent. Crazy people do not act with criminal intent; they act with irrational intent.

Further, the government (particularly ruling class government) is imperfect and is prone to convicting innocent people for a wide variety of crimes, including capital crimes. The current case of Mumia Abu Jamal in Philadelphia is a perfect example. In that case the Fraternal Order of Police -- which shares more with the Mob than any organization of professionals -- claims to be interested in avenging the death of a police officer, who Mumia was convicted of killing. The interesting thing is that the facts in the case all point toward someone other than Mumia being the killer, but the FoP has decided they don't care about the details, they just want Mumia to die.

Our government sometimes has other interests which lead it to pretend that one person committed a crime which was actually committed by a different person. This allows the government to kill the person it wants to kill, for whatever reason, usually related to social repression. Take, for example, the case of Geranimo Pratt (another Black Panther, interestingly). Pratt was convicted of a murder committed hundreds of miles from where he actually was at the time. It took over twenty years, but he, at least, is finally free. Even if the government eventually kills the guilty person, the system is so flawed that one cannot have any confidence in it. The effect on society is to keep people on edge.

Even Death Penalty proponents will argue that the purpose of this punishment is social control. Supposedly, if people know what the penalties are for certain crimes, like death in the case of murder, then people will be less likely to commit these crimes. The actual facts of society show that this argument is a load of cow waste, but the point about social control is instructive. The government having the authority to kill people, in particular disgruntled poor people, allows the government to exert a modicum of social control. Poor people must be kept down, after all left to their own devices they might figure that being poor so that a few others can be obscenely wealthy is not fair. Without social control poor people are likely to reject the system which keeps them poor.

It is the ulterior motives which undermine any claim to justice or morality put forth by those who support our government killing people. Not only is government in general imperfect, and it is this line of argument which is logically compelling, but our government in particular has a long history of trying and executing innocent people it happens not to like. And this really is the point, isn't it?

The Death Penalty is social control. Is it the type of social control that you support? As for me: Not in my name!

They Know Not What They Do (11/3/97)

“Have you ever noticed how many really stupid people you run into everyday? Take a pad and pencil with you and you’ll be amazed how many names you can collect in the course of your day.” -- George Carlin

Silly me, I went out of my way to see who a local alternative weekly was endorsing in my home town city council race. I thought, because this paper tries to engage in serious journalism, including probing investigations of local officials and issues, that they might have some intelligent thoughts on the city council race.

To be fair, I should mention that I have subjected myself to as many of these newspaper editorials as I can find because I was one of the candidates. Some of them are straightforward

enough, and the people writing the endorsement pieces are often reasonably intelligent and articulate. They present the interests of the owners of the paper, usually in a way which implies that the paper shares a great many interests with its readers. This is a highly dubious claim, but readers everywhere have to sort out the truth or falsity of this claim on a case by case basis.

But then there was the little paper that I really expected to articulate interests common to working people. This is their reason for being. Or at least their reason for doing investigative reporting. No such luck.

This little paper decided to endorse the candidate just to the right of me, a liberal Democrat (I was the left-wing alternative), and the candidate furthest to the right, who my wife has taken to calling The Snake. Both candidates seem to be nice people, although the one on the extreme right strikes me as the most dangerous kind of fascist – like a poisoned tipped steel dagger hidden in a colorful velvet sheath. “The two of them should strike a nice balance...” was the justification put forth by the paper for supporting ideologically opposite candidates.

Now I was, of course, disappointed that this presumably most thoughtful of papers had decided not to endorse me, but the choice they made can, none-the-less, only be described as really stupid. Get your pad and pencil out and jot down: The People who run the Boulder Weekly.

A good friend of mine suggested that maybe these editors aren't stupid, just cowardly. Perhaps, except the actual text of the endorsement mentioned that out of control growth was destroying the community, but that they rejected the notion of government actually planning growth and, therefore, recommended what they called balance. That's not cowardly, that's stupid. These people were saying that something has to be done to rein in the market, but they won't support candidates who might actually plan – god forbid. Their choice is to elect candidates who would neutralize each other's position so that nothing is done and the status quo continues on – this status quo being a bad thing even according to the people who wrote the endorsement.

Recognizing a situation which is destructive in one's life, and in one's community, and then consciously refusing to do anything about it – in fact encouraging people to intentionally avoid a solution – is really stupid.

Small commercial papers have a terrible problem because being small they can more immediately identify with their readers. However, being small they are much less free to choose their own line for fear of alienating the few advertisers they have. So, whose interests does a paper like this represent, people or business? Readers or advertisers?

If the status quo is a bad thing, as experienced by working people, then advocating a strategy of strengthening the status quo is obviously counter to people's interests. This same status quo serves the profit interests of businesses that exploit the people in the community and undermine their quality of life. Preserving the status quo is clearly taking sides, even if the claimed intention is to not take a side. Balance is the euphemism of choice in these situations. It is unavoidable, though, that this supposed so-called balance is taking a side, the wrong side.

Do the editors of the newspaper in question understand this? My friend's point was that yes they do, and cowardly seek to deny this reality. In most cases involving the press, when it takes the side of owners over workers, no matter what is claimed, they usually know what they are doing. But somehow, something in the way this particular paper approached its endorsements makes me suspect that they really don't understand the implications of their recommendations.

To paraphrase George Carlin, think about how stupid the average newspaper editor is, and realize that half of them are stupider than that. Some editor must be on the bottom, it is just a shame it turned out to be the one claiming, locally, to be the really serious alternative.

PROPERTY RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS (11/10/97)

The Boulder County branch of the American Civil Liberties Union is upset these days. Evidently, a local community has decided to outlaw what they are calling sexually oriented businesses. The move by the City Council of Lafayette, Colorado came in response to hints that a man from Colorado Springs was intending to open a so-called adult video store in town.

The story of this move to enforce what some call public decency is already full of mystery and suspicion. The ACLU, primarily, is suspicious because the original version of the law was passed with no public notice at an emergency session held election night.

To be fair, the only people complaining seem to be from outside of town. The citizens seem to support the ban. Local merchants who might have ended up next door to the porn shop were quite happy with the decision. The only people upset are the ACLU and the video chain's owners.

In response to claims that the law might be unconstitutional, one resident told the local press that citizens have rights too. As it happens, this is not the case. Americans like to believe that we have rights -- Human Rights. But in point of fact we have given them all away. This is the age of Imperialism -- the age of finance capital. You might have noticed all the talk about free trade, and what not. Capital wants to move anywhere, everywhere and insists that its rights be protected above all else.

The free movement of capital has been a virtual reality for a hundred years now. It is only in the last twenty years that legal structures have mutated to reflect this new reality. In America today, capital -- that is private property -- has more rights than human beings. In legal jargon they say that the artificial citizen (the corporation) has been vested with the legal rights of the natural citizen.

Some social critics would say that the material base of Imperialism creates a superstructure of culture and law which reflect the concrete realities of the free movement of finance capital. This phenomenon has advanced so far that many people seem to no longer question the fact that property has more rights than people. The local merchants mentioned above, for example, have argued that the city council is right in banning sexually oriented shops because such a law protects their businesses, property, and investments.

We have reached a sad state of affairs in this country. The great principle appealed to in this battle is not democracy, but property rights. Our courts have supported this rise to supremacy in the rights of private property and now citizens are left trying to fight capital on its own terms. They will lose, of course. When political struggles are carried out in the realm of finances, then those with the most money have won -- and they are not the citizens of Lafayette. The citizens, by appealing to an argument about protecting their property, have given up the fight by conceding property's terms. The people have already lost when the argument reaches this stage.

Last year a judge ruled that a similar law in another Denver suburb was unconstitutional because it violated the free speech provisions of the First Amendment. And this is clearly the issue. The Constitution was designed to protect the rights of citizens in a democracy -- freedom

of speech and association being of primary importance. By what twist of illogic did we end up with a system that defines selling items of no political significance a human right? I know that some of the sleaze bags who make money exploiting the sexuality of women (mostly) claim that there is a political content to what they do. And it cannot be denied that when Larry Flynt insults the rabid, I mean religious, right that such infrequent examples may be political -- to an irrelevant degree.

Political speech and commercial speech are very different animals. To equate them, as we have done and the ACLU continues to do, demeans all of us and undermines the very fabric of democracy. I suspect that a lot of these people -- the judges, the corporate sponsored politicians, and the large private property holders -- know this. These people know that equating commerce with politics, equating dollars with individual opinions is an affront to our democracy. They do it on purpose.

Who benefits when democracy is diminished? Who benefits when dollars are equated with votes? The people with all the dollars, of course.

So the people of Lafayette may not want a pornographic video store in their community, but in America today this decision is no longer theirs to make. We live in a democracy in name only; the people no longer have power.

We tolerate this development at our own peril.

WAR? Again? WHY? (11/17/97)

Is it just me, or do you too get the feeling that the President is a bit bloodthirsty. I ask this question because I do not understand why he is preparing again for war with Iraq. It was such fun the first time. Remember all of those Persian Gulf War Vets whose lives and health were destroyed? The actual reason for the war escapes me, although I remember being told it was a good one -- oil.

But that was then, and this is now. I'm sure that the Pentagon wouldn't intentionally poison thousands of Americans and then lie about it again. I'm sure they learned their lesson, just like they did after Agent Orange. Maybe not. The poverty draft keeps the military stocked with what they think of as disposables, so we shouldn't be surprised by anything they do.

Why is it we are getting ready for war again now? I'm sure you remember. It has something to do with U.N. inspections doesn't it?

One thing bothers me about all this. There is an obvious solution that no one seems to talk about. I figure either the people in charge -- the President and whoever -- are idiots, or they are lying about their motives.

Imagine if during the Cold War there was a reason for Soviet inspectors to be judging U.S. compliance of something and we felt they were being disingenuous. Would we tolerate the U.N. saying Soviets had to be involved? So why do Americans have to be involved in inspections in Iraq? Does the UN's authority depend on any one member country? And shouldn't any country have the right to veto participation by any other country it doesn't trust?

This is what it is about. The President claims it is about respecting the UN's mission and such. However, Iraq is not refusing to allow the U.N. to complete its mission. Iraq is refusing to allow Americans to be a part of that mission. And we are going to go to war over this?

Does this strike you as a bit odd? If we are so certain that Iraq is hiding something, why not send the inspection teams in without Americans?

Is all of this posturing about inspections or is it harassment? I have to confess that it certainly looks more like harassment.

And then there is Israel. Even our own diplomats in the area confess that the U.N. Security Council has no moral authority to impose its resolutions on Iraq when resolutions with the same aim are routinely ignored by Israel and Turkey, with United States support. Israel has some 200 nuclear weapons and has always refused to comply with U.N. resolutions to monitor its nuclear weapons program. Yet the President is not threatening war with Israel. Iraq is not even refusing the inspections -- as Israel does -- Iraq is only objecting to the inspections being done by Americans.

The death toll from the sanctions imposed on Iraq is estimated at over a half a million children. Is this the moral authority of the Security Council, hundreds of thousands of dead babies? Where are the so-called Pro-Life fanatics on this one? Oh, I forgot, they aren't interested in anyone's life or quality of life after they are born. The so-called pro-life Republicans, of course, support the move toward war in Iraq to enforce a blockade that is killing hundreds of thousands of children. Don't look for consistency in conservative so-called thinking.

But it is the President who disturbs me most. He claims to be a reasonable person, interested in improving the lives of the most vulnerable. But instead he is killing innocent children and threatening war so that...? The only purpose I can see is that the war would continue the blockade and continue the death toll. Stepping back and simply allowing the inspection teams to move forward without Americans would eventually lead to a lifting of the blockade -- one way or the other. Either Iraq has these hidden weapons -- and the inspectors would eventually find them, or they do not -- and the inspectors would confirm that. Honest inspections would lead to the end of the blockade.

By insisting on the presence of Americans, seen by Iraq as biased, the President ensures that the blockade will continue on indefinitely. And this means that innocent children will continue to die. Am I missing something in this equation?

So, while the commercial media prepares to cheer lead yet another war, I can only wonder at the senseless brutality of it all.

Reality, What a Concept (11/24/97)

One gets the impression sometimes that the people in charge don't actually pay much attention to what's going on in the world. Three profound examples of this have been floating around in the last few weeks. From across the globe and across time we have been hearing the most convoluted nonsense about Afghanistan, about Cuba, and about China. Let us debunk these topics one at a time.

The most recent, in terms of length of time the problem has been on going, is Afghanistan. In early November Secretary of State Albright noticed that the fundamentalist Muslim nuts currently running Afghanistan have been -- gasp of surprise here -- discriminating against half the population. Albright discovered that the Taliban are sexist pigs, living in the fourteenth century. Surprise, surprise! One might also have noticed that she didn't bother pointing out that the reason the Taliban are in power is ultimately because of the CIA.

Somehow when some people get to noticing problems around the world, they never seem to comprehend -- or at least acknowledge -- the causes of these problems, in particular their own

role in causing these problems. It was people ideologically in line with Albright – and the class she represents – who brought religious fundamentalists to power in Afghanistan. Recent political history in Afghanistan is actually very straightforward, but the good Secretary is obviously out of touch.

Two decades ago, the people of Afghanistan elected a President who represented the vast majority of the population. President Najibullah was devoted to the cause of people, and the CIA felt that profits would be threatened, so the CIA set about organizing and arming various fundamentalist groups from the countryside to overthrow this democratically elected government. Being a bit out matched by the power of the CIA, the new government looked to the north and asked the Soviet Union to send troops to help put down this fascist coup being organized by the USA – bastion of democracy.

These days we are told that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. But the truth of the matter is that Afghanistan would have been fine, and the Soviets would have never been invited in if it were not for the CIA and people like Sec. Albright, who have ruined that poor country.

And then there is China. Evidently some dissident got out of prison and went to Detroit. The corporate press has been filled with stories about how this guy intends to keep up his agitation for what some call human rights. Even self-described liberals get bent out of shape about China. I even heard the Executive Director of Amnesty International talking about the need to keep pressure on China because of the hundreds, maybe thousands of political prisoners still behind bars. And that much one cannot argue with. But let us keep a little perspective here. In our much smaller country we have thousands if not tens of thousands of political prisoners, and yet one never hears the Free Tibet crowd arguing for sanctions to force the U.S. government to release its political prisoners.

I am just sick and tired of the mindless hypocrisy of these so-called human rights advocates complaining about China. There are serious human rights issues in the world, and quite frankly, China is at the bottom of the list. Compared to capitalist countries, the Chinese are rank amateurs at human rights abuse. If you want to talk about violent suppression, forced disappearances, torture, slave labor, and a muzzled press just look at Mexico today.

On the subject of human rights and national values, let's look at US relations with Cuba. Early November brought news of dozens of absurd plans to destabilize Cuba formulated by our best and brightest in the decade after the Cuban Revolution. It turns out that the defense and intelligence people have been spending their time coming up with more and more absurd tactics for trying to undermine Cuban sovereignty.

The fundamental truth behind all of this is that the CIA and Alpha 66 have not been able to undermine the Cuban government of Fidel Castro because it is among the most popular governments in the world. The CIA can do a lot, but in order to take over a government they need an in, and in Cuba there is simply so little real opposition that there is no one for the CIA to organize or arm.

Those bent on imposing the free market are left to come up with the absurd. The alternative is to accept the democratic will of the Cuban people – but that isn't going to happen. The corporate press has called these plans dirty tricks, and keep in mind we only hear about the ones that weren't used.

The plan that is the most telling was the one to sink a boatload of Cuban immigrants, real or fabricated, and then blame the Cuban government. The disturbing part of this is that the lives of actual Cuban human beings are of no consequence to our government. Apparently this particular plan was not carried out because the CIA couldn't figure out a way to blame the Cuban

government for sinking a boatload of human beings. No one would believe that the Cuban government would do such a thing. But, to our government, murder is not a concern.

Morality is not a factor of capitalist politics, or international relations. Anyone who claims that it is, is either an ignorant fool, or is lying. And here I am thinking of....

NO MAS (12/1/97)

Jorge Mas Canosa is dead! Long live the Cuban Revolution!

Even the international media noticed when the founder and president of the Cuban American National Foundation died recently. And, perhaps it was really big news. For, if ever there was a dictator in the sorry story that is U.S. Cuban relations since the Revolution, that dictator was Jorge Mas Canosa. Mr. Mas was a multi-millionaire who profited supremely from the largess of government, as they say. He had quite the deal going, but then divine retribution, or just luck (not from his point of view of course), caught up with him. Mas died at the age of 57, never having seen his dream come true – his dream of returning to Cuba as its supreme ruler.

Mas came to see himself as dictator timbre; he was the one who could return to Cuba and fill the shoes of Batista -- the man the Cuban Revolution overthrew. Oddly enough, the people of Cuba never seemed to get excited about this prospect and just stuck by the Revolution so many fought and died for almost four decades ago.

The big story behind the news is not that another millionaire would-be third world dictator is dead – although that is happy news for democracy everywhere. No, the big news is that American foreign policy towards Cuba is about to turn a corner. Many have already commented on the fact that Mas was a driving force in the irrational and unjust American policy of blockading Cuba. But that is not quite true. The political reality of trying to strangle Cuba is that most of the American people are either unaware of it, or oppose it. We are not really the Ugly Americanos that we are portrayed to be around the world. Our government is, but we are really decent folks.

Cubans have always known this. When you visit Cuba, and I recommend this to all, you discover that Cubans are actually much more sophisticated than us Yankees. They know that we have no blood lust to destroy their little island and enslave them. Cubans know that people unconnected with the mass of Americans determine American foreign policy. Our government is run by and for the rich, and they don't like the idea of Cuba remaining a bastion of life outside of the profit centers of global capitalism.

But the point of all this is that the barbarism at the top is not a reflection of barbarism at the bottom. Those at the top who decided do so for their own reasons. Jorge Mas Canosa gave them the appearance of acting in the interests of citizens. Mas was not hugely successful because he deserved success, or worked hard. He was successful because he served those with power and money, so they kept him around.

Our policy towards Cuba will change, not because Mas is no longer here to advocate for it, but because Mas is no longer here to provide the pretense of government responding to the will of the people. Contrary to the picture painted by his fans, Mas was not an engine of U.S. foreign policy, but its front man. He was not the man behind the curtain; he was the man in front of it.

As I write these words, it is merely a week since Mas' death, and already the tide has begun to turn. There was a time when any two bit terrorist or criminal could get permanent legal

residency or even citizenship in the United States by simply claiming that they were fleeing persecution in Cuba. The latest terrorist to hijack a plane in Cuba is not being allowed to stay in the US. His name is Pupo and he is not being allowed to stay here after hijacking an Aero Cuba flight last spring. The talk is that he will be sent to a third country, which is still a violation of at least one international treaty.

The tide is turning. Americans no longer tolerate coddling hijackers, Mas can no longer give Washington the pretense of democratic pressure, and soon the Multilateral Agreement on Investment will undo all of the international trade provisions of our illegal blockade of Cuba.

This last one may catch a lot of people off guard, because it will be one of the great ironies of the 21st Century. Our government is currently negotiating a Bill of Rights for finance capital which will grant it the power to overturn any law in any signatory country which interferes with its (finance capital's) God-given right to rape and pillage. The MAI has provisions that allow corporations to sue governments at any level, to undo so-called restrictions on the corporations freedom to pursue profits.

Many here are concerned that MAI will destroy democracy by rendering government powerless in the face of international corporations. The age of finance capital is a new kind of fascism, in which people no longer participate in any decision making. Ironically, the laws that blockade Cuba are all restrictions on the free activity of finance capital, and will fall under MAI.

Cuba will one day soon live free -- in spite of AND because of its enemies, our enemies. Venceremos!

STRIKE NEWS (12/8/97)

These days, with all our high technology and sophisticated news gathering and distribution techniques, we like to think of ourselves as reasonably well informed. We like to believe that when important events occur anywhere in the world that we can hear about them, even as they happen. This is not the case. In the digital age, why would this be true?

Harkin Back: December 3, 1997, Wednesday, was the first day of a General Strike by public sector workers in Israel. An estimated three-quarters of a million workers were on strike. The country was shut down. No banks, no air travel, no stock exchange, no trash removal, about the only thing moving were Tel Aviv buses – oddly enough. The International Desk of BBC Radio noticed, and mentioned briefly that there was a General Strike in Israel. No mention of this event – which had shut down a major industrial country – was made in the U.S. press.

December 4 was day two of the strike, and still no mention in the U.S. press. A friend of mine called the local Scripps Howard newspaper and spoke with the person who pulls stories off the wire services. This person suggested my friend was delusional or making the strike up. He then called the regional AP office to see what they had to say, and got the same response. The BBC carried a longer feature story on the strike that evening. This story mentioned that things were getting critical, no banks, gas running low, no movement.

December 5 was day three – and recall that when the newspapers go to press here it is the end of the day in Israel – and there were only tiny stories in a few papers, including the Wall Street Journal, and on National Public Radio news. In most newspapers the only news about Israel was about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flying to Germany to meet with Chancellor Helmut Kohl to talk about the Peace Process. Ironically, ordinary Israelis were not

able to fly in or out of the country because the strike – estimated at one-third of the national workforce – had shut down the airports.

So I called the regional AP desk to see what was going on. They told me that as of noon (Mountain Time) on December 4 – well past the end of day two Israel time -- they did have a wire story available to the print media. But they could find no mention of any stories being sent to the broadcast media. This means that the NY Times, USA Today, and of course my local Scripps Howard paper could have run the story on day three, Friday morning, but chose not to. Finally, mid-day here December 5, the news was breaking on the TV Internet services that schoolteachers had joined the strike. The New York Times waited until the end of the fourth day to mention the strike.

A major labor strike involving hundreds of thousands of people, threatening economic stability at every level, closing banks, the stock exchange, the post office, trash collection, gasoline running out, and still it took until the end of the day Friday, December 5 – Israel time – for the news to begin circulating in the U.S. media. Most Americans didn't even hear about the strike until it was settled after five days.

Are we actually well informed? How many people remember the first strike in this struggle during the summer? How many, even now understand what the issues involved are? FYI, the strike started because the finance minister was threatening to cut retirement benefits, and then inexplicably insulted the entire working class – by comparing the union leadership to Palestinian terrorists.

If you were to suggest that the press in this country is controlled by a small elite who conspire to determine what news we hear and see, and how that news is presented you would be hounded out of town and labeled a conspiracy nut. If you had read this column last year as a speculative piece suggesting that such manipulation of the information available in the U.S. was actually happening, you would have thought me mad. And even now, I can hardly believe this series of events. It seems impossible that such vitally important news would be virtually blacked out of the U.S.

Yet it happened. For three days the workers of Israel were on strike – we're not talking about Antigua (or some other Third World nation), we're talking about Israel – and this news did not merit mention in the U.S. media? It took five days to get noticed. This is shocking and unbelievable, yet true.

So the next time someone suggests to you that the big media in this country are liberal, at all, tell him or her this story. The life of working people, even entire nations, is not seen as newsworthy to the American ruling class. Those are the people who decide what we read, listen to, and see, aren't they?

Perhaps, though, the owners do know how newsworthy such an event is, but didn't want workers here to know that workers there are not putting up with their social security system being dismantled.

Solidarity forever brothers and sisters for we are not alone!

Democrat, Fascist, Socialist or Capitalist (12/15/97)

It sure seems like we see the word Democracy used an awful lot these days. But what does it mean anymore? For example, the President is catching some heat because the Helms-

Burton bill set aside some money for so-called democracy building in Cuba, but most of this money has not yet been distributed.

We are told that the Cuban system is not democratic. We are told that Fidel Castro is a dictator. And we are told that the right-wing business interests in Miami and elsewhere bent on destroying the Cuban Revolution are democrats. Does any of this make any sense?

To begin with, The Right is a term from the French Revolution referring to those in the original revolutionary assembly who physically sat on the right hand side of the hall. These people were those with money and historic influence who were suspicious of including the masses of the people in decision making. Those on the Right felt that those with money and property should make the decisions. As was the case with our own Founding Fathers, they were concerned that a government that represented the unpropertied could challenge their freedom of action.

On the other side of the hall, the left side, were those who thought that the franchise should be extended to all regardless of their property holdings. Thus we have come to use the terms Left and Right to refer to positions on government and its relationship to property -- more properly capital. The Right claims that it is about the rights of individuals -- they just fail to mention that they only care about individuals with wealth.

The Right -- which represents capital -- has always been suspicious of democracy, of including involving everyone in government. They have always believed that government represents a threat to their freedom -- freedom to pursue their economic interests. Those with property rejected the power of the monarchy to set all the rules, and thought that they should decide the rules. The wealthy getting together and voting on policy is a kind of democracy, but it is the democracy of the few, oligarchy.

However, removing power from its traditional roots in the aristocracy, royalty, meant granting some power to small property holders, and over time to those with no property. This extension of the franchise, extension of democracy, is a threat to the freedom of capital. And so these days we are told that the problem is big government. The Right, as it has always done, says that the government is a threat to property, that government ruins things, that the government controls us.

Government is the compromise the ruling class makes with the working class. The ruling class retains power, but gives up some freedom, like the freedom to pollute or use child labor, or to make dangerous products. The Right claim that the market will sort all of this out and that government just gets in the way. Some working people and small farmers have been saying this too.

The Right, which in modern history is known as fascism, advocates a system in which those with wealth are free to do as they please, and that the functions of government be relegated only to policing and war. Some self-described conservatives reject the term fascism, because they claim that the fascists were statists, who believed in retaining the power of government. Some people are ignorant of history.

Fascism has always been about protecting the rights of private property, of capital. The police and army are necessary to protect corporations, but human services are not. The Right in all its forms, regardless of how it calls itself, wants less government in the areas that serve human beings, but just as much or more government in the areas that protect capital and the pursuit of private profit.

Ironically the political philosophy of the Right, fascism, has been so discredited by history that contemporary so-called conservatives refuse to identify their politics with its roots in

European history. Of course even seventy years ago the philosophy didn't carry much water, so much so that the leading German exponent of conservatism, Adolf Hitler, called his fascist party The National Socialist German Workers Party. It was national, in the sense that the Nazis were ultimately protecting large German corporations against corporations from other nations. But the word socialist came in only because Hitler felt he could appeal to working people through appropriating the monikers of the Left.

Today the fascists call themselves democrats. As a result, right-wing groups in Miami that advocate the overthrow of a popularly installed government in Cuba are lining up for money to pursue so-called democracy building.

Capitalists claiming to be democrats rings as true to reality as fascists claiming to be socialists. Capitalists are and always have been fascists – Rightists who believe the rich should be free to do as they please, socialists are and always have been democrats – Leftists who believe every citizen should have power.

As Jim Hightower put it, there's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos!