

Liberal mourns hatchet job by conservatives

Being a liberal these days means gritting your teeth and swallowing hard when David Stockman cuts off funding for your favorite social program. It also means being awfully confused. Pragmatists realize the Reagan administration is just another passing fancy in our political history. Liberals and conservatives have taken turns throughout the years centralizing and decentralizing. Sometimes they forget who is supposed to be doing what. Every few decades it changes, you know. But lately developments have taken on a confusing twist. Now everyone knows that liberal means "change" and conservative means "preserving traditional values and institutions."

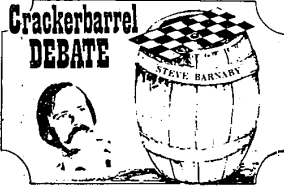
Not even that rather simple definition is safe these days.

TAKE THE RAILROADS, for instance. Everybody knows the railroad system in this country has been a deteriorating mess for decades. But trains, especially passenger trains, have been as American

as apple pie and Al Kaine. No question about it, George. But what do I read in the paper last Sunday. Reagan wants to hatchet the Amtrak railroad budget until all that is left are a few commuter trains running from Boston to New York. Not only is that un-American, it's downright un-conservative.

WHO EVER HEARD of putting a commuter train around the Christmas tree, anyway? Disgusting, simply disgusting. Since political liberalism is out of fashion, we Great Society and New Frontiersmen have taken to more relaxing pursuits. We have left the pursuit of worrying about the government to the conservatives.

We are content to wait until the day once again arrives when we can resume spending money. In the meantime we have taken to stopping and smelling the roses, so to speak. Part of that time has been taken up with lounging



around and listening to things like the radio. In the last couple of years my ear has taken to more diverse tones. After all one only listens to so much rock music or punk or whatever it is. Much to my delight I discovered these two fellow who were different — Karl Haas and Mike Whorf. Haas specializes in playing classical music. The best part of his program, though, the wry com-

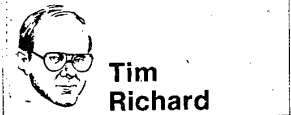
ments. Whorf offers something nearly unheard of in today's radio market — narrated documentaries set to music.

His programs have been recorded and used by many teachers to give a refreshing slant to their students' day. Both Haas and Whorf have become traditions in the metro Detroit area — things to cherish because they are.

But lo and behold, the new management team over at WJR has decided to axe Haas and cut Whorf down to a weekend interlude.

SEEMS WJR has fallen victim to the radio ratings game. A dip in their ratings has convinced WJR executives that Haas and Whorf must go. Imagine more hours of JP McCarthy saying, "good going coach."

Somehow, I have the uncomfortable feeling this new conservatism has crept into media management and the Stockman theory of bottom line results has superseded the quest for quality.



A nice home in suburbia — near the bus

Time was when house shoppers judged a location by its nearness to a freeway. Today they are, or should be, taking a look at public transportation.

"Working together, we can put some selling ammunition in your hands," said Gary Krause, director of planning for the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority.

His audience was real estate agents, the folks who bring buyer and seller together in the housing market.

SEMTA is offering brochures to the real estate people on bus routes and times in their particular sections of the metropolis. Realtors who publish traps in their advertising can get SEMTA logos to stick on the nearest route.

Mary Lou Wood, coordinator of marketing activities, even offered to make presentations to sales staffs.

IT'S AN ODD fact of economic life that in this deep and prolonged recession, community colleges and public transportation are two growth industries.

"Our Park & Ride program has doubled its ridership in five years," said John Saunders, director of market development for SEMTA. "It's 23 percent of our total."

Park & Ride is the service whereby one parks free in a suburban lot, then hops an express bus to downtown Detroit. The price is a little more than \$1. You can't even park downtown for \$1 any more.

And that is why SEMTA is a growth industry. According to the Hertz rental people, who are pretty cost-conscious, it costs 35.65 cents a mile to operate a subcompact auto, 37.20 to run a compact and 45.04 to run a standard. That's taking depreciation and financing and everything into account.

Unless the United States is prepared to conquer Arabia and Venezuela, gasoline is never going to be 35 cents a gallon again. Public transportation thus becomes something everyone needs to look at and real estate agents could use it as a selling tool.

DID YOU NOTICE the titles some of these SEMTA staffers have? Director of market development, coordinator of marketing activities?

For years we've heard business executives say government ought to be run in a more businesslike fashion. Well, it has happened. Indeed, fellows like Saunders and General Manager Larry Salel bring rich business backgrounds into their SEMTA jobs.

"We've tried to function like any modern retailer," said Saunders, pointing out that one can buy tickets or a month's monthly Semtcard and charge it on your Visa, MasterCard or Hudson's account.

They're not above appealing to suburbanites' class instincts, either. On the Park & Ride lines, they say the average income of riders is \$19,575, and 40 percent of the early morning gang is making \$35,000 or more per annum.

THERE ARE admitted gaps in SEMTA's service. Downtown service at peak hours is fine, but if you want to go down at 11 a.m. and come back at 3 p.m., you're out of luck. Suburb-to-suburb service is coming only slowly. The same for reverse commutes — people who live in Detroit and work in suburbia's scattered plants and shopping centers.

Looking at the history of this region since World War II, however, Krause replies forthrightly: "We didn't dismantle public transportation in this region overnight, and we're not going to rebuild it overnight."

Even if the much discussed (and much cursed) subway is never built, SEMTA is striving to market reliable, inexpensive bus service. Realtors and house buyers ought to consider it.



Neighborhoods lose

Where is the handy man?

What ever has become of the handy man? You know the type — an ambitious fellow who always has a hammer, a screwdriver and a wrench within reach and is anxious to repair anything that goes wrong.

Down home in the Dutch country when The Stroller was a youth, we called him the all-around mechanic or Mr. Fix-It. But we don't see his like any more.

The Stroller got to thinking about this the other day when he was taking stock of the things that needed looking at in the annual spring cleanup and fix-up week.

Through the years there always seemed to be these all-around mechanics who were eager to do a few jobs on the side. They welcomed the extra cash, and sometimes it was their private pocket money.

THE FIRST JOB that came in sight was the jamming of the windows. Several of them seemed to be stuck. So one of the men in the immediate area was called and asked if he would do the job.

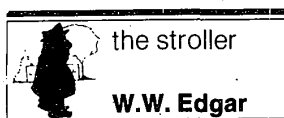
He took one look, shook his head and said, "These are old-fashioned windows that always are going to give you trouble. If I were you, I'd get the new type that are guaranteed never to jam. You see, I can't do anything with these old ones. I am afraid I would break the glass."

Well, well. That was a far cry from the old days when Mr. Fix-it would do a job like that and walk away smiling.

Next, the light in the kitchen went on the bum. The pull chain stuck, so it couldn't be turned on or off. What to do? Another friend was called. He took a look, tried one or two moves and nothing helped. Then he countered, "You would be better off if you got a new fixture. These modern lights don't give you any trouble with the chain."

Would you believe it? The Stroller had to buy a new one.

In the middle of all this, the young fellow who mows the lawn on the riding mower took the machine out for the first time this spring. In a few



moments he was back, his chin down to his chest, and he moaned that the machine was broken. Imagine that — on the first trip of the year.

It developed that the gears were jammed, and no one in the neighborhood wanted to tackle the job. So, off to the repair shop it had to go, with a charge for pickup and delivery.

So, it is no wonder the Stroller asked, "What has happened to the old-time handy man?"

PERHAPS, the absence of the "Jack of All Trades" can be traced to the assembly lines in our auto plants. The men on the line are taught to do one thing. They know little else.

On top of that, obsolescence is being built in to most of our products, from automobiles on down.

So the cry goes up, "Don't fix it — buy a new one." That's how our gross national product was built up.

This is a far cry from the days when The Stroller was a young man in the shops. We were given a rough piece of metal, and it was our duty to do all the things necessary to meet the finished product. In this fashion, a fellow got to learn a lot of things.

While the work was supposed to be learning the machinist trade, it actually was a course that earned a fellow the title of "Mr. Fix-it."

Now the trend has changed, and the old-time "handy man" with his hammer, screwdriver and wrench is gone.

It's too bad, especially at the spring of the year when most every home is involved in a cleanup and fix-up campaign.



Can 'Jimmy' occur here? Not likely

So much has been written about the Janet Cooke affair that I'm reluctant to add to it.

I've read many interesting articles about the episode and I don't want to be redundant. But as managing editor of this group of community newspapers, I feel obliged to add a few thoughts.

A few weeks ago Janet Cooke, then a reporter for The Washington Post, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, the highest award in journalism, for a feature story about an 8-year-old heroin addict "Jimmy" who lived in Washington, D.C. The article was carried by other papers who use The Post's news service.

Subsequent investigation revealed that Ms. Cooke fabricated the story and her own credentials. Naturally, the affair gave much fodder to the critics of the press.

FIRST, I'D never say it could never happen here. But I will say, without hesitation, that it's unlikely.

A community newspaper contrasts sharply from a large metropolitan newspaper like The Washington Post. Staffers of community newspapers must work very closely with those they cover. Readers regularly come in and out of our offices. They are quick to voice their comments through phone calls and letters about anything appearing in the newspaper.

It would be almost impossible for a reporter of a community newspaper to make up a fictitious episode without receiving an angry outcry from local readers.

Contrasted to this is the metropolitan daily newspaper reporter who often is isolated from his or her readers. Large newspapers are usually remote in location and disposition from their readers.

Also, those who check out stories written by our staffers are close to the community. Our editors and copy readers often know the local area better than the reporters writing the stories. This makes it difficult to make up events, people and places without some serious questions being raised.

Finally, our reporters have a strong sense of personal responsibility to accurately cover the events of their assigned communities. They are not competing against each other in an environment of distrust and suspicion, as apparently exists at The Washington Post.

"JIMMY" RAISES serious questions about the use of anonymous sources by newspapers. We avoid them as a newspaper policy, except in very unusual cases.

In one of our newspapers, we published an account of a teen-ager who had been arrested by police for ripping off gold and silver from suburban homes. Since the youth was a minor when some of the thefts were committed, we did not publish his name. But we believed it was important for our readers to understand how easy it was for youngsters to sell loot to precious metals dealers.

Use of anonymous sources reinforces the perceptions of some readers — that is, they are only used so reporters can fabricate stories. Unfortunately, in the case of The Washington Post, this was true.

A group of our editors is now grappling with the problem of putting into writing the news policies this newspaper follows. I'm surer than ever they will weigh carefully the issue of using anonymous sources.

Could what happened at The Washington Post happen in your community newspaper? I'd never say never. It's a newspaper's nightmare and sometimes nightmares become real.

"Jimmy" could happen here, but it's unlikely.