

# States of the Union

## ALL AGAINST ALL

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

WASHINGTON  
**W**HAT WILL Ronald Reagan do with Simeon W. Bright, a Carter appointee to the Postal Rate Commission whose term of office has now expired? I'm rooting for his reappointment.

No one in the White House smiles on Bright. Why should they? A vocal New Frontiersman, he spent years in the Postal Service here doubling as chief fundraiser for the Democratic National Committee. When Richard Nixon came to town in 1969, Bright was the first to be fired, a distinction he still boasts about. Now Reagan's minions would like to give him something more to brag about, but the task is not so simple. He happens to be a close ally of Senator Jennings Randolph, the powerful Democrat from West Virginia, and the Senator has more than hinted that his attitude toward certain White House initiatives on the Hill may depend on Bright's prospects.

A friend who has been watching this minor drama spelled out for me the Administration's dilemma: "Some of the people surrounding Reagan have grown pessimistic about his chances in 1984. They've already given up on getting

more of their kind of legislation passed by Congress, but they still think they have time to make a permanent dent in the Federal bureaucracy. All they have to do is put through a lot of appointments and write a lot of new regulations. To people like that, it makes sense to bust Bright."

On the other hand, my friend went on, there are those on the White House staff who would rather pamper Randolph than purify the Postal Rate Commission. These are the optimists, "the ones who think Reagan can win again and who still hope for more victories in Congress." The upshot of this argument between pessimists and optimists has been stalemate. Although Bright's term expired three months ago, he and Randolph still await the President's pleasure.

We exiled liberals must wish the optimists the best of luck—not in their electoral prophecies (perish the thought!), only in their sensible administrative intentions. Nothing is so dangerous to the public welfare as the actions of lame-duck ideologues, in this case neoconservatives who keep confusing Washington with the Little Big Horn. Their last stand is the last thing we need.

Since 1981 we have been presented with more evidence than we required concerning the harm ideologues can do by fiat when other, more democratic means fail them. In the face of Congress' understandable reluctance to curtail Social Security, for instance, the Reagan Administration has waged a bureaucratic war against certain types of beneficiaries, notably widows, children and the disabled. Millions in this last category have been cynically certified as "able to work" and thus struck from the rolls. The Congress last December reinstated many of these victims and even mandated the payment of back benefits, but a reluctant Administration has thus far done nothing in the way of redress. Guidelines have not yet been written; neither have any checks.

By singling out the poor as Social Security "cheats," Reagan has succeeded in converting long accepted rights into very chancy privileges, to be granted at whim or withheld by willfulness. The resulting injustices have already gone far to erode public confidence in programs once judged fair to one and all by one and all.

A few weeks ago in Fitler, Mississippi, a village 10 miles downriver from Vicksburg, I met a black woman doing her best to understand why the government had ruled her and her children ineligible for Social Security survivors' benefits. The man who had died was the man she'd been living with in common law marriage for 11 years. He was the father of her five children and the family breadwinner. Loryce Hawn, a white woman who owns the Fitler general store, signed a sworn, notarized statement attesting that this man had each and every Friday faithfully purchased groceries for his family. Yet the Social Security supervisor in Memphis rejected the widow's application: no marriage license, no benefits. "People in the government just go by the book," the widow told me. "They don't hold with personal circumstances."

Given the increasingly clandestine way the Reagan regime has been translating prejudice into policy, we need not be surprised at the President's latest

moves. His White House gag rule, which forbids all except a chosen few to talk with members of the press corps, seems admirably suited to an Administration in love with its own capriciousness; likewise his recent decree that anyone seeking Federal files under the Freedom of Information Act must pay for the privilege.

To the extent that it is the work of Reagan pessimists, the garrison government now emerging can be taken as cheering news. It suggests that the neo-conservative insurrection, which began with Nixon, continued apace under Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and attained full virulence under Reagan, may have run its course. Otherwise, why all the sneakiness? If the jury is friendly, let the trial be public.

The voters' 1980 conversion to conservative tenets was not wholly convincing in any case. In retrospect, the "critical realignment" that Reagan's election was said to have made manifest appears to have been merely another blip on the electoral screen, one attributable less to a rise in Republicanism than to a rise in the "discomfort index," a combined measure of unemployment and consumer prices. Reagan, after all, defeated a President who had spent four years proving his unfitness for office, and doing it in a shockingly non-Keynesian manner.

As Walter Dean Burnham shrewdly reminds us in *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (Oxford, 1982), it was Carter, not Reagan, who appointed Paul Volcker chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Carter's reward, writes Burnham, was "a combined credit crunch and recession in the Presidential election year itself. . . . In no small measure, Carter was defeated in 1980 because he handed the economic issue on a silver platter to the Republicans, the first such occasion since FDR created the modern Democratic Party a half-century ago."

Carter thus cleared the way for a successor committed to extreme reactionary measures. And for a brief moment the American people went along, having persuaded themselves that strong leadership and simple canons of faith, how-

ever dubious, were preferable to past timidities. Hope, though, soon yielded to disillusion. Most of the dreams Ronald Reagan peddled turned out to resemble Fats Waller's mocking description of love: "that fine, soft Arabian stuff."

Flossiest of all were the Administration's supply-side promises, billed only a short time ago as the one sure way to revive a fitful economy. Supply-side theology is today as dead as Scotism, a medieval theology of similar valence. (It was preached by Duns Scotus, from whom we get the word "dunce.") In place of supply-side castles-in-the-air we now have the ugly detritus of false dogma obsessively pursued: soup kitchens and tent cities (called "Reaganvilles").

**T**HE FATUOUSNESS of Reagan's response to the fresh miseries that surround us nicely reflects the feebleness of neoconservative doctrine, that tiny shovel with which we have dug our own grave. If the White House these days is "in disarray"—a term the press corps has turned into an instant cliché—and if it seems remarkably bereft of solutions, that is probably because the original neoconservative scenario envisioned few problems. By now we were supposed to be living in the best of all possible worlds. Our newly capitalized industrial complex was supposed to be operating at something like full capacity, providing jobs for all who were "willing to work" (a relatively small crowd in the neoconservative scheme of things), and thumbing its nose at Japan and Germany. In actual fact, our industrial complex is richer today, thanks to supply-side tax donations, but no busier. It continues to limp along at somewhere below 70 per cent capacity.

Carter's way of dealing with the sluggish economy was to announce that we were suffering from "a national malaise" and the thing for us to do was snap out of it. Reagan has gone Carter one better. He has urged each and every employer to hire one new employee as a gesture of Christian charity toward America's 12 million jobless. I assume

he meant Christian charity, since he made the pitch on the White House lawn just before lighting the Christmas tree. The plea foretold his later call for a nonprogressive income tax, the two schemes requiring equal philanthropic sacrifices from General Motors and Mama Rosa's (my local pizza parlor). In the President's manicured hands, the nonprogressive income tax would be a flat *noblesse oblige*.

In case these brilliant ideas are rejected by a purblind Congress, the Administration has come up with a plan that is even more imaginative—having the jobless pay a tax on their unemployment benefits. Such a tax might discourage unemployment cheats, a band of renegades not to be confused with their slick cousins who are elsewhere milking welfare and Social Security. People would think twice before queuing up at the unemployment window, and the worse things got, the more money the government would collect. Who can tell? A really steep rise in the number of jobless Americans, which seems to be in the cards anyway, might just balance the Federal budget.

The message behind these brainstorms is very familiar and vintage Reagan: *Don't blame me for your troubles. Social misfortune is a private problem; its cure, a private responsibility.* The President would return us to Square One, or more accurately, to before Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal, which among other things vouchsafed to all of us some of the very wilderness areas that Reagan and his Secretary of Interior, James Watt, are trying hard to steal back for the corporations. It is characteristic of this unbending Administration that it has not hesitated to bend the conservation laws to its own elitist uses. Exeunt Square Deal, New Deal, Fair Deal, and Great Society. Enter the big deal, the secret deal and the Hobbesian ordeal, a war of all against all.

*Whose woods these are I think I know;  
Indifference may betray us though.*

That's why I'm rooting for Simeon Bright.

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