

States of the Union

UNMAILED MEMOS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



HERE ARE SOME memoranda I composed recently but never delivered.

TO BOB BERGLAND, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture:

I realize you are part of an Administration that appears to have thrown compassion out the window. Still, your tantrum in response to the wheat farmers' recent "tractorcade" in Wash-

ington strikes me as a new low in official heartlessness.

It will not suffice to write off the demonstrators as people "seeking publicity" or "driven by just old-fashioned greed." As a farmer yourself you must know how hard it has been over the years, even in the worst of times, to convince farmers of the efficacy of national politics. They might dump milk in Madison or slaughter surplus hogs in Waterloo, but seldom have they become sufficiently exercised to pray in person to the gods in Washington.

If they have done so now, one must assume that they are hurting even worse than usual. I for one am inclined to listen when these farmers tell us that it costs them more to produce a bushel of wheat than they can get for it on the present market. Surely there are genuine grievances here that need redressing.

We are not dealing in this instance with the minions of agribusiness. Most of the farmers who rumbled around Washington in their tractors last month—snarling traffic and getting snarled at by commuters and government officials alike—are by the standards of grain-farming relatively small

potatoes. Their holdings are said to average about 600 acres apiece, which isn't a hell of a lot when measured against the multi-thousand acres controlled by Cargill, Purina and other corporations.

One of the things these farmers are suffering from is depressed world wheat prices, caused chiefly by the nations of Western Europe—not to mention Canada and Australia—who have been dumping their surplus wheat on an already soft market. These countries protect their farmers in ways we've hardly considered: They buy dear at home, then sell cheap on the world. *We* buy cheap and sell cheap.

If you really cared, Mr. Secretary, you would recommend that the U.S. government be the sole exporter of wheat; and you'd put a reasonable floor on export prices, one that our farmers could live with. No more private wheat deals between Cargill and the Soviet Union. No more tractors on the Jefferson Memorial Bridge!

TO TOM BETHELL, Washington editor of *Harper's*:

Your essay in the February *Harper's* ("Against Bilingual Education") was pretty bad. Bilingual education is hardly the unpatriotic ripoff you assume it to be; it is simply a way of teaching reading, writing and arithmetic to children who speak some other language better than they speak English. The payoff is that these children learn *English*, faster, too—and isn't that what you say you want?

You never really tell us what bilingual education is. The definition I like best was suggested by Jorge Lara-Braud, a bilingual scholar in Austin Texas. He calls it "instruction in two languages and the use of these two languages as mediums of instruction for any part of or all of the school curriculum. Study of the history and culture associated with a student's mother tongue is considered an integral part of bilingual education. . . ." It stands to reason that children will learn more readily in a bilingual classroom because, as Lara-Braud points out, "When we deal with language, we deal with

life at its core. . . . There is no other path to self-awareness and self-disclosure. . . . Man's dominion over the earth begins as a function of language, the naming of created things."

You seem to think that man's dominion over the earth begins with the "Pledge of Allegiance."

It's not easy, or pleasant, to respond to your little treatise, replete as it is with innuendoes and chauvinistic pieties. If only you could hear yourself sermonize. For instance: "Bilingual education is an idea that appeals to teachers of Spanish and other tongues, but also to those who never did think that another idea, the United States of America, was a particularly good one to begin with, and that the sooner it is restored to its component 'ethnic' parts the better off we shall all be." Come now, Bethell; the United States of America aren't going to suffer from a little humane teaching that gives unassimilated kids the benefit of the doubt. No one is being taught to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in Spanish.

You put particular stock in the "Melting Pot," that old chestnut invented by Israel Zangwill, an Englishman, whose play *The Melting Pot* enjoyed a long and undeserved run on Broadway in 1909. A *New York Times* reviewer of the period called it "romantic claptrap"—a third-rate drama about a second-generation Jewish concert pianist and his infatuation with a golden-haired WASP heiress, and how they made it in the United States of America despite their component ethnic parts. "It is a dream," simpers the pianist to the heiress. "You cannot care for me—you so far above me."

A dream indeed. No sensible citizen ever believed the Melting Pot was real; no first-rate commentator on the American scene—not de Tocqueville or Mrs. Trollope or Irving Howe—ever thought for a moment that the Poles and the Chinese and the Utes and the Jews and the Mexicans could be carelessly stirred into Yankee soup and made to vanish.

Don't be deluded that bilingual education is aimed exclusively at the children of "newcomers" to our shores.

There are a quarter-million Native American schoolchildren whose tribal languages are as old as Celtic and as American as apple pie. A century ago—thanks to a genius educator named Sequoyia, who invented a written alphabet for the Cherokee language—thousands of Cherokee children learned to be literate in both Cherokee and English. They were educated bilingually, the only way that made sense, and many of them went on from Cherokee schools in Oklahoma to study in places like Harvard and Princeton.

Or consider the Chicanos of our Southwest. Most of them are U.S. citizens not because they crossed the border but because the border *changed* in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In that treaty, the U.S. government solemnly promised to teach Mexican-American schoolchildren the three Rs in both Spanish and English, but only the state of New Mexico attempted to live up to its bilingual obligations, and the effort was short-lived.

One result has been widespread Chicano illiteracy and alienation from the Anglo-dominated public school system. Is that how your Melting Pot is supposed to work? As the proverb goes, *Del dicho al hecho hay un gran trecho*. ("Between the saying and the doing there is a great distance.")

TO THE NEW LEADER EDITORS:

In your December 18 edition ("Between Issues") you observe that the magazine's annual index of articles and reviews contains only six references to "U.S. Race Relations," a statistic you call encouraging. I call it discouraging. We writers have spent the greater part of the decade persuading each other that the American Dilemma is no more, that prejudice is largely extinct and that racial justice is now a routine reality. Everyone suspects there is something amiss about this new and shining portrait of America, but so long as we neglect to mention the dirty little secret, we can all keep pretending that the Emperor is fully clothed.

"America is continuously struggling

for its soul," wrote Gunnar Myrdal 35 years ago. The current illusion that the struggle is over, that our angelic side has triumphed, has reached epidemic proportions; it gained new respectability last year with the publication of William Julius Wilson's book-length treatise on *The Declining Significance of Race*.

Wilson, a black sociologist at the University of Chicago, devotes considerable space to his proposition that "economic class is now a more important factor than race in determining job placement for blacks." The problem today, says Wilson, is the presence of a sizable inner-city underclass that finds itself the victim not of racist tradition but of technological progress. That this youthful army of the unemployed happens to be black is "an accident of history" rather than a consequence of white discrimination.

All of which may be music to the ears of those who have tired of domestic strife and guilt-edged manifestoes concerning the race problem. Nonetheless, Wilson's thesis seems Panglossian at best. As an antidote, I recommend Dorothy K. Newman's more saturnine vision in *Protest, Politics and Prosperity*. Among other things, the author demonstrates that American communities are still more than 90 per cent segregated, and the connection between housing apartheid and job discrimination is not hard to draw. Since the '50s, corporations have been fleeing the cities in favor of the affluent white suburbs, and the jobs have fled with them. As HUD Secretary Patricia Harris noted recently, "When businesses are moving from the central city to the suburbs, it seems to me unjust to say to the black and the poor that you may not live near where you earn your living"—or, perhaps more to the point, where you *can't* earn your living.

So what we have is not a declining significance of race but merely a declining interest in race, and that is not good for our soul. I hope next December's NEW LEADER index will have more entries under "U.S. Race Relations."