

States of the Union

THE COMPLEAT NATTERER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

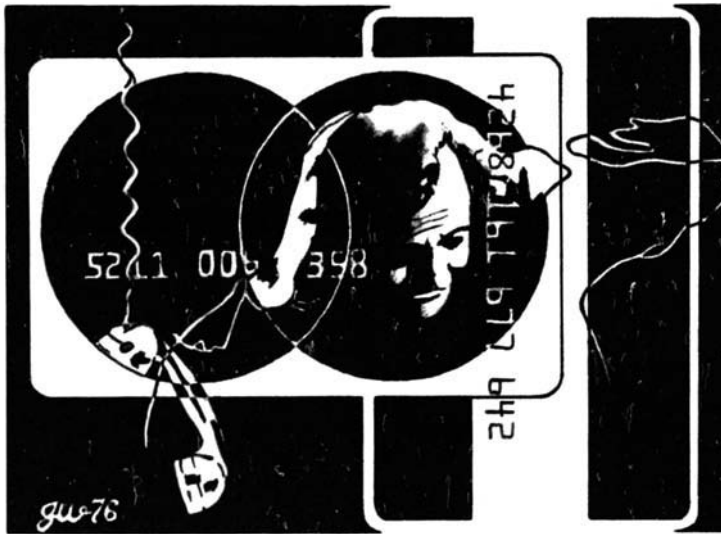
gration that gets our goat, heinous as that sin may be, as it is, say, the mysterious disappearance of everybody wearing a uniform when one is stumbling around the supermarket in search of the hollandaise sauce, or the mindless stutterings of a computer that refuses, month after month, to admit its billing error.

Such little annoyances tend to pile up and weigh heavily upon our spirits, in part, I suppose, because we have no satisfactory means of venting our exasperation. How does one bawl out an absent store clerk, or dispatch a sarcastic note to a computer? In the end one is reduced to mere grumpiness, a common mood these days of that unlucky personage, The Common Man.

What this country needs, then, is not Naderism but *natterism*, i.e., a way of grumbling at and dealing with the everyday aggravations of consumership. (*Natter*, v.i., to complain; to be peevish; to grumble.) And, since no one has come forward to lead this promising new crusade, I have appointed myself its temporary executive director—your friendly nattering nabob—and have formed a task force of one to investigate all major minor consumer irritations. Here is a sneak summary of my findings to date.

The most common major minor irritation among consumers, according to my researches, is a phenomenon called “VR,” a social pox said to be as dangerous as VD and nearly as widespread. VR stands for Vendor Resistance; also for Very Rife. All of us are familiar with its manifestations: the waiter whose eye you can’t catch; the cabbie whose cab you can’t flag down; the reluctant contractor; the vanishing clerk. In sum, there appears to exist a well-planned conspiracy among vendors of all types to prevent the public from purchasing their wares and services.

VR has grown especially virulent in the men’s apparel field. Barney’s,



THE CONSUMER movement is already a decade old, and all we have to show for it thus far are safety belts that buzz if you neglect them, erratically provided shelf unit-prices you can't read without first squatting and squinting, and 5,846 books about corporate ripoffs, each featuring an introduction by Ralph Nader. There

is less to consumerism than meets the eye.

The trouble, I have come to believe, is that reformers keep inveighing against the larger evils—monopoly, corruption in high places, stuff like that—while the rest of us keep chafing beneath the smaller irritations. It's not so much the sin of corporate vertical inte-

surely the largest men's store in New York and perhaps the country, makes a virtue of VR in its television commercials. In one commercial we see a customer begging to be waited on. No, says the clerk with a patronizing smile, "you are free to roam." ("... nothing more hopeless," laments K. in Kafka's *The Castle*, "than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability." VR puts us all on K. rations.)

A friend told me he recently attempted to buy a hat at a local department store. The clerk talked him out of it. "We don't have much of a selection here," he said. "You'll do much better at the Suburbanite or Ed Mitchell's . . ."

"But I *like* this hat," pleaded my friend, fondly fingering a fedora.

"... or the Factory Outlet Store, or Harold's Haberdashery, or . . ." My friend left, bloodied but bare-headed. How does one cope with a salesman who won't take yes for an answer?

Because of VR our house and its many accoutrements are inching toward extinction. A stereo set, silent since last December, awaits the ministrations of Bob Miller, our local electronics expert. "I'll get to it right after Christmas," he assured me, "as soon as I have room in my shop."

I called him in late January. "Any day now," he said. "You can count on it."

By mid-February he was no longer returning my calls. In March his wife, theretofore cheerful and sweet-tempered, turned surly. "I gave him your message this morning," she said to me one afternoon. "I'm sure he would have gotten back to you if he thought it was important."

In April I bought a small FM radio. So far it works fine.

The incident with my electronics man was, any way you look at it, stereotypical. VR is in the saddle, and rides mankind. It does no good to fight ire with ire; carping is counter-productive. The other day,

precisely a decade after its 10-year guarantee took effect, our electric hot water heater sprang a leak. Immediately I called Mr. Silk, our electric hot water heater man, and reached his assistant, who promised to pass along the urgent message. Three hot-waterless days passed without word from Silk. I decided to get tough. "Listen," I barked to the assistant, "this is getting silly. What does a man have to do to persuade a plumber to sell him a new, \$300 hot water heater? Does the request frighten him?"

"Maybe," answered the assistant, "you should take your business elsewhere."

"I will, I will. But let me ask you one more question. Does Mr. Silk know anything about stereo sets?"

From this incident I learned an important rule to follow when trying to overcome VR: The vendor is always right.

OF COURSE, VR is not the only consumer misery uncovered so far by my one-man nattering task force. Another is "the anonymous connection" sometimes called the "Crane-Moore-Thomas nexus." The labels derive from a new tendency among corporations to assign fake names to their bill collectors. These incorporeal employes are forever telephoning and dunning one in their best *nom de voix* manner.

"Hello, Sir. This is Miss Crane (or Mr. Moore, or Mrs. Thomas), your representative from the telephone company. I have your bill here and it seems you do owe us for the past month."

"How much is it, Miss Crane?"
"Eighty-nine dollars and twenty cents. If you put the check in the mail today we can continue your phone service."

Sometimes I object: "Miss Moore, are you really and truly my representative? Because if you are, the best way to protect my interests is to tell the folks at SNET [Southern New England Telephone

Company] that I'm a little short on cash right now and maybe they can wait a few weeks. Okay?"

"I don't think you understand, Sir. Your bill *is* overdue, and unless you put a check in the . . ." I hang up.

For the record, I have never been able to talk my "representative" out of any bill, but once, a few years ago, I did register a victory of sorts. It was with Mr. Thomas, my representative from Carte Blanche. He kept calling me from Los Angeles, demanding that I pay up and threatening to put me on their baddy list. I was contesting part of the bill.

One day, after we'd been arguing again, I said, "Mr. Thomas, you have me at a disadvantage. You know my real name and I don't know yours. All I know is your alias. How can I deal honestly with a mere alias?"

"That's ridiculous," he said. "Thomas is the name they *assigned* me. It's just a convenience."

"Well, why is it that these phony names are never ethnic. Can't my representative be Mr. Shapiro or Miss Pucinski? To tell you the truth, Mr. Thomas, I'm getting sick and tired of Mr. Thomas."

The upshot was that Mr. Thomas promised to reveal his real name in exchange for my promise to pay the bill in full. "Okay, okay," I said. "Tell me your name."

"It's Smith," he informed me. "John Smith."

It seems clear from all this that there is no rest for the corporate dunner and no hope for the hapless natterer. One's best bet, it would seem, is to sleep late, consume as little as possible and never answer the phone. In any case, these were the highlights of my initial findings on major minor consumer vexations. You will be glad to hear that the entire story is eventually to be published in book form, the first of an endless series. Maybe I can get Ralph Nader to write an introduction.