

OPINION

N.C. government kills education to fund unnecessary highways

Much of the news in our state these days concerns the choice of spending priorities made by our state government. This year our government decided to spend \$9.1 billion on new roads even though North Carolina already has the best state highway system in the whole country. Unfortunately, we also possess one of the worst primary and secondary education systems in the country. SAT scores in North Carolina are the lowest in the nation, and teacher salaries are not even competitive with those of our southern neighbor. Somehow our leaders still were able to confidently claim that what North Carolina needed in order to enhance the quality of life for its citizens in the future was more highways.

Let's step back a minute and take a hard look at this program. Having \$9.1 billion to spend, would a wise legislature, deeply committed to the well-being of our people and our natural endowment for generation after generation have spent it on roads? We argue that a truly wise legislature would have spent very little of it on roads. A truly wise legislature would be aware that the end of the petroleum age is close at hand and that our society is rapidly waking up to the real consequences of the automobile.

More than 40 percent of the gasoline we use is supplied from faraway places, many of which are politically unstable. This deserves far more attention than it gets in our daily discourse. Supplies of petroleum are limited, and that limitation, once hinted at in the embargo of 1973, may become crippling at any time.

The ecological damage done in exploring for and in production and shipping of petroleum is extensive. This is true for both land and ocean transportation. Exploitation of Alaskan oil has not been without its problems. The oil spill from the tanker Valdez in Alaska, the spill of the Argentine tanker in Antarctica and the massive oil spill off of Morocco's coast represent just a few of this past year's major oil spills. Our own gas consumption represents our personal contribution to these oil spill disasters and provides incentives for offshore drilling in places like the Outer Banks.

Gangi/Berry Guest Columnists

Carbon dioxide emissions cause global warming through the "greenhouse effect." How soon will the oceans rise so that our coastal residents will become "environmental refugees" fleeing their homes? There are such refugees in many parts of the world now — people whose homelands are no longer habitable because of environmental changes.

Damage to the ozone layer becomes more alarming with each new gathering of scientists examining this phenomenon. The freon used in automobile air conditioners contributes to the problem.

The automobile is also the leading culprit in our state when it comes to producing ground level ozone. Unfortunately, this ozone does not replace the ozone we are destroying in the atmosphere but instead stays close to the ground destroying or harming trees, crops, animal and human lungs. Ozone levels are already becoming dangerously high in the North Carolina Piedmont. Farmers in the Piedmont already face crop yield losses of up to 30 percent. Ozone in summer also represents a major health threat to the young, elderly and physically active. According to Stephan Ostrowski of the Centers for Disease Control, "ozone is nearly as effective at destroying the lungs as mustard gas." People think the problem cannot be too bad in North Carolina. Actually the ozone problem in the Piedmont is among the worst in the country. Ozone is formed when "ozone precursors" such as nitrogen oxides are cooked in the hot summer time sun. Other factors that combine to worsen the ozone effect of car emissions are humidity, ultraviolet light and stagnant air masses — i.e. the normal summertime conditions of our state.

The paving of enormous areas so that automobiles can move at high speeds from anywhere to anywhere frustrates the Earth's function as a solar collector. Photosynthesis is the basic life support system. The arrival of sunshine and

clean rain on plants is the essential action. That cannot happen where there is pavement.

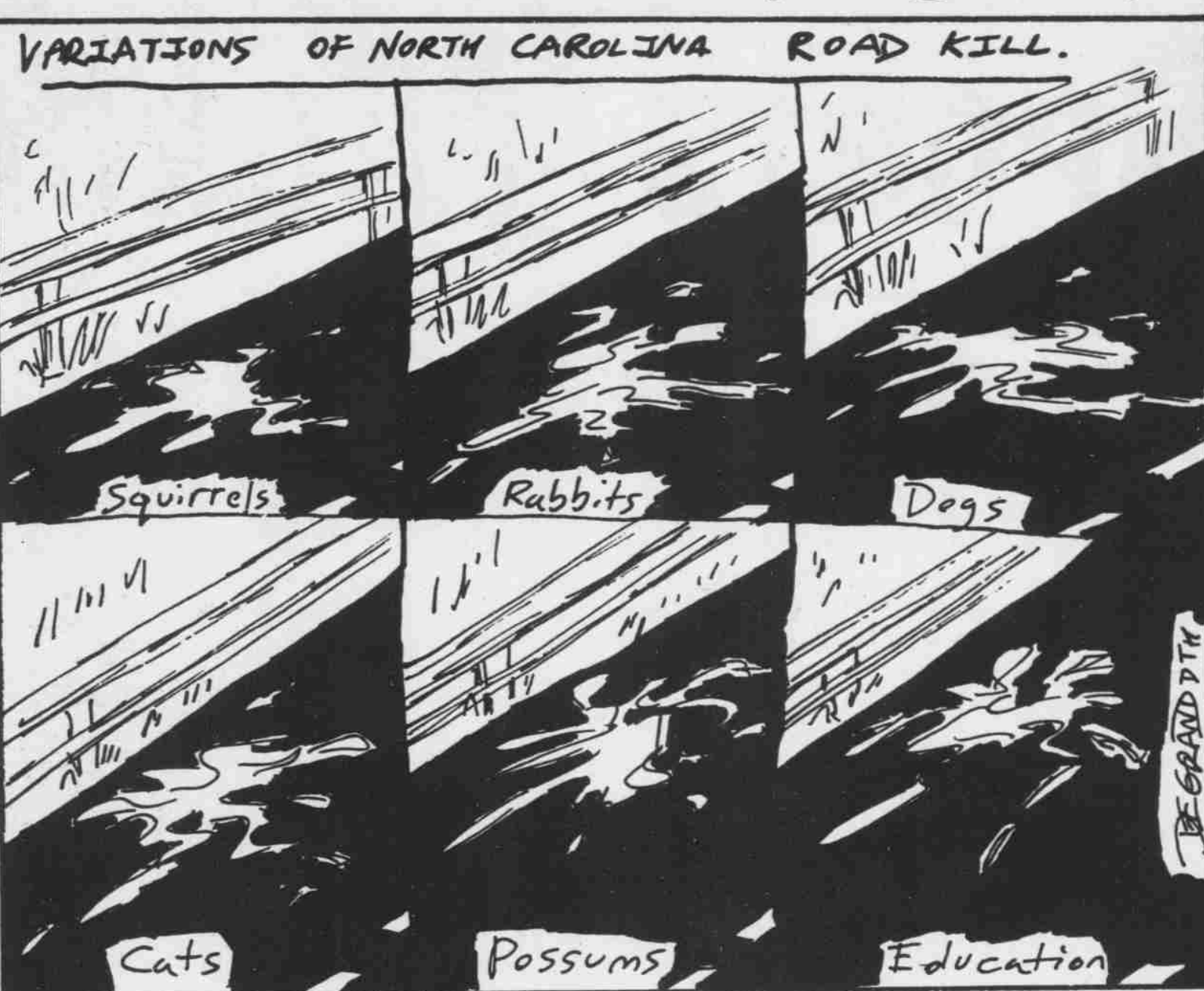
Road runoff contaminated by automobile fluids is a serious cause of pollution in rivers and lakes and ground water. All the fluids that automobiles require are pollutants: brake fluid, transmission fluid, battery acid, anti-freeze and lubricants. Most end up in the ground and ultimately in the water. The Earth is the source of everything, and it must absorb everything our wasteful economy discards. A polluted Earth cannot sustain decent life.

New roads and highways around towns and cities may temporarily relieve highway congestion but they also facilitate urban sprawl and strip development. Strip/sprawl development is unfortunately becoming an all too familiar site in the Piedmont. It is not too early to begin speaking of the New Jerseyfication of our Piedmont since the day is not far away when dense development will cover the Piedmont from the Virginia state line north of Durham to the South Carolina state line below Charlotte. The construction of roads in the mountains will also be followed by intense development and the building of more bridges along our coast will open up more areas to development further endangering wetlands and other coastal ecosystems.

The loss of vegetation because of paving and the subsequent development seriously handicaps the ability of natural systems to sustain healthy communities. Trees, particularly are essential to the retention of soil and groundwater, to the absorption of carbon dioxide and the manufacturing of oxygen. Many world changes in climate are due to the loss of trees. North Carolina is naturally forested and should continue to be largely forested. The implications of the dying trees in the mountains are not sufficiently reported nor sufficiently appreciated.

The automobile is a major factor in the loss — roadkill — of native wildlife which rightfully belongs in our community of life.

We need to call into question the faith we as a people put into the automobile and the funds we devote to



making it possible to get from here to there quickly without any delays. A five- or 10-minute delay requires that new roads be built and old roads widened. Neighborhoods are changed, beautiful hundred-year old trees are cut down, hundreds acre parking lots are built for unnecessary shopping centers. Downtown areas which once gave our towns and cities so much character and vitality have been sacrificed for easy convenient but sterile shopping malls. A lot of us are weeping in sorrow as we watch the automobile steal beauty and community from our lives, as we watch opinion leaders voice their support for more and more concessions to the automobile and more and more damage to the land. Can they not see that a commitment to doing more and more of

what is already wrecking the planet, and wrecking North Carolina?

Human destiny and the Earth's destiny are inseparable. The destiny of North Carolinians and North Carolina's land are inextricably entwined. We have an obligation to pass on to our children and grandchildren a land of fruitfulness and good health. The elevation of the automobile to the role of primary determinant of how our economy functions, how our energy and our money are spent is ridiculous. We are making our place into a poisoned wasteland because we will not give up an addiction that destroys us.

Our society tells its youth to say no to drugs. They ought to be saying right back to society, "Why don't you practice what you preach?" The automobile

is as great as an addiction as heroin. It destroys the land, which is really the body of our society, but we keep on catering to this monster and acting as though that's a good thing.

Those of us in the environmental community also need to begin to visualize a world in which automobiles no longer shape our world and we need to begin working toward that end — it's never too early to start such a monumental task.

Greg Gangi is a graduate student in ecology and the vice chairman of the Research Triangle Group of the Sierra Club. Jim Berry is the director of the Raleigh-based environmental group The Center for Reflection on the Second Law.

Reaganism caused economic hell Reagan brought prosperous era

Ms. Mona Charon was right. Satan is afoot. In 1988, the former White House speechwriter invoked "Paradise Lost" to decry critics of Ronald Reagan. John Milton's fallen angel urged his minions to resent their lowly fate, and Charon claimed that those attacking Reagan copied Satan's method. They practiced "politics of envy," she argued, by telling America that its hero president favored the rich over the lower classes.

Ms. Charon's judgment was only partly accurate, and two years later the speechwriter-turned-columnist encountered a Satan less reassuring to Reaganism's defense.

Ninety percent of Americans pay as much or more taxes today than in 1980. Even the former New Right propagandist Mr. George Will acknowledges that Reagan and his heir, George Bush, have cut taxes only for the wealthiest 10 percent of our nation who Charon warned us not to envy. The rest of us pay more, and out of incomes harder to earn and that but less than before Reagan took office.

Ms. Charon, however, argued in 1988 that incomes kept up with inflation in the 1980s, discrediting any harping that Reaganomics had leftmost Americans behind. 1990 statistics reveal how families kept up with inflation. Government reports show we worked more hours in 1988 than 1979 and were more productive in those hours.

Ms. Charon missed that, critics didn't. Overlooked in Charon's judgment was a fact already well-established in 1988. Families need more than longer hours and harder work to keep up, they also needed two wage-earners to maintain standards of living provided by one working parent before 1980. No real rise in family incomes occurred — not for most of us.

In 1990, families work harder and longer. For many it's just to survive. Child-labor law violations have reached record proportion this year. Children don't work when families prosper. Don't tell that to Elizabeth Dole, though, she's the President's Secretary of Labor and is responsible for enforcing labor laws. At a Republican party forum held at the end of March, Dole was too busy extolling Reaganism's victory over inflation to mention its costs to children and their families.

Is exploitation of children the only update on Reaganism from 1988? The answer comes from the policies of Bush, who wants to out-do Reagan by further shifting the tax burden from the rich.

The president's most recent budget proposes taxing college students' work-study earnings to help White House budget chief Richard Darman pay part of this year's \$160 billion-plus federal budget deficit. The tax will fall on those working their way through a school, a group already suffering reductions in federal aid to students, which has lowered the number of poor Americans enrolled in higher education.

Even more galling is that the exactation on students won't even go to the

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U.S. government, at least not all of it. The rich get 25 cents of every tax dollar paid by the poor and middle classes — plus that portion of the Social Security trust fund used by Bush to fuel his deficit spending.

Why is it the rich get our tax dollars? The ocean of tax-cut cash they received in the 1980s was money that first Reagan and now Bush since borrowed to pay the staggering federal debt, which owes in part — bitter irony — to those same tax breaks. The rest of us pay the interest on the debt.

Interest payments swallow one-fourth of government spending, and those owning piles of government bonds, America's wealthy, thus enjoy a taxpayer-paid annuity for forever. \$3,200,000,000, the current federal debt, won't go away fast, and it's growing by hundreds of billions each year under Bush.

Besides the debt, other legacies of Reaganism have also worsened since 1988. Financial deregulation, combined with Reagan's cash windfall for Wall Street and his tax holiday for corporations caused a merger mania that, while making fortunes for a few people, now bleeds bankruptcies, junk bond losses and savings & loan insolvencies. Insurance and pension funds pay for the wreckage, the cash lost no longer available for loans to homebuyers or businesses seeking to expand.

Overpriced leveraged buy-outs thus skewed interest rates sky high for conventional credit customers. Home ownership became harder in the 1980s as a result of borrowing by takeover artists, who leech billions in credit to fuel their coups. The damage lingers.

Junk bonds losses in failed and failing LBOs, plus monumental chicanery in the S&L industry, which helped fund Wall Street's machinations, keep interest rates high today. Top all that with the \$200 billion-plus taxpayers will pay to salvage the S&Ls, money that otherwise would flow to savings or could be used for mortgage payments.

Effects of financial deregulation also show at the everyday level. Airline competition reduced by the merger craze has sent ticket prices skyrocketing. President Bush's response? Raise airline ticket taxes and increase fees for landing rights to repair crumbling airports, expenses the federal government used to pay — that is, before the Reagan debt debacle — and which the now less-competitive airline industry will pass on to you and me. Such is the consumer's lot in the Age of Reagan.

Consumers of another product, housing, have been hit as well. It's harder to buy a home or even rent an apartment today than before Reagan-Bush policy: highly selective tax cuts resulting in a hemorrhaging national debt, which

drives massive government borrowing that inflates interest rates; a tight money campaign that protects the rich against inflation while capping wages and reducing credit for new housing; and financial deregulation, the cost of which has been described already.

Adding lower average incomes for young people 25 to 34, which result in part from Reaganism's regressive taxation, the housing picture for most Americans has become very bleak.

"Even today the real cost of financing a home — the nominal mortgage-interest rate minus the rate of inflation — is many times higher than it was in the late 1970s, when home ownership was still expanding." — Rolling Stone magazine.

If housing is harder to obtain, and especially harder for young people, consider one last legacy of Reaganism that shows on our own campus today, one heaping an additional burden on students already enduring cuts in federal financial aid and facing the prospect of taxes on work-study earnings.

Republican Gov. Jim Martin's tax breaks for the wealthy now cause a \$200 million-plus shortfall in state revenues. The fiasco doesn't owe to the cost of repairing Hurricane Hugo's damage, which is the governor's defense (Hugo is only 10 percent of the problem), and unlike Bush, Martin can't pass on the red ink to future taxpayers, hence the budget freeze in effect in our state university system.

If you're a student who can't get a computer to use in campus labs, or if your fees and tuition are raised next year, remember who to blame.

Most importantly, if you're one of the nine of 10 of all Americans, not just students or other young people, who've been left behind by Reaganism, remember that your economic well-being today and in the future is indentured to the \$3.2 trillion tab of 10 years of prodigal, elitist national government.

That brings us back to "Paradise Lost." Where is Satan's handiwork evident today, or phrased another way, would envy be the evil Ms. Mona Charon beholds in 1990? First, current critics of Republicans in the White House suffer two facts: Bush has two more years in office, and he currently enjoys a whopping poll-approval rating. So if Ms. Charon continued using Satan's anguish as her guide, she might like the critics' fertility to this sigh heard from Milton's black pool: "Fallen cherub, to be weak is miserable."

Hope Charon would be both wrong and right. Misery can turn into positive action, and those thus energized, critics and the voters they appeal to, can soon enough end Reaganism's burdens. Consider that Charon's hero won in 1980 by asking, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" New Right ideologues and their presidents should have to answer that question in 1992.

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Bob Lukefahr Guest Columnist

A tax increase to "make up for lost revenue." If the Reagan era has taught us anything, it is that decreasing the tax burden enhances revenues and reduces the need for high-priced welfare programs. Reaganism reminded the nation that the free enterprise system remains the most effective anti-poverty program ever created. If the current expansion is to continue, more tax cuts must be forthcoming.

This is not to say that we have discovered Utopia. Even in the shadows of Trump's skyscrapers dwell legions of homeless men and women who have been left behind. They seem ignored and trampled upon by the affluent society around them. But the question remains, is this the fault of Reaganism?

While demagogues frequently accuse Reagan of "decimating the nation's supply of low-cost housing," the facts tell a different story. First, there are not 3 million homeless people in the United States. Credible estimates range from 350,000, as claimed by Harvard Professor Richard Freeman, to 650,000 according to the National Academy of Sciences. Nobody, except Mitch Snyder, Sam Donaldson and the editorial board of The Daily Tar Heel, still believes there are anywhere near 3 million people living on the streets. The problem is much more manageable than we have been led to believe.

Also, most homeless persons, 71 percent according to the Urban Institute are drug addicts, alcoholics or suffer from mental illness. Not even Sam Donaldson would blame that on Reagan.

So what is the problem? Clearly there is a scarcity of affordable housing. But this comes as no surprise when local government officials have strangled the housing market. Destructive policies like rent control and overly restrictive zoning regulations have given many inner-cities that chic Third World look. When market forces are held at bay, incentives to build housing disappear. Should the left become serious about solving the homeless problem, they will deregulate the housing market. Until then the poor will suffer.

Unfortunately, deregulation is an anathema for the left. According to the conventional wisdom, everything from airline delays to the savings and loan crisis stem from inadequate government oversight. One would think that the pundits and policy dweebs who perpetuate this myth would take a lesson from Eastern Europe. Asking a politician to tinker with the market is a little like asking a pit preacher to rewrite the Bible. Just because he knows John 3:16 by heart does not mean he can compose the Summa Theologica.

In any case, blaming deregulation for either airline delays or the S&L mess is foolish. Since deregulation,

airline fares have fallen almost 40 percent in real terms. U.S. airlines are carrying 60 million more passengers each year and the number of passengers that have three or more carriers from which to choose has increased 37 percent. Unfortunately, the government still owns the airports and runs the air traffic control system. Is it any wonder there are delays?

We can also thank state control for the savings and loan debacle. Congress deregulated the risks and guaranteed against losses. In an effort to protect their political hides, corrupt congressmen shielded insolvent institutions from market forces. We are now presented with the bill and an admonition that America must rely more on government. (Is it just me, or is there something wrong with this logic?) Deregulation works. We ought to try it sometime.

Perhaps the greatest failure of the Reagan era has been the accumulation of a massive federal debt. Since the early 1980s, deficit spending has risen at an unprecedented rate. Once again, however, it is disingenuous to blame this on Reaganism.

Balancing the budget is a fundamental tenant of the conservative doctrine. (Personally, I have been against deficit spending ever since my ex-wife got her first credit card.) Conservatives have been calling for a balanced budget amendment since 1981. Even though annual federal tax revenue has increased from \$517 billion in 1980 to \$980 billion in 1989, there is never enough money to satisfy the congressional spendthrifts. Lawrence Lindsey promises that by limited government spending to 3 percent annual growth, there will be a budget surplus by the end of the decade. There is no shortage of funds, only a shortage of leadership. And with some 98 percent of our representatives being re-elected every two years, the leadership deficit will likely continue.

In spite of all this, there is on thing about which both conservatives and liberals can agree: Eight years of Reaganism radically changed the country and the world. In 1979 no self-respecting American politician would have dared to stand up and proclaim the virtues of limited government and the *laissez-faire* capitalism. Today one finds such visionaries in nearly every communist country. A few can even be found in America. The desire for liberty is rocking the foundations of socialist monoliths around the world. From Peking to Sacramento advocates of big government are on the defensive. People finally realize that a strong dose of Jeffersonian liberty is the only way to halt the cancerous growth of the state. Reaganism reminded the world that government is the problem not the solution. For this alone we owe a great deal to the man and his vision.

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