

**MORE LETTERS**

# Old-Time Education, Celebration Would Keep Us All Safer

To the editor:  
 Southeastern North Carolina's most righteous liberal spent the glorious Fourth of July deploring the dangers of fireworks. How time distorts mental balance!  
 Before achieving the age of awareness I can remember envying one 12-year-old son of a rich man who had a whole box full of two-inch salutes and he was punting them off as fast as he could and throwing them out into the stream at the public park we attended. Wow!  
 One landed in a canoe propelled by some Romeo and his girlfriend, and the explosion was indeed momentous, as was the scream, but after ten seconds when it was ascertained that no hole was blown in the bottom of the canoe and all was safe, and love was interesting than retribution and accusation, the Romeo kept on going and the scion of indulgence kept up the barrage. No other fireworks or product liability suit or anything.

Excitement is sometimes very fleeting.  
 A few years later when we were almost desperately poor, somehow I got 50 cents to celebrate and, for some now unknown reason, had saved one of my precious cherry bombs for the special occasion which appeared magically: our female, anti-boy neighbor gossiping over the back fence. I positioned the cherry bomb under an empty fruit juice can about 20 feet behind her. Kerplow! A twisted piece of metal was propelled about 30 feet upward, and the inspiration for the mischief propelled herself halfway to the moon.

The town's most famous pastor had two sons who put Peck's bad boys to shame, and to celebrate the Fourth that evening they had a 16-gauge shotgun mounted on a couple empty crates with a rope tied to the trigger, aimed at a bark-covered fence post about 12 feet away, stuffed the barrel of the gun with wads of newspaper and 22-caliber cartridges. Whilst we timid onlookers backed off in amazement, one of them yanked the rope. All the flames of Vulcan belched forth at the hapless fence post, blowing the bark off like so much tissue paper and leaving it pockmarked like a Marne River battlefield.

Of course we had other dangerous toys to play with in those days: lead soldiers we molded ourselves, chemistry sets, erector sets (small pieces for babies to swallow), steam engines (egad, they burned alcohol!), swimming holes and quarries without lifeguards, small-bore firearms, bows and arrows, sleds and dangerous vehicles, and even special effects devices for Halloween like the rosin can whose cacophony at a front window would propel the resident of an easy chair six feet into the air!

Yes, they were dangerous times. And today, in the interests of safety, we have substituted imaginative and effective education for AIDS prevention classes and all kinds of sex education and nothing else very exciting.

Now our young people can experiment with sex and drugs at an early age and let others pay for the consequences. And there will be more lives ruined, even physically destroyed, and more crime resulting from our "liberal" educationists' prescriptions than all the hazards of yesteryear.

Give us that old-time education and that old-time Fourth of July celebrating and everybody would be happier and safer, too.

Karl E. Brandt  
 Shallotte

## Principal Is 'Valuable Link'

To the editor:  
 Waccamaw Elementary School parents wish to express our appreciation to Dr. Johnston and the school board for being sensitive to our wishes. Over the years, Mr. Chestnut has become a valuable link between the school and the community. Thank you for allowing him to remain with us.

Pat Purvis Brown  
 Ash

## No Self-Control At Graduation

To the editor:  
 As a friend's son graduated from West Brunswick High School, I was astounded by the behavior of the audience. There was absolutely so much noise and disruption going on in the bleachers that one could hardly hear the name of the next graduate being called. It appeared to me that the graduates exercised more self control and respect than the audience!

In the future, it should be expected and understood that no person in the audience shall leave the graduation site until after the last graduate exits the field. Let's make our young men and women as proud of us as we are of them. After all, we as parents spend our lives teaching our children self control, discipline, manners and respect for others.

Selena Jordan  
 Matthews

# It's Because We Let Them, Stupid...

A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking about real money.  
 —Everett McKinley Dirksen

Interesting things I learned today:  
 Only about \$8 billion of the \$11 billion set aside by Congress for earthquake relief actually will go to California.

Among the hidden "extras" are \$112 for cooperative space ventures between the U.S. and Russia; \$40 million for NASA's "spacehab" module; \$20 million to hire 500 new employees at an FBI fingerprint facility in West Virginia; \$10 million to convert a post office into a train station in New York; \$5 million so the state of Florida can buy land in the Everglades.

Also, \$4.5 million for high-speed rail research; \$4 million for Coast Guard bases in the Midwest; \$2 million for U.S. Information Agency facilities overseas; \$1.5 million to dry dock the commercial ship Savannah at a state museum in South Carolina; \$1.4 million to battle potato blight in Maine; \$1.3 million for two sugar mill communities in Hawaii; \$550,000 to cover travel expenses for the U.S. Trade Representative; and \$1.2 billion for humanitarian missions in Somalia, Haiti, Iraq and Bosnia.

The U.S. Department of Energy



Lynn Carlson

facility in Rocky Flats, Colo., is reportedly missing more than \$62 million in equipment, including a semi-tractor trailer, forklifts, computers, camera and furniture.

Their lab in Sandia, N.M., can't account for \$386,000 in equipment. In addition, computers were improperly stored and furniture was left out in the open.

A DOE facility at Los Alamos, N.M., cannot account for \$100 million in personal property and equipment, including computers and medical equipment. Sixty-five percent of the \$7.3 million in equipment on personal loan to employees was unjustified.

Audits of seven "smaller" defense contractors—meaning not General Dynamics, Lockheed or McDonnell Douglas—recently made public by the General Accounting Office turned up \$4.9 million in illegal or questionable billing charges on top of another \$4.4 million that the Pentagon's own contracting watchdogs caught.

Among the expenses charged to taxpayers: \$333,000 for one contractor's "business meetings" in Puerto Vallarta, Jamaica, the Cayman Islands and Hawaii; \$62,000 for use of a 46-foot sport fishing boat; \$24,000 in booze; \$14,000 worth of Celtics and Red Sox tickets; \$12,000 in cable television charges; \$10,000 for schooner rentals; \$5,800 for running shoes; and \$10,600 for one party featuring caviar, salmon and smoked duck.

But don't think the bureaucracy is insensitive to charges that it is bloated—in January of this year, the federal government granted seven separate contracts for studies worth \$49 million, all identically entitled, "Studies of the Impact of Regulations."

These alarming newsbytes came from the spring edition of *Government WasteWatch*, which has been coming to me unsolicited for several editions now. The tabloid-sized newspaper is published quarterly by

Citizens Against Government Waste, which describes itself on its masthead as a "nonpartisan, non-profit educational organization."

The publication certainly seems to have no particular axe to grind, other than to point out the fact that billions—with a "B" and 9 zeros—of public funds go toward some of the most inexcusably inane purposes anyone can imagine. Anyone, that is, who pays taxes and is not at liberty to write a fat check against the public account.

There's something about reading pages and pages of accounts of boundless boondoggle, audacious excess and shameless usury—something nauseating that starts in the belly and travels to the brain and becomes a shrill voice that tells you what you already know. "It's because we let them, stupid..."

By the way, it's not all bad news. On the positive side, \$144 million was reportedly saved when the Clinton administration finally fulfilled a campaign promise to eliminate one-third of the no less than 801 "discretionary" federal advisory panels (410 of them are mandated by Congress).

How in the world will we get along without the Board of Tea Experts, the National Digestive Diseases Advisory Board and the South Texas Melon Committee?

## GUEST COLUMN

# State Leaders Should Allow Initiatives

BY PETER HANS

Democracy is a popular idea. Although there are many forms of initiative and referendum procedures, roughly half the 50 states allow the people some form of direct access to the ballot. Other states, like North Carolina, vest their legislatures with enormous power over legislation and deny their citizens the opportunity to vote on public policy issues.

Historically, the N.C. General Assembly is a powerful institution. This can be traced back to the colonials' fear of the royal governors and to Jim Crow-era legislative resistance to pluralism. Today, North Carolina is the only state in the entire country whose chief executive lacks gubernatorial veto.

A 1990 study by UNC-Chapel Hill political scientist Thad Beyle found that North Carolina's governor was the nation's weakest in terms of formal powers. The result is that the N.C. House Speaker, elected to serve 65,000 people in one section of the state, is at least equal in power to the state governor, who was elected to represent six and a half million citizens.

With so much power concentrated in the hands of the General Assembly, it's understandable why legislators would be extremely reluctant to allow ordinary people to have direct access to the statewide ballot. Yet there has been a strong

effort in the legislature to create a state lottery through a binding popular referendum. Why? Because the lottery is one controversial issue that many legislators would rather pass to the voters. Rather than searching for political cover on one particular issue, state legislators should have to either establish or reject a lottery—or, alternatively, give citizens the ability to place any issue, including the lottery, on the ballot.

If direct democracy were a reality in North Carolina, the lottery, along with several other high-profile, unresolved issues, would surely qualify for the ballot. That would give people an opportunity to debate and argue, not rubber-stamp, questions as varied as a state lottery, term limits, gubernatorial veto, environmental protection and education funding.

Only issues with strong popular support would qualify for the ballot if the petition signature threshold were set at a level guaranteed to eliminate fringe or special-interest issues. It is vitally important that direct democracy legislation be written to ensure a responsive and responsible process where the people gain a greater voice in their government.

It would be better for everyone concerned if legislators could spend most of their time deliberating complex budgetary and policy issues not amenable to "yes or no" decisions,

while giving interested citizens the opportunity to take more straightforward questions directly to the people.

Popular disaffection with government has reached all-time highs as people feel that political decisions are conducted in an atmosphere which is remote to their concerns. The advent of career elected officials, the increasing influence and number of lobbyists, the never-ending cycle of campaign fundraising, negative advertising, and bizarre redistricting plans all contribute to widespread citizen anger with politics and government.

In any event, legislators have as much of an interest as anyone else in seeing that public respect for the institution of state government is enhanced. Direct democracy would clearly accomplish that goal. A recent national poll by the Americans Talk Issues Foundation found widespread support for initiatives that let citizens bypass or veto the votes of elected officials. For example, 64 percent of those interviewed favor conducting national referenda on

major issues and want the government to give a referendum approved by a majority the same weight as legislation passed by Congress. In addition, 66 percent favor submitting tax increases that past congress to vote of the people in the next election, and 71 percent favor including a voluntary questionnaire with federal tax forms to give citizens an opportunity to define the government's spending priorities. Commenting on these findings, pollster Frederick T. Steeper said: "I think we need to rethink the whole idea of indirect democracy that we've committed to for over 200 years."

There is every reason to believe that North Carolinians agree with voters across the country that a more direct form of democracy is urgently needed. It's time our state's leaders recognized that fact.

Hans is director of communications and public affairs at the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and author of a policy report on direct democracy just published by the John Locke Foundation.

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