

Coping with illiteracy in our state

The author is the president of First Union Corp.

THE GUEST COLUMN By BEN T. CRAIG

Henry carries a newspaper with him to the factory so his fellow workers will think he can read. Susan wants to be able to read aloud to her 3-year-old daughter. George makes excuses to avoid delivering packages to a part of town he is not familiar with because he cannot read street signs.

A third of North Carolina's adults share a tragic secret -- they cannot read a road sign, a warning label or an election ballot. In our state's information society they are outcasts -- marginally employable, burdened with feelings of inadequacy and unable to contribute fully despite high native intelligence.

More than 1.5 million of our approximately six million citizens never completed high school, and 835,000 have less than an eighth-grade education. Most of these people are functionally illiterate,

and their numbers increase by 20,000 every year.

It is not, of course, a problem limited to North Carolina. One out of every nine adults in the United States cannot read at all. In addition, there are another 47 million who are borderline illiterates -- who can function, but not well.

Tragically, however, North Carolina has the third-highest percentage of illiterate adults. It is an economic and a social problem that costs our state hundreds of millions of dollars and untold human misery. It affects all of us.

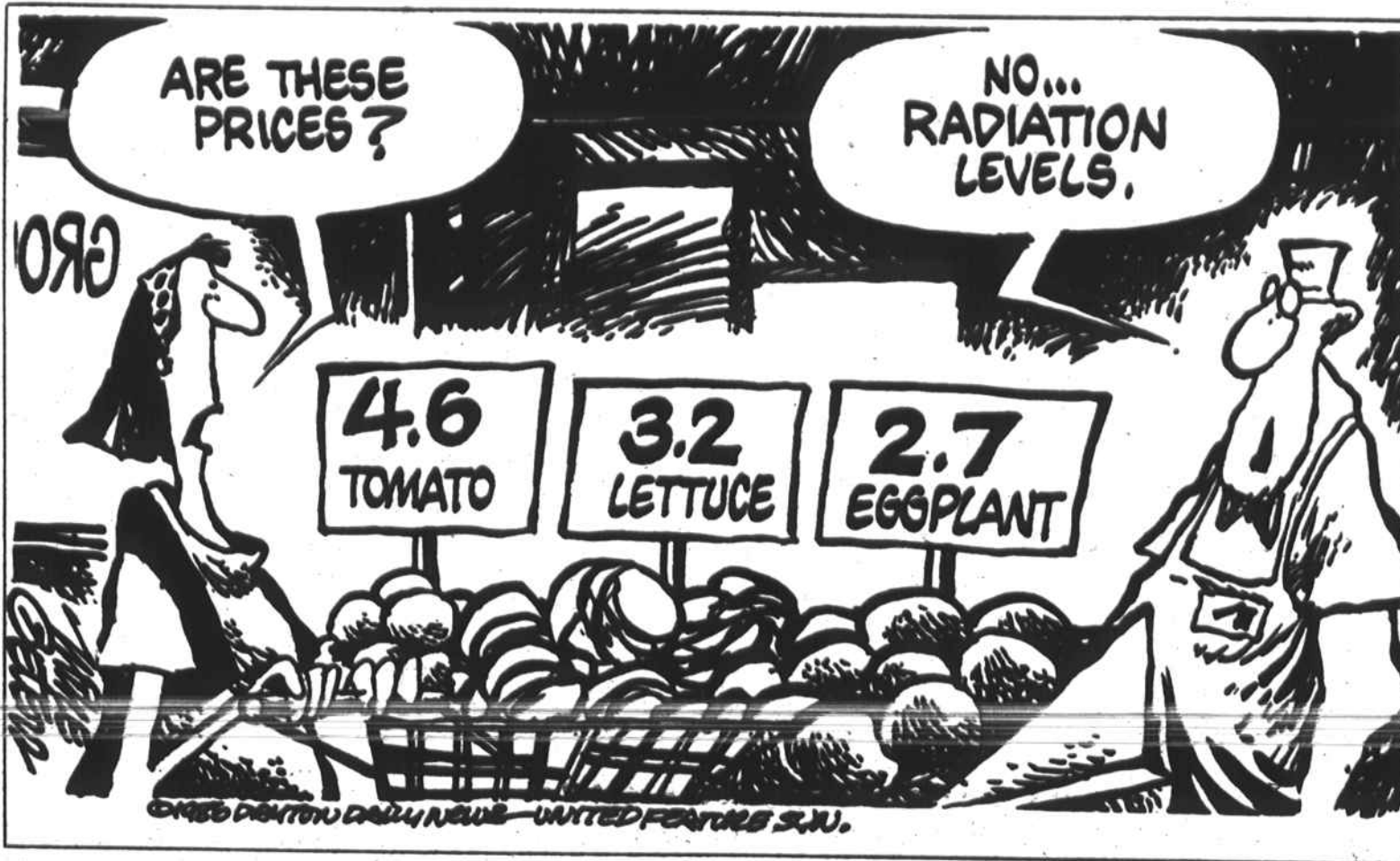
Although businesses in this state employ more than 600,000 functionally illiterate people, more than 200,000 are unemployed. The drain of illiterates on the economy and our tax dollars can be measured in

their numbers in social welfare programs, in our prisons, in our juvenile-delinquency programs and in our unemployment lines.

The problem can also have a dangerous impact on our daily routines, when you consider that illiterates are all around us -- as drivers who cannot read road signs, employees who are unable to read instructions dealing with chemicals and parents who cannot decipher warning labels on their children's medicine bottles.

Major efforts have been under way in this state for several years to combat the problem, and these efforts have been supported by leaders in the business, government, civic and education sectors. But there is much more to be done.

One of the most exciting developments is a pioneer program at Charlotte's Central Piedmont Community College called ABLE, (Adult Basic Literacy Education). It uses computers and instructors to teach adult



students to read. The computer program reduces the amount of time it takes to teach the basic skills.

This project is an example of cooperation between government, business and community, which joined to fund the nationally recognized program.

The ABLE project has been implemented in five other countries, and as a result of its success, the state Legislature approved funds last year to put the com-

puter program in all of the 58 community colleges across the state.

In addition to the ABLE program, the community colleges after Adult Basic Education classes, and there are literacy councils throughout the state offering tutoring to those trying to improve their reading skills. All of these programs are free.

Compare a lifetime spent isolated from the literate world, where reading the local

newspaper and handling your own financial affairs is impossible to the relatively short time it takes to obtain basic reading skills. You can see that literacy programs are incredibly cost-effective. Business leaders should appreciate this better than anyone.

Yet, while teaching an adult to read is not difficult, the process is complicated by the stigma associated with illiteracy. As a
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has been particularly interested in training black folks to win elections, though there are opportunities to learn how to run campaigns more effectively. But "we already know about politics." "We can't afford to learn campaign management." Wrong. We cannot afford not to dramatically increase the number of trained political operatives. If you want to play major-league ball, then you have to invest major-league resources.

Campaign management training is available from several sources.

These sources include the national parties, the state parties, party auxiliaries such as the Young Democrats or the Republican Women's Club and political action committees such as the North Carolina Association of Educators' PACE or the 21st Century PAC.

However, availability is not the problem. Our political leadership must commit to investing the resources to train political operatives and then use these operatives and the sound campaign techniques they have learn-

ed to win elections.

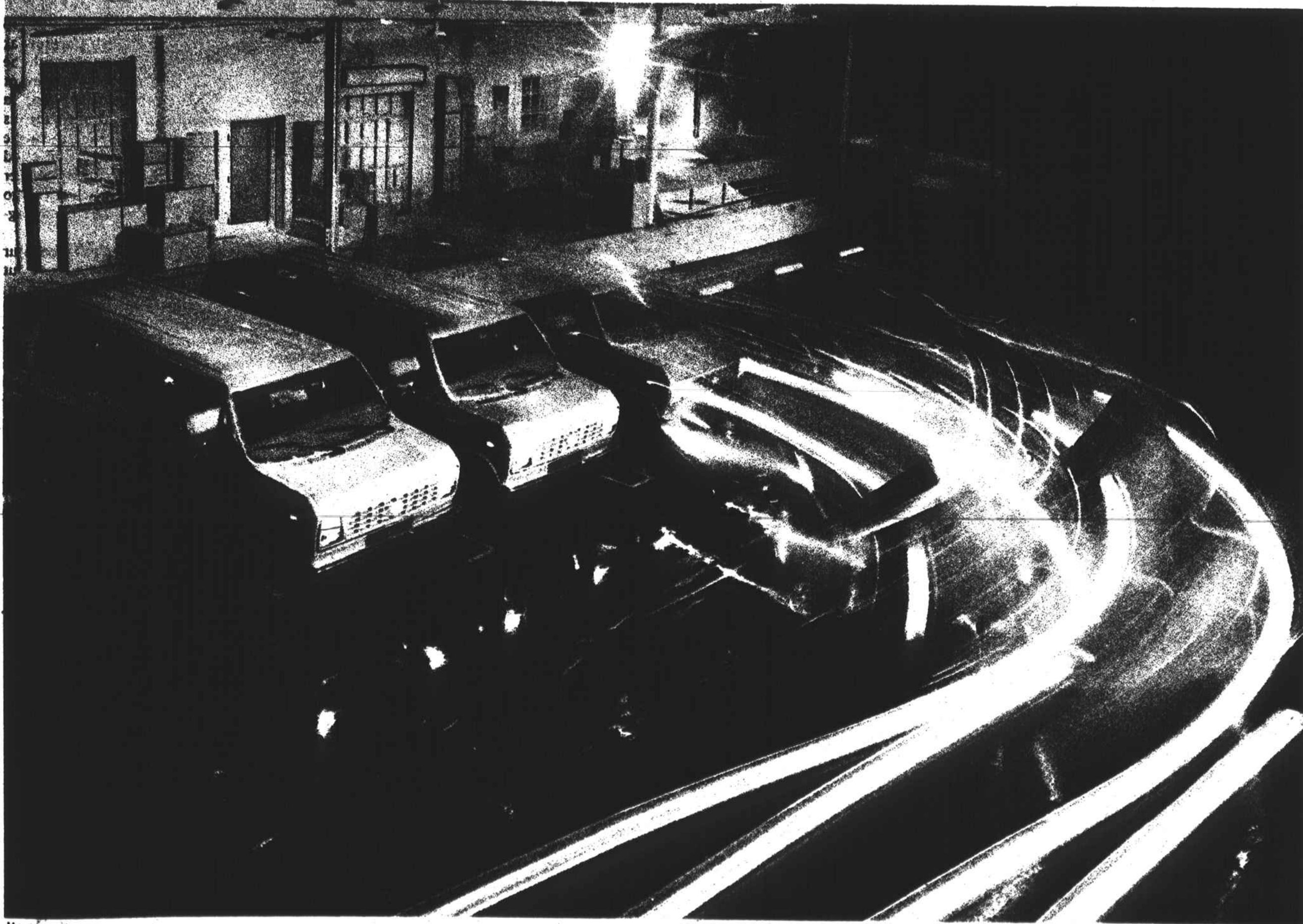
However, waging more effective campaigns addresses only part of the political empowerment challenge. I say this because the most promising way for blacks to increase political power is through channelling political efforts into the Republican Party and a number of its candidates to a much greater extent than has been the case in the past.

I found this paper's endorsement of several Republicans facing primary races very interesting. Interesting from the

standpoint that not a single employee of the paper could make any impact in these races at the polls, because none of them are registered Republicans in Forsyth County. But the *Chronicle's* staff should not be singled out for special attention. Almost the entire black community is very comfortable letting other folks pick the candidates for the GOP in the fall.

Can we afford to be the only ethnic group in the country that plays one-party ball in a two-party system?
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