

ANOTHER VIEW
R.E. Smith Jr.

Politicians 'cook the books'

"Edwards' hometown in line for funds"
"Grant money tempting"
"Easley puts millions into Floyd account"

These headlines from articles in a recent issue of the News & Observer of Raleigh represent the tips of huge government icebergs floating in a sea of tax money and drifting into the shipping lanes of American life.

U.S. senators and President Bush have sternly admonished corporate executives— some who played fast and loose with company money— for seeking too much personal gain, failing to reveal how money was used, and using money for unauthorized purposes. But before the exalted ones carry their indignation too far, they should take aim at their own malfeasance. Politicians and bureaucrats at all government levels are guilty.

The N&O reported that U.S. Sen. John Edward's hometown of Robbins, N.C. (pop.1,200) will receive \$500,000 for improvements to its water-treatment plant. Critics have charged favoritism. But the problem is bigger than a minor ethics lapse. "The episode highlights the ways of pork-barrel politics in Washington, where clout matters and much of the action is cloaked from public view," the N&O reported.

Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee make decisions about which porkers go to the trough, steering projects to their own states and to members up for re-election, after they have insider discussions with the noble councilors who hope to benefit. This year both Edwards and U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms each put in bids for more than a dozen water-treatment projects.

In addition to powerful politicians expropriating public money, bureaucrats in government agencies squabble over federal and state taxes, misuse funds, and confuse accountability. In another story, the N&O reveals that as "research grants have grown dramatically over the past decade," UNC-Chapel Hill has not passed an increasing share of the loot, as overhead, to its libraries. While UNC-CH "redirected" overhead money to recruiting and building construction, state taxpayers paid an extra \$1.4 million over the past four years. Former State Treasurer Harlan Boyles said about university obfuscation, the "big issue" is revealing how the monies are used and not using these receipts as a "slush fund."

Unaccountability for public money starts with the mother lode in Washington. According to a report in National Review July 29, the General Accounting Office in 1998 audited for the first time federal agency finances. The GAO found that agencies spent a large amount of money to improvise accounting procedures and adjusted billions of dollars to make up financial statements "months after the end of the fiscal year." Corporate finaglers go to jail for these practices.

The Wall Street Journal reported that L. Dennis Kozlowski, former CEO of Tyco International Ltd., used funds improperly to benefit himself, helped himself to a "smorgasbord of financial rewards," and donated millions to "charities he favored," but, our representatives, using laws they make, are doing the same things — and worse.

Economist Lawrence Kudlow and Stephen Moore, president of the Club for Growth, wrote in the Aug. 12 issue of National Review: "... a strong case can be made that when you roll together all the bad laws (farm-bill giveaways, steel tariffs, timber quotas, antiterrorism spending and refinancing failed foreign-aid programs) that have been enacted on Capitol Hill this year, Congress has been a greater depressant to the stock market than all of the corporate crooks at Enron, WorldCom, and Arthur Anderson combined." Which brings us back to North Carolina political shenanigans.

In a shell-game to uncover money for a \$14.3 billion budget and at least \$1.6 billion of excess spending, Gov. Mike Easley and state legislative budgeteers are frantically moving tax money around. Easley toured Pender and Pitt counties to drum up excitement over what's left of \$836 million appropriated to help those who chose to live in floodplains. Hurricane Floyd in 1999 dumped more rain on the plain than anyone had ever seen in North Carolina. So much money rained down after the flood that more than \$300 million of state money still hasn't been spent. Easley took \$150 million, just in case of a budget "emergency." He wants to lock up the balance so legislators can't spend it. Senate budget writers proposed spending \$100 million from the recovery fund.

Well, of course.

While tempting amounts of money, easily taken from taxpayers, snow on the political system, government icebergs will continue to break from the massive glaciers of spending. And who's counting?

R.E. Smith Jr. is a freelance writer living in Wilmington. Formerly he was associate professor at the State University of New York, and worked with the USDA in Washington, D.C.

Ten books I would keep

What if you had to choose just 10 books to last you the rest of your life?

It is a question I ask sometimes when I look around my room and see so many unsorted books stacked up everywhere.

So I ask myself, "Which ones are really precious? If I could keep just ten books, which ones?"

1. The Bible. First of all, I do not want to pretend that this is just to demonstrate my strong religious convictions. It is less than that, or maybe more than that. But, the Bible is the book that I know best. My grandmother read me all the great Bible stories when I was a boy, and I remember them. All my life I have heard it read from the pulpit at church services, weddings, and funerals. It is the source book and connecting link for so much of the wisdom and inspiration and comfort that others have given me.

More than that, the Bible provides a key to understanding so much about our society and why we are what we are. Anyone who wants to understand American culture and history should become familiar with the Bible.

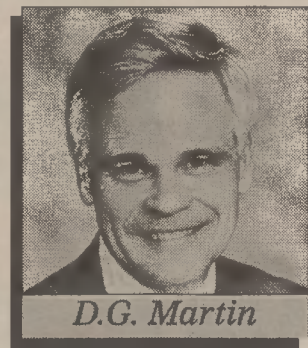
2. A good dictionary. Even though I have been

working with the English language for many years, I discover new words every day. Many of them, once learned, become essential tools. Often I find, upon checking, that I am misusing, misspelling, or misunderstanding words that I thought I knew well. Without a good dictionary, I would be a cripple as far as language is concerned.

3. A one-volume encyclopedia. The Columbia Encyclopedia is a treasure of information, one that I would not want to be without if I lost access to the Encyclopedia Britannica and other multi-volume reference books.

4. The World Almanac and Book of Facts. I like to have this book close by to answer questions and settle arguments, and sometimes just read for pleasure.

5. An Atlas. The National Geographic Atlas of the World always opens for me a whole new way to look at how our world is arranged and how particular pieces of it fit together. It shows how the mountains, oceans, deserts, and



D.G. Martin

great rivers separate us and bind us together.

6. Shakespeare. Unbelievably, all of Shakespeare's known works can be packed into one volume, which I would take with me. As hard as Shakespeare is for me to read and understand, he is still our English language's greatest storyteller and wordsmith.

7. Mark Twain's collected works. Maybe Twain is outdated and overrated, but his stories are still classics. His descriptions of life are a key to understanding what America was like in the 19th century, and why we are what we are today.

8. A hymnbook. The old hymns, the ones that I have sung hundreds of times, are something special to me—like books of poetry and song are for others. I have collected the texts of about 25 of my favorites and put them in a booklet, and it would probably be one of my ten books. (I will be glad to send you an electronic copy of "my little hymn book." Just send an e-mail request to dmartin13@nc.rr.com.)

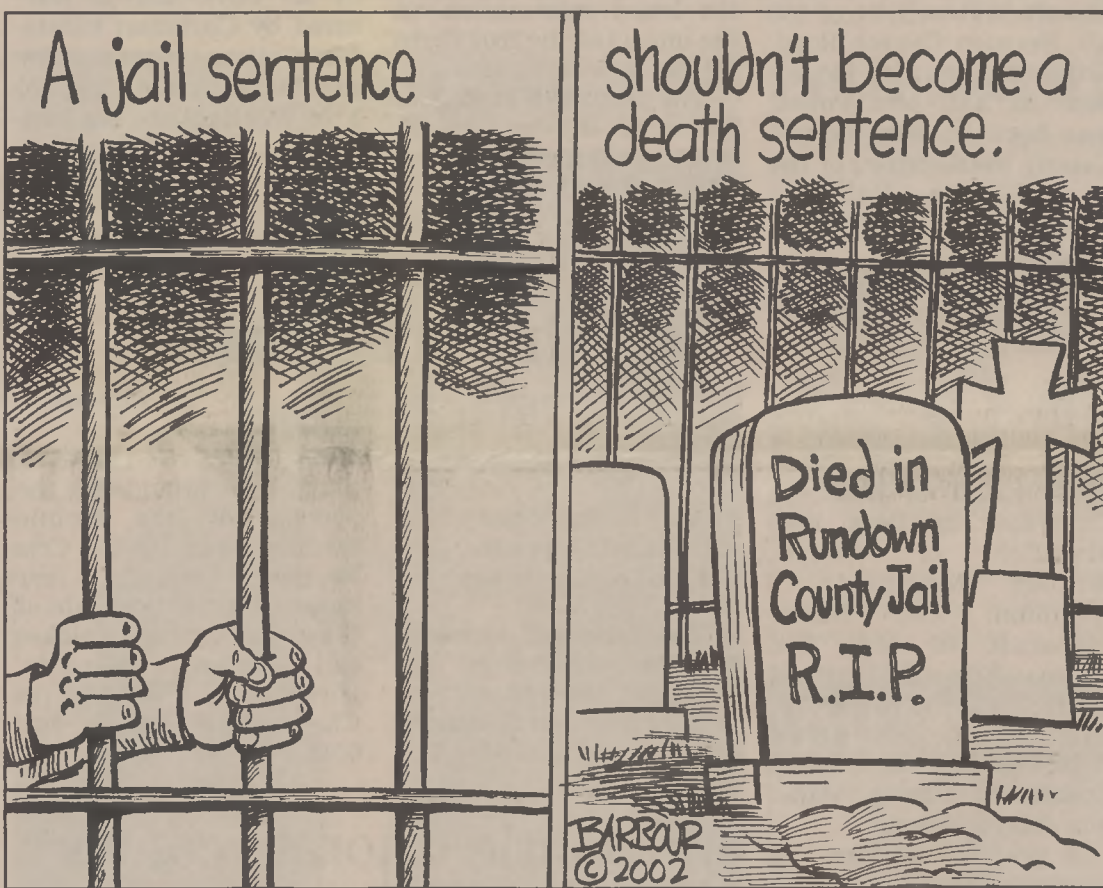
9. A book of astronomy. I would want a book that shows the constellations and how to find them in the night sky.

10. A blank book for my writing. More and more, I realize that my favorite writer is me. Reading things that I wrote earlier puts me in a conversation with myself. It reminds me of things I felt and learned and then put aside, perhaps never to have been recalled except for re-reading my own writing.

Now I can almost hear you saying, "But what about history, philosophy, and science? What about the great works of fiction? What about poetry? What about books that tell you how to do things—like cook-books? What about books of inspiration and practical guides to living? What about all the other books you left out?"

All I can say is that maybe it is time for you to make your own list, and see what it tells you about yourself.

D.G. Martin is Carolinas Director of the Trust for Public Land, a national conservation organization that preserves land for people. UNC-TV's North Carolina Bookwatch, hosted by Martin, will return to the air soon.



Feeling my age

Every Monday, I remember exactly how old I am. Yep, this old lady who could at one time stay awake for three days before finally falling exhausted into bed isn't handling it quite like she used to do.

Mondays are just tough

RAMBLIN' WITH SUSAN

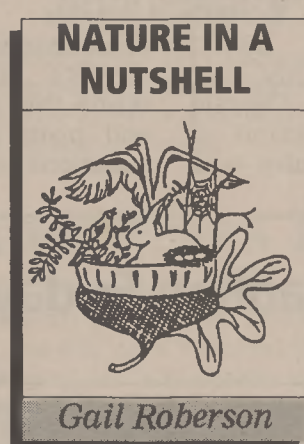


Susan Harris

Becoming a naturalist

Her telephone call came just as I got out of bed and put the phone back on the hook after a long night of writing. She said she'd like to talk to me about becoming a naturalist. I needed a break, so we agreed I'd meet her at her home later that day. As soon as I entered her drive I knew I was with similar kind. Rocks were piled in neat displays among her flowers, bird feeders and houses were everywhere, tall sunflower stalks rubbed against her barn and a string of colorful cats paraded around the yard. A rooster crowed from somewhere as I slammed the truck door and she stepped off her back porch.

"I want to help do something about the state of this planet," were her first words of greeting, "and I want you to tell me how to become a naturalist so I can get started. We have little time to waste, as you well know." She was probably about seventy years old, but tough and determined, and after a few hours of kindred spirit sharing, we decided that if bumbling bureaucrats and idiots in



general would leave us alone, the two of us could probably accomplish more in one week than the whole of them in years. But, that's another story, so we sat drinking iced tea in the shade of her willow tree and planned her strategy.

"You are already a naturalist in every way that really counts," I assured her. "Not all need to be professionally trained or highly technical though there should be someone everywhere to whom we can turn for reliable information about the living world."

I explained to her how the most numerous and useful of the naturalists who do not earn a living by this profession are those who have filled their senses with the facts as well as the beauty of living things. Facts are free today on the Internet and libraries, and must be used in place of guesses and games that only confuse and leave facts unearthed and unlearned by those you impact. It must be clearly understood that the slightest deviation from fact destroys the usefulness of any naturalist.

The rules of this game are rigorous and require much self-discipline and training in the field as well as open books.

In her home were many collections of shells, rocks, bones, leaves and more, all of which bore the common and scientific identifications. I took stock of her library and found it to be a marvel of information. She was not just a collector of pretty things. She told me of the children she often entertained, and the hours they spent tramping around in the meadows and fields while she pointed out things and made them stop and feel the sun against their faces or at night to learn the constellations together.

I finally left her at dusk, but my mind returns to that afternoon quite often. I see a woman, far into her golden years, giving and caring about something other than herself. I see a human still willing to learn and pass it along, still anxious to make a difference, still recognizing her role in the circle of life. But most of all, I see a woman with a naturally inquiring mind beneath that gray hair, not just continuing to learn, but passing it on and arousing and inspiring a whole new generation that will someday continue her role in the sacred circle of life. And I see a woman I greatly admire.

days in my business. There are certain things we just can't do until the last minute as we prepare to go to press each week. There are also meetings to cover three Mondays each month.

So often, as is the case tonight, I am banging on this computer at 3 a.m., hoping I catch all the typos and scared to death of making grammatical errors.

By Tuesday at noon, I will be a zombie, probably crashing until time to go get my daughter from school.

When I first started at The Perquimans Weekly in 1988, I could get by on one or two hours of sleep on Monday night, then stay up until bedtime on Tuesday night. I had to. Our technology wasn't quite as advanced then, and in order to get the paper out on time, I got about two or three hours of sleep between Monday morning and Tuesday night every week.

Once during basketball tournament season, I actually made it from Monday morning until Wednesday night.

But I must have been at least 20 years younger then. I still don't have much problem staying awake until the wee hours, but by noon the next day, I'm crashing.

How in the world did I manage this schedule when I had three kids at home?

I was just younger, plain and simple.

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