

somewhere, to reach a breaking point, at which breaking point the army takes over and the ancient battle begins once more."

Not exactly words to stir hearts in Tiananmen Square, but after Goude's *jour de gloire* one can almost see Davidson's point.

John Shelton Reed left Paris two weeks before the festivities. As a rule, he views the world from Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

Not a Smashing Success

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It's the little things — not the front-page disclosures — that suggest to us that we've been had.

Take, for instance, a 1987-88 study by the Oregon Department of Transportation. ODOT studied 551 students between 16 and 19 years of age who had completed driver education programs, 581 students who said they *would* have taken the course had it been available, and 197 students who didn't take the course and weren't interested in doing so.

The project compared driver examination test scores and driving records of the 1,329 drivers, all of whom obtained their first driver's license between September 1987 and January 1988.

An article in the ODOT magazine explains that students who had taken driver education and *passed* the driver exam scored "significantly higher" on the law and knowledge part of the test, and "somewhat higher" on the behind-the-wheel portion, than those who passed the licensing test but had no interest in taking the course. On the other hand, the flunking rate for all groups was the same, whether or not they'd had training.

More amazing than this, though, was what ODOT Motor Vehicles Division researcher Barnie Jones was quoted as saying, "We found that the *driving records* of those who had taken student driver education and those who hadn't were very similar. The

groups had virtually identical traffic accident and violation rates after six months and 13½ months of driving." In other words, driver ed doesn't change any lifestyles.

Now, in most states driver education is *mandatory* for high school students who expect to drive, and car and liability insurance is lower for kids who have taken the course. That was true even 20 years ago, when we were forced to sit in the simulator (we called it the "stimulator") and watch bloody movies about kids who drank and drove, movies so embarrassing that we giggled through them. Now ODOT has the nerve to say that driver ed really doesn't make much difference.

This also encourages thinking about other "mandatory learning experiences" that our kids don't need. What about physical education class? Does getting frustrated or sweaty for 40 minutes twice a week (and then either being denied a shower or forced to take one, gang-style, and re-dress in a sweaty locker room) teach our kids that sports are fun, that our bodies are temples? No PE teacher I've ever had has looked as if she *enjoyed* the job. Every 1989 American couch potato — and we come by the truckload — was forced to attend years and years of gym class. They just didn't "take." I learned in adulthood to enjoy several sports, moderately, but at the time I would rather have been reading. So sue me.

Then there's "hygiene" or "health" class. It's no secret that even though most teenagers are forced to take this class, they're still having babies during homeroom and making more of them after school. "Health" class *used* to mean learning how important it is to brush one's teeth and wash with soap; now third-graders learn exactly how to do things that I still had to guess about when I was in *college*. These children are also, presumably, being told about Death, and how it looms ever more near these days — after all, sex ed didn't move into elementary classrooms in a big way until what has come to be very wishfully called the "AIDS epidemic." I don't particularly *want* my third-grade son to know about condoms — and if he's not interested, let's give the kid a break. I tried to chat with him about babies one night as we did the dishes, and he finally turned to me and said, "Mom, I'm having a lot

of trouble listening to this." Still, those babies keep dropping, so we ship the kids off to another state-mandated "health" class. Their time would be better spent in driver ed.

Does anyone remember "social studies"? It's still around. I didn't have a bona fide *history* class until I was in high school, and I didn't have geography until I was in college. In grade school and middle school we had "social studies," where in a dozen pages kids learn a smattering of the history, customs, and agriculture of a smattering of countries. A fourteen-year-old sixth-grade social studies book our household plodded grimly through last year "did" Italy in ten pages, covering the early Romans, grapes and olives, Mussolini, and everything in between (except the Pope, of course). That same book pronounced Kuwait the "world's most progressive nation," and asked, at the end of one chapter, whether North Vietnam or South Vietnam were the communist nation. (I didn't look, but I bet the Vietnam chapter talked about rice and the manufacture of straw hats.) Kids today still have "social studies," and then embarrass a puzzled nation when they flunk history and geography tests.

Then there's "defensive driving" for adults. Most states make a defensive driving class obligatory for those who have been in a traffic accident, regardless whether they were sober at the time. Now, an adult with a good record who has been in a fender-bender and who is really *interested* in learning a few little tips for driving more safely will take a lot home from such a class. The majority of drivers won't. And yet "defensive driving" courses are a big industry, and make a state or city *feel* as if it's doing something. It is, I guess: creating a cash flow.

But to get back to the driver ed students: I have a solution. If a kid does poorly on his exam or has a lot of accidents, just increase his mandatory PE classes. Make him run more laps and then endure the purgatory of gang showers — or return to class unshowered. It'll keep him off the streets, and will be a right use of every aspect of gym class, which was, after all, *created* to punish.

Jane Greer edits Plains Poetry Journal in Bismarck, North Dakota.

COMMONWEAL

Jeanne Berg



The Brave New World of Public Policy

by Richard D. Lamm

John Stuart Mill woke up one morning and had this overwhelming feeling that the "answer to the question of the ages" had come to him in the middle of the night. But he forgot what it was. He then placed a quill and paper next to his bed, and a few mornings later he awoke with a similar feeling; this time he found on the paper in his own handwriting, "Think in different terms."

We are sailing into a new world of public policy, a world as strange and new as the one Columbus discovered. It is a world where infinite government demands have run straight into finite resources. Most of our institutional memories and political culture come out of the 1960's and 1970's, when America had the industrial world's highest rate of productivity growth and was doubling its wealth every 30 to 40 years. Government had a substantial yearly growth dividend it could spend. Now we have the lowest rate of productivity growth in the industrial world, and it will take approximately 130 years to double our national wealth. We go into debt to maintain current levels of gov-

ernment. Being in government today is like sleeping with a blanket that is too short: we do not have the resources to cover all our needs.

It is my belief that the old world of public policy is dying and a new world of public policy is being born. The essence of this new world is that the economy of the 1990's cannot support the dreams of the 1960's. Public policy cannot count on historic levels of revenue growth and thus cannot chase geometric curves of public spending. I suggest that this world of ever growing public needs and shrinking resources will require us to reconceptualize much of *what* government does and *how* it does it. It will cause us to define what is absolutely fundamental in many of our basic institutions.

This is not a matter of conservative or liberal. It is not a matter of "won't." It is a matter of "can't." It is not a philosophic difference between parties, but a resource limitation imposed by an economy increasingly under international attack and not growing fast enough to sustain programs already undertaken, let alone new needs. Nor can they be met by reallocating existing resources. This is not another argument against "waste in government." Waste cannot be justified, but it will not yield that much new money. We are going to have to decide what is fundamental and what is superfluous. It is not a matter of the heart. It is a matter of the wallet.

Spending on the elderly is one area where considerable funds could be refocused. The elderly are 12 percent of America and receive 57 percent of all federal entitlements. "Retirees" get 65 percent of all federal entitlements, even though studies show that they have the highest amount of discretionary income. America still thinks of the elderly as poor, but as a class they are doing quite well. A child in America is still seven times more likely to be poor than someone 65.

Ken Dychtwald states that between 500,000 and 600,000 millionaires get a Social Security check every month,

and that half the millionaires in the country are over 65. Our society *does* have the option of transferring money now going to the rich elderly to poor kids. It could be done through taxing all Social Security and Medicare benefits or even by means testing Social Security. Social Security and Medicare are tremendous transfer payments from a younger to an older generation. Contrary to public myth, people are not "getting their money back" in these programs. The average person retiring today receives back five times more than he and his employer paid into the system (plus interest). The accrual benefits of Medicare are often 20 to 25 times what a retiree has contributed. This is appropriate for many of the elderly, but questionable for those elderly who have considerable resources. Medicare and Medicaid have averaged 19 percent growth a year since their inceptions, and clearly we cannot continue to fund them at such rates.

Public policy today amends Medicare to give heart transplants to the elderly, but 600,000 American women gave birth last year with either little or no prenatal care. That is not a correct distribution of limited resources. We have the highest life expectancy (80) of any country in the world, but we are 20th in infant mortality. That is not fair. Poverty in America wears diapers, not a hearing aid.

We cannot be indiscriminately generous, and therefore we need to develop a sense of "compassionate austerity" where we honor compassionate goals but, perhaps, change the means whereby we accomplish them. Take transportation of the handicapped. The handicapped advocacy groups push for a "barrier free society" and demand a wheelchair lift on every bus in America. Studies show, however, that government can transport three times as many handicapped by vans for a fraction of what it costs to put a wheelchair lift on every bus. The future will have enough money to meet compassionate ends, but we must be