

Teletubbie Politics

Just as Bill Clinton was escaping from his inquisitors with his presidency intact, the nation's sexual swat team set their sights on Tinky Winky. Jerry Falwell charged that this purple, triangle-crowned Teletubbie was "modeling the gay lifestyle." Speaking on the *Today* show, the reverend explained that "little boys running around with purses and acting effeminate" is something that "Christians do not agree with."

Falwell is spouting nonsense. Yet Tinky Winky, Laa-Laa, Po and Dipsy do provide a subversive alternative to his authoritarian world view. The Teletubbies live happily in an undefined relationship—are they siblings, friends, comrades?—watching out for each other in a make-believe land where no central authority directs their lives.

The Teletubbies' communitarian spirit stands at odds with the current political climate. Our celebrity-driven culture has left us well equipped to express shock and pass judgment on the individual actions of Clinton, Falwell or Tinky Winky, but we have lost our belief in the idea that collective efforts can better the common good. This is exemplified by the lack of public outrage at the Washington political establishment, which, having dissected the private morality of the President ad nauseam, is now preparing to pass legislation that will impose immoral public policies on the nation.

Social Security is under attack, not because it is in dire straits, but because it is based on the premise that we as a nation have a collective responsibility for the individual's well-being. The Republicans (and far too many Democrats) want to get the government out of the equation and let people play stock market roulette with their Social Security savings.

At the same time, Congress will tinker with legislation to ameliorate the most egregious failings of the HMO-based health care system, but will again fail to address the 43 million uninsured Americans who are one hospital visit away from financial ruin.

The Republican Congress and the Democratic president are prepared to allocate at least \$272 billion to the Pentagon in fiscal year 2000. That this engorged military spending package is coming down the budgetary pipeline with little organized public opposition indicates just how far we are from building a progressive political movement that would demand that human needs be put first.

Other examples of our collective immorality will not even be addressed by Washington's policy-makers. The ongoing destruction of Iraq by bombs and an embargo that has led to an estimated 250,000 infant deaths will continue. More young black men will attend prison rather than college, thanks to our failed war on drugs and

our inability to deal with the decay of our inner cities. And our nation's global trade strategies will continue ensuring that capital can move about the world without regard to how it disrupts human life.

In short, issues of community morality are lost when we would prefer to debate presidential infidelities, speculate on the proclivities of an asexual Teletubbie or be dumb struck by a right-wing preacher's stupidity. Indignation about an individual action is much easier to muster than outrage at the omnipresent social wrongs for which we bear collective responsibility.

The mainstream news media are partly to blame, with their incessant pursuit of the trivial, fixation on celebrity news and tabloid journalism, and inability to take editorial positions that might galvanize the public to right social wrongs.

In each issue of *In These Times*, we try to turn back that tide. While like King Canute (who tried to hold back the sea 1,000 years ago) it sometimes seems a lost cause, we provide news and perspectives that kindle an indignant outrage at the problems facing our society—and offer possible and practical solutions.

In the next couple months we will be asking you to help us put *In These Times* in the hands of more readers. To that end, we have initiated the Appeal to Reason

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Campaign, a three-year project to triple our readership. When we began publishing in 1976, we were inspired by the *Appeal to Reason*, a weekly newspaper published out of the tiny town of Girard, Kansas, that played a significant role in the development of the Progressive movement at the turn of the century. The *Appeal* grew to have more than 750,000 subscribers by the early teens. One of the secrets of the paper's success was that like-minded organizations and readers—the "Appeal Army"—played a pivotal role in distributing the paper. Today, there are few organizations to support an independent press. We depend on you. Join our Appeal to Reason Campaign (see page 21). Do it for Tinky Winky. J.B.

The Lost World

By Ted Kleine

CHICAGO

To the homeless men who lived there, Lower Wacker Drive was known as the "Lost World." A subterranean boulevard that winds beneath the Loop, Lower Wacker has been a popular sleeping spot for the city's down and out since the '20s. "It was a safe haven," says Elmo "Joe" Shelby, who lived for two years in the Lost World. "It's like a family there, and plus you didn't have to worry about the rain and the snow."

In January, the homeless' 70-year lease on Lower Wacker expired. The city locked the gates on fences that enclose the sidewalks and moved many of the street's 80 residents into shelters. Carl Brown, an 11-year-member of the "Lower Wacker Crew," thinks it's no coincidence that his eviction day came only two-and-a-half weeks before the Feb. 23 city elections. He says Mayor Richard M. Daley "got good publicity for getting people housing. [The city] claims they're gonna get people apartments, but it hasn't happened yet."

To Shelby, the closing of the gates was the culmination of a long campaign to shuffle him and his buddies off Lower Wacker. When police swept through in December 1997, "They threw all our stuff away," he says. Last fall, the city put up black iron fences along the sidewalks and police began warning the homeless that their time in the Lost World was almost up. According to Brown, "a cop said, 'Your days are numbered.' He was joyous."

The Lower Wacker eviction is part of a nationwide trend of treating people who sleep on the streets as criminals. In its report "Out of Site—Out of Mind?" the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty found an increasing meanness in the homeless policies of 50 major cities. In the past two years, the report says, 36 percent of the cities initiated "aggressive, intense enforcement" of anti-homeless laws. Forty-eight percent ordered police sweeps—"targeted removal of homeless people from particular areas of the city."

San Francisco, well-known for its large homeless population, has declared traditional sleeping sites off-limits. To get the homeless out of Golden Gate Park, the police department used a helicopter with heat-seeking equipment to spot people "jungling up" under bushes and trees. In January, cops swept through United Nations and Hallidae plazas, confiscating shopping carts. The homeless have been slapped with \$76 tickets for camping, blocking sidewalks, loitering and being in parks after hours. If they can't pay, they're often issued bench warrants and hauled off to jail.



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It's a modern version of debtors' prison. "San Francisco is very liberal toward peasants in El Salvador—it hates poor people in its own town," says Paul Boden of the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness.

Ironically, many of the homeless' woes are due to America's prosperous economy. The minimum wage has not kept pace with booming housing prices in big cities, and, as a result, there are more working homeless than ever before. A seedy flophouse room in San Francisco now costs \$500 a month, more than half the earnings of a minimum-wage worker. And every year, there's less cheap housing: In 1998, the city saw 1,200 evictions by owners who wanted to convert their buildings into chi-chi housing for yuppies rediscovering city life.

When Atlanta hosted the 1996 Olympics, the city tried to sweep its unsightly homeless population away from the eyes of the world by offering one-way bus tickets out of town. Those who wouldn't go Greyhound were jailed under newly enacted ordinances against begging and hanging out in parking lots. In the year before the games, more than 9,000 homeless were arrested.

Once the homeless had been frightened away, the city and the business community were determined to keep them out. In 1997, the Atlanta City Council passed an "urban camping" ordinance, making it a crime to sleep, lie down or store personal property in a park. "If you're lying down in Piedmont Park after a picnic and a hearty meal, you will not be arrested for urban camping," says Gerry Weber of the ACLU, which has sued Atlanta to strike down the ordinance. "The police are specifically targeting areas where the homeless find a place to stay." The suit is currently in settlement negotiations, and the city is considering revising the law.

But Atlanta police now have so many ordinances in their arsenal that they can arrest any homeless person, anywhere, for any reason. The sweeps are worst during big media events like the World Series. "There's a menu of ordinances that is used periodically," says Anita Beaty, executive director of the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, "and it rarely has anything to do with behavior."

In Chicago, 39 members of the Lower Wacker Crew have a temporary home at Haymarket House, a substance abuse center that provides a minimum of 30 days of primary treatment, though the men can stay as long as they want if they meet the criteria. Upon leaving, they may be referred to halfway houses or a city-run transitional housing program.

The city has set aside \$120,000 for initial care of the Lower Wacker Crew. The money is expected to last two months, but Haymarket President Ray Soucek is talking with city officials about increasing funds. In addition, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless has asked the business owners along Lower Wacker—who requested the gating of the