

# The Washington Monthly Journalism Award

OCTOBER 1996

## REYNOLDS HOLDING Accusations of Prison Coverup *San Francisco Chronicle*

*It's a tale that has everything: death, violence, government cover-ups, a high-speed car chase, early morning visits from the FBI. No, it's not an episode of "The X-Files"; it's an account of the how the California Department of Corrections came under investigation for allegedly attempting to block a federal investigation into criminal wrongdoing at Corcoran State Prison.*

*Holding's report reveals how prison guards at Corcoran, one of the nation's most violent facilities, were orchestrating fights among inmates from rival gangs, then shooting prisoners who failed to stop fighting—often with fatal results. More significant, however, is how the agency first ignored reports of the abuse, then tried to prevent a corrections officer from turning over the information to the FBI. A possible reason for the agency's reluctance to investigate: The corrections department frequently cites inmate violence at facilities such as Corcoran as a justification for increased funding.*

## ALISON YOUNG & WENDY WENDLAND Who Cares? (Five-part series) *Detroit Free Press*

*With the graying of America, the nation's elder care system is bracing for a massive influx of seniors. This five-part series by the Detroit Free Press examines the current state of Michigan's nursing home system, what is being done to improve the quality of care, and some of the major barriers to that improvement. Among other problems, reporter Alison Young finds that state and federal regulators often behave more like industry lapdogs than watchdogs, having repeatedly "watered down rules, declared moratoriums on fines, changed definitions and retrained inspectors in response to industry criticism."*

a good relationship."

If money has anything to do with friendship, then the union has a good relationship with a lot of people. On January 24, NYSUT gave \$27,990 to Democratic committees and \$15,200 to GOP committees. On March 12, it gave \$11,000 to the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee and \$25,000 to the New York State Senate Republican Campaign Committee. On March 15, NYSUT even gave Doran \$150. (The contribution was news to Doran, who between laughs said he can only figure the money was for a ticket to a March fundraiser. "I have no idea why they would do that," he says.)

Rosenblatt says the union's money is not just to fight changes in tenure laws but also for other issues teachers care about, like getting more dollars for education, keeping class sizes small, and keeping schools safe for kids. She admits that the union has done what it can to choke off tenure reform, "Remember you are dealing with a profession with tremendous political pressures. There have to be some protections." If a good teacher is pressured not to teach *Huckleberry Finn* or forced to teach creationism, it's good to know tenure is there to support them, she says. Rosenblatt has a point. Any serious reform must make clear that ineptitude is cause for firing, but a difference of opinion is not. That way, if a zealous school board tries to fire a teacher because he wants to teach Mark Twain or Charles Darwin, the teacher can file suit. After all, the overwhelming majority of teachers out there are good at what they do and can easily defend themselves in such cases. And surely all that union money could help the few good apples that get unjustly dismissed.

New York's legislative session is over. Doran has been talking to the union and is planning to introduce his bill again next session with some revisions, including one that would make it illegal for a district to fire an older teacher simply because his or her salary is too high. He is hopeful the bill will move this time.

### Small Steps

Sean Duffy is hopeful too. As press secretary for Pennsylvania's Department of Education, he has seen some incremental changes in teacher laws despite the efforts of teacher unions. Last year, Pennsylvania took a small step forward by passing a bill that lengthened from two years to three the time required to obtain tenure. Duffy is not ready to claim victory yet—not even close—but he says the change is a positive step against a force with a lot of money and a lot of friends on both sides of the aisle. "This is not a Democrat or Republican issue. It's about who wants

to change the way these things operate and who doesn't," he says. "The state's NEA affiliate is the biggest or second-biggest PAC in terms of giving in every election and they are always throwing a monkey wrench into things."

Last year the union threw a monkey wrench into the state's next big reform project, a bill like Doran's that would require recertification every five years. The bill never made it out of committee. "The education committee chairs in both parties are basically the same person," Duffy says. "The trick is making one talk while the other drinks water." Education committee chairmen are well taken care of in Pennsylvania, a state with no limits on campaign contributions. In total, the four chairpeople grabbed about \$14,000 from the teachers' unions to aid their reelection efforts in 1996. That doesn't sound like a lot until you consider two of them were unopposed, one faced no major party opposition, and the fourth does not even have to run until 1998.

Despite everything stacked against his cause, Duffy has not lost faith. He believes that the people entering the state house today are a different breed than their forebears—more committed to reform, more willing to take a stand. As proof, he cites the tenure changes made just last year in Pennsylvania. He may be right, but even if he is, can it last? It will be interesting to see what happens when those young Turks face a couple of tight races and need money to bail themselves out. Self-preservation is a strong instinct. It can send politicians to some strange places for help, sometimes even the arms of their enemies.

It can also make candidates resort to deceptive half-truths, in the hopes of winning a few more votes—which brings us back to Dole.

Looking back, his attempt to make teacher unions a national campaign issue was more than a little ironic. The candidate of the party of devolution was discussing a problem he could not have controlled even if he had been elected—a problem already devolved to, and entrenched at, the state level.

It's stranger still when you realize that the teacher union issue may actually be one of the best arguments against devolution. If there is any lesson from teacher-law reform efforts, it is that a well-organized lobby has an easier time running over a small money-hungry governmental body than it does a large one. As devolution chic grows, we may discover the protracted and ineffectual battles over tenure reform in the past few years are just the beginning. They may replay themselves in the future on a host of other issues. That's not just ironic, it's sad. ●

NOVEMBER 1996

PETER ELKIND  
The Number Crunchers  
*Fortune*

*When it comes to the lottery business, luck has nothing to do with winning. Nor does success depend entirely upon skill, reveals Elkind in his investigation of the world's leading lottery vendor, Gtech. While this Rhode Island-based company is arguably the industry's most skilled and efficient operator, having turned state-sponsored gambling into a "modern, efficient, and hugely lucrative" venture, it allegedly has made heavy use of political cronyism, palm-greasing, and corporate kickbacks to destroy its competitors and cement its dominance of the international market.*

GLENN FRANKEL,  
STEVEN MUFSON &  
JAMES RUPERT  
Big Tobacco's Global Reach  
(Four-part series)  
*The Washington Post*

*With U.S. cigarette consumption on the decline and anti-smoking sentiments raging, tobacco companies have been working for more than a decade to expand overseas sales. The Post's four-part series details tobacco's crusade to penetrate markets throughout Asia and Eastern Europe, including the resultant anti-smoking backlash in Thailand that spurred a tobacco control movement in Asia. In the disturbing opening piece, reporter Glenn Frankel examines the U.S. government's role in helping the industry pry open tough-to-penetrate markets in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. During the Reagan and Bush administrations, writes Frankel, "[while] one arm of the government was warning Americans about the dangers of smoking, another was helping the industry recruit a new generation of smokers abroad."*

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THE MONTHLY JOURNALISM AWARD is presented each month to one or more newspaper, magazine, radio, or television stories (or series of stories) that demonstrate a commitment to the public interest. We are particularly interested in reporting that explains the successes and failures of government agencies at all levels and of other institutions such as the media, corporations, unions, and foundations that contribute to the existence or solution of public problems. Please send nominations (including two copies of the article or broadcast text) to Monthly Journalism Award, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009. Fax: 202 332-8413. Nominations for stories run in December and January are due February 2.

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# Muzzling a Watchdog

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*What happened when the General Accounting Office tried to take on a politically wired foundation*

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BY DAVID CORN

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HE INDEPENDENT WATCHDOG OF Congress. That's the impressive-sounding catch phrase often used to describe the General Accounting Office (GAO), the nonpartisan government outfit that conducts hundreds of investigations a year for the legislators of Capitol Hill. Its 2,500 evaluators investigate subjects ranging from acquisition problems at the Pentagon to the efficiency of penny manufacturing at the U.S. Mint, and they often do a good job. Readers of *The Washington Monthly* are well aware of the GAO's importance—and of the need for an objective evaluator of government programs that is immune to political pressures and bureaucratic power plays.

Yet the independence of the GAO was challenged recently when it dared to question the existence of a small, obscure, government-financed foundation that happens to be a personal favorite of major players across Washington. What happened doesn't constitute a major scandal. But if the GAO softpedaled a report for political reasons, that ought to worry any citizen concerned about government accountability.

Several years ago, the House Foreign Affairs Committee asked the GAO to look into the proliferation of pro-democracy programs run by federal agencies. With the end of the Cold War, the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), the U.S. Information Agency, the Pentagon, and others were each grabbing for a piece of this growth industry. One small but significant participant in the pro-democracy field has been the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which receives up to \$50 million a year from Congress and disburses these federal funds to

organizations supposedly promoting democracy in foreign lands. Most of its money is funneled to four "core grantees"—the international arms of the Democratic and Republican parties, the AFL-CIO, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

With this quartet of politically wired organizations as the prime beneficiaries of the NED, influential people throughout the capitol have a vital stake in the foundation. To say the NED is well connected is an understatement. Its board members and supporters include such political luminaries as Richard Lugar, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Walter Mondale, John McCain, and Jeanne Kirkpatrick.

Using NED dollars, the core grantees and other recipients conduct assorted activities, from worthy projects like how-to-register-voters seminars in newly democratic nations, to more questionable exercises like flying operatives and consultants to fancy overseas hotels for conferences. Managed since its creation by a small band of neoconservatives who use government funds to wage their own foreign policy, the foundation bears a troublesome past. It has assisted groups with agendas other than the promotion of democracy, such as a thuggish far-right outfit in France and a Costa Rican policy institute that schemed to unseat an elected president. Past government audits have found lax financial management. In other words, the foundation could use a little outside inspection.

In 1993, a team of General Accounting Office evaluators began studying the crazy quilt of federal democracy programs, and subsequently they divvied up the project into portions. One was to be a review of the NED. "The GAO was so appalled by the lack of oversight at NED and other matters that it wanted to issue a separate report on NED," says a former foundation official. "This made people at NED very nervous. They

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DAVID CORN is the Washington editor of *The Nation*.