

## *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

*(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")*



February 01, 2014

# **HENRY WAXMAN: FIRST (AND LAST) IN HIS CLASS**

*This week, California Representative Henry Waxman announced that after 40 years in office, he would be retiring. Waxman was a member of the fabled "Watergate Class" of 1974 -- 91 freshmen who first won seats in the political aftermath of the granddaddy of all White House scandals. Waxman's class, which included such future notables as Chris Dodd, Henry Hyde, Tom Harkin, Charles Grassley, Max Baucus, Abner Mikva and Stephen Solarz, was made up of 75 Democrats and 15 Republicans. He is the last member of the class of '74 in the House. A legislator of exceptional range and accomplishment, Henry was, for many years, my family's representative in Congress.*

*What follows, is Henry's (slightly updated) entry in my 2011 book "The Jews of Capitol Hill."*

When Angelinos mention “The Westside” they are referring to the place that folks from Plattsburgh to Peoria call Hollywood or “Tinseltown.” In truth, Hollywood, the “Entertainment Capital of the World,” doesn't really exist. While there certainly *is* a section of Los Angeles called “Hollywood,” it has only in recent years begun emerging from a decades' long state of decline. For nearly a generation, Hollywood and Vine, the crossroads of a mythic world of glitz and glamour, stood at the eastern end of a rather seedy, rundown shopping area. Over the past decade-and-a-half, the downtown shopping area has been staging a comeback. And although the original studios – created mostly by Jewish immigrants possessing what one writer termed “little ancestral experience of America” – are long gone, Hollywood still houses auxiliary industries that engage in editing, special effects, props, post-production, lighting and of course, the backlot of Paramount Pictures.

Legally, Hollywood is part of Los Angeles, and does not have its own municipal government. Its one official isn't even elected by the people; he's appointed by the Chamber of Commerce. From 1980 until his death in January 2008 that official was



Johnny Grant (1923-2008), the honorary “Mayor of Hollywood.” For nearly 30 years it was Mayor Grant who would preside over the dedication of every new star on the town's “Walk of Fame,” and cut every ribbon for every old theatre made new -- every new property made retro. This was and is Hollywood – not “The Westside.”

The Westside is part and parcel of the 33rd (formerly 30<sup>th</sup>) Congressional District. This district is, in the words of the *Almanac of American Politics* (2008 edition), “shorthand for what might be the biggest and flashiest concentration of affluence in the world.” Made up of the upper-income enclaves of Beverly Hills, Los Felix, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, and Hancock Park, the largely Jewish Fairfax section, and the singles and gays of Santa Monica and West Hollywood, the Westside has gone through explosive change. For in addition to all the showbiz types, it has become metro Los Angeles’s “biggest office center.” The vast majority of folks who work in all these offices cannot afford to live anywhere nearby. In 2009 the *median* price of a home for sale had dramatically dropped to only \$775,000, a new home to \$1.2 million. On The Westside it is not all that uncommon for people to buy houses for multiples of \$1 million, “knock down the structure and build something new for more millions.” It also contains one of the world’s premier high-priced shopping areas: Rodeo Drive, which was once an ordinary shopping street. The Westside has long been the most solidly Democratic and liberal part of Southern California; over the past decade its Cook Partisan Voting Index has ranged from D+20 to D+11. (In 2000 people in the then 30th district cast only 28% of its votes for George W. Bush; in 2004, 33%; in 2008 70% for Obama; in 2012, the newly-formed 33rd district cast 64% of its votes for Obama.) The people of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District “probably contribute more money to Democratic candidates and liberal causes than any other district in the country.” It is also the home of one of the ablest, most influential – and least prepossessing – members of Congress of the past three generations: Henry Arnold Waxman.



Not quite five and a half feet tall, balding, with a toothy grin and a quiet, almost shy demeanor, Henry Waxman is the antithesis of Southern California glamour and glitter. Few articles on Waxman fail to mention that “The hometown congressman for the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard has never been to the Academy Awards.” When asked why, he explains, “It’s such a long night. When I watch it on TV, I can get a snack.” Ask him to name a hobby, and all you get is silence. Yet, ever since 1974, he has been regularly reelected by such large majorities that he has a hard time remembering who his opponents are. Waxman’s formula for the extraordinary success he has experienced, both at home and in Congress, is simple: hard work, knowing the issues and parliamentary procedure better than anyone else; a genius for fundraising, and a great deal of patience, persistence, and perspicacity. He is also, despite his appearance and demeanor, as tough as nails. “When I first came on the Budget Committee years ago I thought Henry’s first name was ‘sonuvabitch,’” his friend and longtime colleague Rep. George Miller once said. (**Note:** *Miller, also a member of the Watergate Class of '74, announced his retirement earlier this month.*) “Everybody who had to deal with [him] kept saying, ‘Do you know what that sonuvabitch Waxman wants now?’”

Henry Waxman, the son of Louis and Esther (Silverman) Waxman, was born in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles on September 12, 1939. From the end of World War I through the end of World War II, Boyle Heights was *the* Jewish working-class neighborhood of Los Angeles. The Waxmans and the Silvermans had originally come to America from Bessarabia (Moldova), shortly after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. The Waxmans came to Los Angeles in the early 1920s by way of Montreal, and the Silvermans at about the same time via Pittsburgh. As a child, Henry Waxman heard his grandparents' horrifying tales about "how the Anti-Semites would come into town and destroy property, beat people up, threaten their lives. . . . They were younger people, so they could just pick up and leave . . . but they suffered." Waxman credits these memories with spurring his lifelong concern for the poor and the powerless.

Of his parents, Henry Waxman writes: "My father, Lou Waxman, was the most political person I knew, and my mother, Esther was not far behind." Lou and Esther were both staunch Democrats. One of the young Henry's most vivid childhood memories was "going to bed on the night of the 1948 election and waking up the next morning to find my parents still huddled around the radio listening to the news that Harry Truman had won." Waxman also recalls that as a child, his mother "encouraged him to wear an Adlai Stevenson button to school, even though the teachers made him remove it."

When Henry and his sister Miriam were still quite young, the Waxmans moved to Los Angeles' South-Central District (Watts), where the family lived above Lou's grocery store at 80th Street and Avalon Boulevard; Lou was "a proud member of the Retail Clerks Union #770." Since there were no synagogues in South Central, Henry attended afternoon Hebrew school at the Conservative Huntington Park Hebrew Congregation, where he became *bar mitzvah* in 1952. He went to Fremont High School where, he recalls, "I was in a minority - both as a Caucasian and as a Jew." Following his graduation in 1957, the family moved once more; this time to the Jewish Beverly-Fairfax area, which has remained Henry Waxman's political base ever since.

While still in high school, Waxman worked as a volunteer in local political campaigns. The Waxman name was already known in Westside political circles; his father's brother, Al Waxman, was both "a fiery liberal" and the founder and publisher of the *East Side Journal*, one of only two liberal newspapers in the Los Angeles area. After World War II, when the LA Jewish community moved to the Fairfax area, Al closed down the *East Side Journal* and began publishing a new paper for a new neighborhood: the *LA Reporter*, was commonly referred to as the "Waxman Report."

Henry Waxman attended UCLA, where he majored in political science. During his undergraduate years, he became involved with the California Federation of Young Democrats, a network of clubs that specialized in political debate and lobbying for influence in party circles. Upon receiving his bachelor's degree in 1961, he enrolled in the UCLA Law School, from which he received his J.D. in 1964. From 1964 to 1965, the

young attorney served as president of the Young Democrats: "We were considered way-out radicals at the time . . . we came out with resolutions endorsing a test-ban treaty, recognition of Red China and disbanding the House Un-American Activities Committee." (**Note:** *This is when I first encountered Henry Waxman; as a teenager, I was an active member of the North Hollywood Young Democrats . . .*)

More importantly, as president, Waxman made friends with a group of young politicians who together would change the face of California politics: Howard Berman and his brother Michael, John Burton, Willie Brown, and David Roberti. Howard Berman and John Burton went on to become members of Congress; Willie Brown became the California Assembly's powerful Speaker and mayor of San Francisco; Roberti, a savvy state senator.

After practicing law for three years, Waxman ran for the California State Assembly. Searching for a district from which to run, he decided to take on twenty-eight-year veteran Lester McMillan, who was "losing touch with the voters." Waxman entered the race as a distinct outsider, challenging "not only an incumbent but his own family," for



the *LA Reporter*, his uncle Al's paper had long supported McMillan, and would continue to do so in this race as well. Aided by his friends Howard and Michael Berman and hundreds of volunteers from the ranks of the Federation of Young Democrats, Waxman polled 64% in the Democratic primary vote, and then coasted to victory in the general election.

The key to victory lay in Waxman and Berman's then-novel use of differentiated political mailings. Michael Berman was given charge of the mailing strategy. Howard Elinson (1940-2005), a UCLA classmate who had become a professor of sociology, "helped develop the message." (Elinson would spend 27 years as Henry Waxman's Administrative Assistant – six of those in the California Assembly.) The differentiated mailing strategy called for "seniors to get one letter from Waxman addressing their concerns, while middle-class homeowners . . . got another." Today, this technique, called direct mail, is a well-accepted tool in all phases of political campaigning; in 1968, this "intersection of politics and technology" was just a glint in the eye of Michael Berman. With Henry Waxman's victory a political career was born; it also marked the beginning of a political alliance which, to a great extent continues to this very day.

The California State Assembly has long been a fluid institution, where freshman and sophomore members often chair important committees. At the beginning of his second Assembly term, Waxman chose the right side in the fight for Speaker, which went to San Fernando Valley-area Assemblyman Bob Moretti. In thanks for his support, Moretti

(1936-1984) named Waxman chair of the Assembly's redistricting committee, charged with "redrawing California's congressional districts to reflect the demographics of the 1970 census." As chair, Waxman hired Michael Berman to be his "right-hand man." And, because his district was home to an especially large elderly population, Waxman decided that health policy would be a good field in which to specialize. He pushed for – and received – chairmanship of the Health Committee.

During his first term in Sacramento, Waxman married Janet Kessler, the cousin of old friends from UCLA. Kessler, originally from Brooklyn, had moved to Los Angeles as a small child, where she was raised in the predominantly Jewish Fairfax section. When the two married, on October 17, 1971, the neighborhood newspaper ran the headline "Local Assemblyman weds Fairfax Grad." To the native Angelino, this could only mean one thing: the Assemblyman had married a Jew. The new Mrs. Waxman had a daughter, Carol, from a previous marriage. The couple later had a child together, Michael.

In 1972, Henry Waxman helped his old friend Howard Berman win a seat in the Assembly. Thus was born the Waxman-Berman Machine, a "network of liberal politicians who pool their resources, including sophisticated computer technology and campaign coffers, overflowing with contributions from wealthy southern Californians, to help elect like-minded candidates to state and national office." Over the years, the machine would grow to include Congressmen Mel Levine, Tony Beilenson, and Julian Dixon, and Howard's brother Michael, who served as their technical wizard.

In early 1974 Henry and Janet Waxman, needing "a little more grounding" and feeling that his Assembly seat was "more or less secure," decided to purchase a home in Sacramento. On the very day they moved in, the California Supreme Court released its redistricting map, "which made it clear that I'd win my next Assembly race easily." It also made clear that if he wished, Waxman could win the local State Senate Seat or even the newly redrawn Twenty-fourth District Congressional seat. Henry and Janet decided on the latter and quickly sold their new home. Waxman began lining up endorsements and convincing other potential candidates not to enter the race. He succeeded. Making judicious use of the Waxman-Berman computer lists and \$95,000 in campaign contributions, Waxman was elected with 64% of the vote. He has been reelected ever since; in his 19 reelection races his *average* margin of victory was 70.2%.

In 1978, after languishing in relative obscurity for two terms, Henry Waxman took the bold and unprecedented step of challenging a senior member for chairmanship of a subcommittee. Setting his sights on the House Energy and Commerce Committee's powerful Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, Waxman waged an all-out effort to defeat North Carolina Democrat Richardson Preyer. Preyer (1919-2001), "a popular and highly respected former federal judge," (and grandson of the man who

invented 'Vicks VapoRub') not only outranked Waxman; he also had the backing of the Democratic leadership.

In his effort to become subcommittee chair, Waxman contributed some \$24,000 to the campaign coffers of ten Democratic members of the Energy and Commerce Committee, a practice generally observed by only senior members of Congress. (During his years in Congress, Waxman has contributed well over \$1 million to his colleague's campaign coffers – money that comes largely from his wealthy Westside constituents.) Waxman was also quick to point out that Preyer “represented a tobacco-growing state, favored tobacco subsidies and opposed anti-smoking measures, and that Preyer's family had substantial holdings in a large pharmaceutical company (Richardson Vicks), setting up a potential conflict-of-interest problem.” Waxman's bold scheme worked; he was elected subcommittee chair by a final vote of 15 to 12. It was the first time in the history of the institution that someone had won a subcommittee chairmanship out of the line of seniority. Waxman was accused of buying his subcommittee chairmanship, but insisted otherwise: “California officer-holders have been doing it for years. That's how the Democrats won a majority in the state assembly.” Writing about this event in his 2009 book *The Waxman Report*, he noted:

*“The widespread view of money's role in politics is simply that it's bad. But rather than think of it as 'good' or 'bad,' it's more useful to think of money as a political fact of life, and to develop a realist's understanding of how it flows and influences the business of Washington. Money is as important to the substantive work of congress as a bill or an election. Everything intertwines.”*



Waxman continued chairing the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment until the Republicans took back the House in 1994. During his 16 years as subcommittee chair, Waxman was at the center of some of Congress's most crucial legislation. Over many years Waxman became the House's acknowledged expert on health-care and environmental issues. He fought for expanded health-care coverage, increased funding for AIDS research, and stringent measures for protecting the air we breathe and the water we drink. His “legislative fingerprints” were all over the Radon Abatement Act and the Lead Contamination Act. He was also pivotal in improving the quality of nursing home care, bringing down prices for prescription drugs, and helping make available otherwise unprofitable “orphan” drugs for rare diseases. In early 1994 he lined up the chief executive officers of the leading tobacco companies and accused them of “adding nicotine and other substances to cigarettes and of lying in their testimony.” Eventually, he “helped inspire” the lawsuits against tobacco companies which have



resulted in “the biggest redistribution of corporate assets – from the tobacco companies to state government and trial lawyers – in history.” In 2009 he successfully reintroduced a bill he had been pushing for many years; one that would give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the power to regulate tobacco products. The bill was signed into law by President Barack Obama in June 2009.

A master of parliamentary procedure, Waxman learned early on how to stall bills that did not meet with his approval. Case in point: the 1981 battle over reauthorization of the Clean Air Act of 1970. Waxman, along with a host of environmental groups, favored keeping the act largely intact. The Reagan administration, backed by a coalition of the automobile, coal, and steel industries, public utilities companies, and House Energy and Commerce Committee chair Michigan Democrat “Big John” Dingell (He’s 6’ 3” and has been in Congress since 1954), sought to “significantly relax the act’s provisions on automobile emission standards and its rules barring new industry in clean-air zones.”

The bill’s first stop was Waxman’s Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, where he initiated an ingenious set of stalling tactics until public opinion about its revision might be changed. In addition to holding hearings that promised to go on *ad nauseum*, Waxman one day entered the committee room wheeling a shopping cart containing more than 600 amendments. He insisted that the committee clerk read the entire text of each amendment, and barred the committee (as was his right) from holding afternoon sessions. Waxman was able to stall successfully for more than fifteen months, until public sentiment shifted toward strengthening the Clean Air Act.

Eventually, even Chairman Dingell relented. Knowing that he had little chance of passing a weakened act, Dingell adjourned the committee. *Washington Post* writer Michael Barone noted that “Waxman maneuvered and delayed masterfully, preventing action until he had the votes to win. He proved himself to be one of the shrewdest legislators in Congress – and one of the most powerful.”

Waxman, who represents a district with a large gay population (at one point, West Hollywood and its surrounding neighborhoods had a higher per-capita AIDS rate than New York or San Francisco) was instrumental in passing the first comprehensive federal legislation dealing with AIDS. The bill established “a \$1 billion program [including] appropriations for anonymous testing, home health care, research, counseling, and education.” During hearings on the bill, California Republican Representative William Dannemeyer tried to scuttle Waxman’s proposal extending anti-discrimination protection to people with the fatal disease. Dannemeyer, a conservative protector of family values who served in the House from 1979-1993, suggested that “many of these individuals brought the disease on themselves and [do] not deserve special treatment.” Waxman, who is normally a soft-spoken individual, grabbed his microphone and made the caustic remark that “anyone making such an argument was speaking like a supreme being.” As a hush fell over the committee room,



Waxman, looking directly at his Republican colleague, said, "I don't see any supreme beings on this committee." (**Note:** *the now 84-year old Dannenmeyer believes that Jews are trying to take over the world, or according to his website, "The main goal of the Zionist Jews and their New World Order is exactly the same as it was when Jesus was on earth – to exterminate Christ – and His followers!" His article is linked to by [his wife's website](#), which openly states that the Holocaust is a plan by Jews "to destroy all nations, control the entire world, slaughter most of the population of the earth, and reduce the rest to slaves."*)

Waxman has been instrumental in writing laws to provide health-care coverage for children, the poor, and the aged. "I believe that government has a responsibility to help those people who are otherwise going to be unprotected," he told writers from the *National Journal*. "Without basic health care, housing, education and the basic necessities of life, I think we're denying people an [equal] opportunity."

When Republicans won control of the House in 1994, Waxman gave up his post as ranking member on the Health Subcommittee in order to become ranking Democrat on the Government Reform Committee. Largely shut out of any significant role in passing – let alone shaping – legislation, he spent the next 12 years concentrating on holding his own separate investigative hearings on a host of issues. "When the Republicans excluded me and other Democrats from legislating, we had to figure out something else to do. So we did our own investigations." In this position Waxman acted first as one of President Clinton's chief defenders – against scandal charges brought by Chairman Dan Burton (R-IN) who had "given himself unprecedented subpoena power" – and then as one of the chief critics of the Bush Administration. He held investigative hearings on Vice President Dick Cheney's relationship with Halliburton, and uncovered State Department documents showing that the firm's employees had "tried to extract bribes for fuel contracts." He also turned his investigative spotlight on the use of steroids in major league baseball, Republican ties to disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff and the "friendly fire death" of former NFL player and Army Ranger Pat Tillman in Afghanistan and the subsequent Defense Department coverup.

At the end of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress – November 2008 – Waxman played David to John Dingell's Goliath: he launched a bid to topple Dingell as chair of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee – of which Waxman was second in seniority. This committee handles one of the largest portfolios in the House, including "climate change, oversight of energy, trade, telecommunications, Medicare and Medicaid, and consumer protections." Aided by Democrats who were displeased with Dingell's environmental stances – he represents an auto-manufacturing district – and a publicly neutral Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Waxman won 137-122. (Waxman then announced that he was naming Dingell "Chairman Emeritus.") As the new chair of Energy and Commerce, Waxman joined Education and Labor Chair George Miller (D-CA) and Ways and Means Chair Charles Rangel (D-NY) in putting together the House Democrats health reform bill. Rather than write three separate bills, Waxman

convinced his colleagues to write a “tri-committee” piece of legislation. Their bill – estimated to cost in excess of \$1 trillion – included a mandate that “all Americans obtain health insurance with discounts for those who can’t afford it . . . [and] require[d] employers to provide health insurance to their employees or face a stiff fine equal to a percentage of payroll.” Their bill also included the controversial public health insurance option that was hotly debated in the summer of 2009. Waxman had a natural in with the Obama White House: Phil Schiliro, his former longtime (1982-2008) chief of staff was by this point White House Director of Congressional Relations.

The second month that Waxman was in Congress (1974), he made his first trip to Israel with a delegation from the House Armed Services Committee. The junket's purpose was to “look at some of the military equipment that Israel had captured from the Arab countries in the '73 [Yom Kippur] war.” Although Waxman was not a member of the committee, its chairman, Illinois Democrat Melvin Price, gave the freshman legislator permission to come along. When informed that the junket would also be making stops in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Waxman “hurriedly [got] together a visa application.” It “asked not only your religion but some documentation to prove you are what you are.” Waxman sent an aide to Washington's Adas Israel Synagogue (of which the Waxmans are active members) to get a letter on their stationery saying that he was Jewish and that his mother was Jewish.

The Saudis turned his visa application down on the grounds of his religion. In a 1992 interview Waxman recalled that at the time, “I was astounded because prominent Jews by that point had been admitted to Saudi Arabia, including the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger.” Waxman took his outrage to Armed Services Committee Chair Price (1905-1988). He expected Price to take the attitude “that none of them [the committee members] would go to Saudi Arabia unless I would go.” Instead, Price's response was, “Oh yeah, you may not be able to go. . . . They've had this law for a long time.” Incensed, Waxman exploded and told the chairman, “I'm not going as a member of the Jewish community; I'm going as a member of the United States Congress.” Waxman put pressure on the State Department, which finally got the Saudis to agree to let him make his visit.

While in Saudi Arabia, Waxman and members of the committee met with the soon-to-be-assassinated King Faisal, who handed out copies of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Waxman recalls the king being “a very sinister and mean-looking man . . . and he had these guards around him all the time with daggers or knives in holsters. It was sort of a menacing experience.”

When it got to the question-and-answer session “nobody asked him [King Faisal] any tough questions.” Finally Waxman, steeling up his courage, said, “Your Highness, we're pleased to be in your country. It's certainly the heart of the Islamic world because of Mecca and Medina. The Arab people have a number of countries. Do you foresee ever,

under any circumstances, coexisting with one Jewish country in the Middle East?" Faisal got extremely agitated.

Continuing his train of thought, Waxman then asked, "Since you made the distinction between Jews and Zionists, why do you prohibit Jews to come into your country?" Faisal angrily explained to Waxman that "Jews are our enemies. They're friends of our enemies, and friends of our enemies are our enemies. . . . Palestine is an Arab country. Jews can live there, but only with Palestine as an Arab country." Waxman recalled that his give-and-take with King Faisal had the effect of "shocking [his] colleagues, because that was not the view they were getting from a lot of people [who] were giving them a different analysis of the Middle East."

Henry and Janet Waxman are practicing Conservative Jews. They keep a kosher home, observe Shabbat, and for years met twice a month with other members of the Jewish Caucus for a study session. Waxman is, except under the most pressing of circumstances, unavailable from sundown Friday until sunset Saturday. The Waxmans sent both their children to Hebrew day school in Washington. He is also the only



member of Congress to have a sabra for a grandchild. Their daughter Carol made aliyah after college (Brandeis), changed her name to Shai, and married Ricky Abramson, a Canadian *oleh* who changed his name to Raki. Shai is Founder of "[Shai Abramson Strategic Consulting LTD](#)," whose stated aim is "To strengthen the people of Israel through effective philanthropy." She and Raki are the parents of the Waxman's three grandchildren: Ari Barak, Maya Gavriella and

No'a Lillie. Son Michael, also a graduate of Brandeis, is a Vice President in the Washington offices of Hyde Park Communications, where he specializes in health care communications. Janet Kessler was a founding member of Congressional Wives for Soviet Jewry, and has worked actively on behalf of Syrian Jewry. Waxman remembers that in the early days of the Soviet Jewry committee, his wife would host get-togethers at their home, where participants would place calls to Jewish refuseniks in Russia. In 1987, the Waxmans went on a political junket to Syria. Visiting the Jewish quarter of Damascus on Shabbat, they were met by the neighborhood's Jewish residents, who took Mrs. Waxman into their homes and voiced their grave concerns.

Throughout his long Congressional career, Henry Waxman has been one of the House Democrats most visible faces. It seems like hardly a night goes by when he is not seen on the evening news. Feared by some, respected by all, he has been, from day one, a champion of liberal causes. He has not always been immediately successful. As a colleague once remarked, "At the beginning of every year, he'll ask for the sky. And

when he gets only the moon instead of the whole sky, he still ends up getting more than most legislators get in ten years.”

In August 2009 Henry Waxman published *The Waxman Report*, subtitled *How Congress Really Works*. Named after the nickname his Uncle Al’s newspaper carried so many years ago, this *Waxman Report* dealt with many of the issues and laws that have consumed the congressman over the years: The Ryan White Act, The Orphan Drug Act and The Clean Air Act. The book’s dust jacket contains a series of quotes or nicknames that have stuck to him over his then thirty-five years on Capitol Hill. The more memorable include “The Moustache of Justice,” “The Democrat’s Eliot Ness,” “A legislative genius,” and, from Ralph Nader, “The best argument against term limits.”

With Henry Waxman's pending retirement, the fabled Watergate Class of 1974 has run its course. It seems only fitting that a man who, in many respects was first in his class, should also be the last . . .

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# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

*(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")*



**February 07, 2014**

## **WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .**

Like many of you, I am a former smoker. And like many of you, I well remember how difficult it was to break the habit once and for all. For the first couple of months, I would do mental math, determining precisely how many hours and days I had been nicotine-free, and then mentally multiplying the number of days by the average price of a pack of cigarettes to see about how much money I had saved. Eventually, it got to the point where one day I realized I hadn't done the mental math for at least a month -- a sign that perhaps, just perhaps, I finally had the addiction licked. Just for old-time's sake I did the math about an hour ago: to



date, I've saved more than enough to purchase a couple of seasons' worth of dugout-level seats at Chavez Ravine, the home of my beloved Los Angeles Dodgers.

During the years I smoked, there were a plethora of brands on the market: Parliament, Chesterfield, Raleigh, Tareyton, Salem, Newport, Lark, Old Gold, L&M, Lucky Strike, English Ovals, Galuloises, Time . . . Seems like I tried 'em all.

All former smokers will likely remember how, after a period of being nicotine-free, we started gradually becoming aware of the permeating aroma of cigarette smoke in rooms, on people's breath and clothing . . . even in their hair. I for one remember thinking "Egad, did I reek this badly? How come I never smelled it before?" Fortunately, opportunities for being gassed and gagged by second-

hand smoke have dramatically declined over the years. There are no longer "smoking sections" in restaurants and on planes; one may not light up at sporting events, in malls or -- in many places -- on beaches. One of the universities where I lecture, Florida International, has become a 100% smoke-free campus; one may not even smoke in their car so long as they are on university grounds. This is a far, far cry from the day when cigarette distributors actually set up tables on campus and gave away free packs of smokes at the University of California. These trends and changes have increasingly marginalized the smokers amongst us . . . and for good reason: smoking can kill you and make other innocent bystanders ill. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), more than 480,000 people die every year from the effects of smoking cigarettes. Moreover, tobacco use in the United States cost more than \$289 billion a year, including at least \$133 billion in direct medical care for adults and more than \$156 billion in lost productivity. According to the CDC the 50 states have billions of dollars available to them—from tobacco excise taxes and tobacco industry legal settlements—for preventing and controlling tobacco use. However, states currently use a very small percentage of these funds for tobacco control programs.

Two days ago, CVS, the nation's second-largest drugstore chain, announced that as of October 1, they will cease selling cigarettes and other tobacco products in all their stores. In its statement, CVS medical officer, Troyen Brennan, said that, "Stopping the sale of cigarettes and tobacco will make a significant difference in reducing the chronic illnesses associated with tobacco use." CVS, of course, isn't the first large retailer to take this step; others chains, such as Target, haven't sold cigarettes years ago. The importance of this move goes beyond saving lives and helping to curb a wickedly addictive habit. In an age where more and more people decry the inability -- and question the very appropriateness -- of government addressing our health needs, CVS' move should be a conservative's dream: corporate America addressing a national healthcare need via the free market. Indeed, it is a breath of fresh smokeless air.

To be certain, there are plenty of folks -- both smokers and the clean-lunged -- who are quick to point out that CVS is, to put it mildly, inconsistent. "If they're so concerned about America's health, why are they going to continue selling sodas, candy bars, junk food, beer and lottery tickets -- all of which are also harmful?" more than one columnist has asked. Indeed, it is an interesting question . . . but beside the point. For contained in this query is a logical fallacy: that unless CVS -- and indeed, every other outlet that stops selling cigarettes -- ceases also selling "sodas, candy bars, junk food beer and lottery tickets," they are just spinning their wheels. In other words, it's all or nothing. And there is the fallacy. How so? Let the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu provide an answer: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

To be certain, CVS' decision is *not* going to cause America to go smokeless; is *not* going to suddenly save 480,000 lives a year. What it *may* do, however, could be even more important: to show corporate America that it -- perhaps more than any government agency, policy or program -- can be effective agents for achieving beneficial, healthful social change.

In his State of the Union address, President Obama spoke at some length about using the power of the Executive Office -- and the so-called "bully pulpit -- to accomplish things that Congress is never going to get behind. Even before the president reached the end of his address, media naysayers were warning against an increasingly dictatorial White House; one bent on avoiding and evading Congress in a mad attempt to enslave America. If they had been listening, they would have heard something far different: a president seeking to bring state and local governments as well as American industry into the Oval Office, in order to achieve things Congress cannot . . . or will not approve. President Obama didn't ask Congress to pass a law that would keep corporations from unfairly weeding out the long-term unemployed in their hiring practices or to appropriate billions for wifi in America's public schools. Rather, he used his bully pulpit to gather some of America's most powerful corporate leaders together and then get them to sign on to his proposals. The president has also spent a lot of time discussing the necessity and practicality of raising the minimum wage not with members of Congress, but with, again, captains of industry. And, he has gotten a firm commitment from high-tech companies to help make his universal wifi vision a reality. When you get down to it, this is about the last thing one would ever expect from a president who is regularly called "Marxist," "Leninist," and "socialist." If he were any of these, he would be forcing the government to do his bidding -- instead of sipping tea with the heads Apple, EBay and 21st Century Fox.

It's kind of like what CVS is doing with tobacco: taking a positive step that is free of government involvement, and could, in the long-run save both millions of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars. And don't be surprised if more and more former smokers start getting their prescriptions filled at CVS instead of Walgreens.

Hopefully other corporate entities figure out that like CVS, they too can be effective vehicles for positive, healthful change. And, it can be good for business.

For where there is smoke . . .

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# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



February 16, 2014

## RECHANNELING WILL ROGERS

In all American cultural history, there has never been a phenomenon quite like Will Rogers. For in his relatively brief life Rogers, (1879-1935) was a man who wore many, many hats: cowboy, vaudeville performer, movie star, radio favorite, columnist, author,



social commentator and world-class pundit. During the 1920s and 1930s he was one of the best-known, best-loved celebrities on the planet. At the time of his death, he was also the highest-paid movie star in the world, making an estimated \$35,000 a week. Rogers' syndicated column, *Slipping the Lariat Over*, was read by tens of millions every week. His quips and *bon mots* were in the same league as the great Mark Twain and the lesser-known [Artemus Ward](#).

A brief sampling of Rogers' political barbs reveals a man who spoke the truth with tongue lodged firmly in cheek:

- "The income tax has made liars of more Americans than golf."
- "A fool and his money are soon elected."
- "Be thankful we're not getting all the government we're paying for."
- "Everything is changing: people are taking the comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke."

My two favorites:

- "The average citizen knows only too well that it makes no difference to him which side wins. He realizes that the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey have come to resemble each other so closely that it is practically impossible to tell them apart; both of them make the same braying noise, and neither of them ever says anything. The only perceptible difference is that the elephant is somewhat the larger of the two," and
- "I belong to no organized party. I am a Democrat . . ."

This last one-liner has always fascinated me. For back in the 1920s and early 30s, the Democrats were about as disorganized a mess as one could imagine. Then suddenly, in 1932, they coalesced around FDR, and Rogers' aphorism became dated -- although never forgotten. I wonder what Rogers would make of today's Republican Party. Would he see in the Republicans of Boehner, Cantor, Ryan and Cruz a disorganized mess of a party -- just as he had with his beloved pre-FDR Democrats? Is Speaker Boehner muttering under his breath, "*I don't belong to an organized party. I am a Republican.*" In short, has the GOP rechanneled Will Rogers?

Without question, over the past couple of years, the Republicans of Capitol Hill *have* been showing signs of increased disharmony and disunity. This week's vote to raise the federal debt ceiling is a prime example. You know, it wasn't all that long ago that the GOP, standing firm with Tea Party ideologues like Ted Cruz, Rand Paul and Louie Gohmert, chose to shut down the federal government instead of raising the nation's debt ceiling. At that time, they smelled blood in the water and decided that unless they got what they wanted -- like the dismemberment of Obamacare -- in exchange for their vote, they would shut the sucker down . . . and reap the approving huzzahs of a grateful nation. Of course, as things turned out, it was the hoots of condemnation they heard.

Turn the page to this week's debt ceiling vote, and you see a very different Republican Party; one beset with uncertainty and a lot of people pointing nasty middle fingers . . . at each other. In the House, 28 Republicans joined 192 Democrats to pass the clean debt resolution by a final tally of 221-201. This means that 199 Republicans (and 2 Democrats) were willing to let the "Full faith and credit of the United States" go down



the drain. Speaker Boehner, understanding that his party simply could not go through another bout of national derision cobbled together enough establishment votes to pass the C.R. And for this relatively heroic act, he may well lose his Speakership come January 2015.

On the Senate side, faced with a filibuster from the Texas bloviator-in-chief, Ted Cruz, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell decided to play both ends against the middle. He first "saved the day" by getting enough Republican votes (12) to enact cloture -- essentially giving Senator Cruz a case of political laryngitis -- and then turn around and vote against raising the debt ceiling. In fact, every member of the Republican caucus voting *in favor* of cloture -- permitting the vote to come to the floor -- then turned around and voted *against* the resolution. Talk about political bi-polarity! Minority Leader McConnell and his Whip, Texas Senator John Cornyn are now even more vulnerable to primary challenges from Tea Party Republicans who are accusing them of being IMACs: "Invertebrates Masquerading as Conservatives." Of course McConnell and Cornyn (along with Senators Collins of Maine and Johanns of Nebraska -- all four of whom are up for reelection) will tell voters that they were actually "standing tall" for conservative principles, both by voting in favor of cloture and against the C.R. Whether folks going to the polls will buy this rationale remains to be seen.

The behind-the-scenes political chess maneuvers involved in the vote are both fascinating and multi-dimensional. There is no one obvious reason why the clean C.R. passed both houses. However, a couple of chess moves do come to mind:

1. Members of the Republican caucus were and are in so much disarray that they could not agree on precisely what they wanted in exchange for their vote. Consequently, leadership backed the clean C.R. It's kind of like a bunch of kidnappers letting their victim go free because they simply cannot agree on how much ransom to charge.
2. Republican leadership simply did not want a repeat of last October's government shutdown. With 2014 being an election year they do not need all the negativity and public scorn that attends such an action. Try as they may, in 2013, Republicans utterly failed in their attempt to convince the American voting public that President Obama and the Democrats were the real culprits. In poll after poll after poll, the American public pinned the tail of blame not on the donkey, but on the elephant.
3. The more pragmatic, less ideological wing of the GOP decided that nothing -- the debt ceiling, immigration reform, gay marriage or even Benghazi -- that nothing should take a nanosecond's worth of attention away from their number one issue in the 2014 election: the "failure" of Obamacare.
4. Some Republicans truly understand that defaulting on our debt would be both unconscionable and catastrophic -- regardless of what Cruz, Paul, Stockman or any other Tea Party twerp may claim.

All of which adds up to the same thing:

The Republicans *have* rechanneled Will Rogers . . . who also famously said:

*That's the trouble with a politician's life-somebody is always interrupting it with an election.*

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*(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")*



**February 23, 2014**

## **GALILEO MUST BE SPINNING . . .**

A couple of days ago, the National Science Foundation released a report showing that a quarter of Americans surveyed could not correctly answer that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and not the other way around. In the same



survey, just 39 percent answered correctly (true) that "The universe began with a huge explosion" and only 48 percent said "Human beings, as we know them today, developed from earlier species of animals." And to top things off, just over half understood that antibiotics are not effective against viruses. Galileo, Georges Lemaître (father of the "Big Bang Theory"), Charles Darwin and Sir Alexander Fleming (discoverer of penicillin) all must be spinning in their graves.

These aren't the only things that Americans do not know. According to poll numbers:

- Only 45% of Americans were able to correctly identify what the initials in GOP stood for: Grand Old Party. Other popular guesses were Government of the People and God's Own Party. [[Source](#)]

- 55% of Americans believe that Christianity was written into the Constitution and that the founding fathers wanted One Nation Under Jesus. [\[Source\]](#)
- When looking at a map of the world, young Americans had a difficult time correctly identifying Iraq (1 in 7) and Afghanistan (17%). This isn't that surprising, but only a slim majority (51%) knew where New York was. According to Forbes and National Geographic, an alarming 29% couldn't point to the Pacific Ocean. [\[Source\]](#) and
- Although a "relatively" high 40% of people were able to name all three of the United States branches of government — executive, legislative and judicial — a far lower percentage knew the length of a Senator's term. Just 25% responded that a Senator's term stretches for six years. Even less, 20%, knew how many Senators there were. [\[Source\]](#)

As things stand today, I feel comfortable speculating that far more Americans can name two Kardashians than two senators, and know what the letters LOL, OMG and LMAO stand for but likely cannot limn GDP, DNA or  $E=MC^2$ . To be certain, knowing facts -- whether critical or trivial -- historic dates, famous names and the like can be indicators of basic knowledge. However, in the world of the 21st century, one must know far, far more. There is a vast chasm between quantitative knowledge and analytical ability, between being trained and being educated. Increasingly, the components of an "education" are subjects and issues which lead to a job or career. Programs leading to Degrees and certificates in I.T., Sports Management, Accounting and Hospitality are filled to overflowing. Woe betide those who major in -- or worse, have PhD's and teach -- philosophy, literature, history or the classics to name but four. Jobs in the humanities are becoming increasingly scarce; programs are being drastically cut back. Increasingly, we are living in a society in which people know more and more about less and less.

Of late, there has been a ton of debate over the [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#) which, according to its mission statement, will ". . . provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them." At base, Common Core is a national curriculum with a standardized set of tests or "assessments" by which to gauge students' progress in a host of subjects. Many of these assessments will be more rigorous than any in the past. Whether the Common Core is called a curriculum or not, there's little doubt that teachers will feel pressured to gear much of their instruction to this annual regimen. In the coming years, test results are likely to affect decisions about grade promotion for students, teachers' job status and school viability.

It is the uniformity of the exams and the skills ostensibly linked to them that appeal to the Core's supporters, like Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Bill and Melinda Gates, who got the initiative off and running with a grant of \$35 million. They believe that tougher standards, and eventually higher standardized test scores, will make America more competitive in the global brain race. On the other side of the issue, Common Core is currently taking its lumps . . . mainly from the right. Tea Party-like groups have been gaining traction in opposition to the program, arguing that it is another intrusion into the lives of ordinary Americans by a faceless elite.

Maybe yes, and maybe no.

Whether Common Core succeeds or fails is anyone's guess. One thing however is clear: that American public schools -- as well as many charter and private schools -- and the students they are supposed to be educating, are failing. More and more, students can't -- and therefore don't -- read. And when they do, it is frequently accompanied by a stunning lack of comprehension. More and more, students cannot do simple math without the aid of a calculator. More and more, students can't tell you whether the sun orbits the earth ([Ptolomy's notion of geocentrism](#) as originally proposed by Aristotle) or vice versa ([Copernicus' heliocentrism](#) as popularized by Galileo), let alone how many planets there are. (By the way, anyone wishing to become an "expert" on the solar system might consider visiting [kidsastronomy.com](#) -- a magnificent site that makes learning both fun and easy.)

Even as Americans -- both young and old -- show how little they know about math, science and the world in which we live, groups and individuals continue arguing over what should and should not be taught as well as who or what is ultimately to blame for students' low test scores. As but one example of the former, public schools in Louisiana and Tennessee, as well as publicly-funded charter schools in Florida, Indiana, Ohio, Arizona, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, are permitted to teach "[Creationism](#)" as "an alternative to evolution." And, thanks to the Koch Brothers funded [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC), an increasing number of state legislators have concluded that teachers' unions are the culprit lurking in the bushes. How utterly simple: overpaid, underworked (only ten months a year) teachers are one of the big reasons why American students lag behind their counterparts in Korea, Japan, Finland, Iceland and Poland when it comes to reading, writing, math and science.

If America is ever to regain its edge in the world and be recognized for something other than our celebrities, we're going to have to get serious about both teaching and learning. It is the greatest long-term investment any society



can and must make. Piddling away our time and energy trying to convince some hapless students that evolution (the basis of all modern biological science, supported by everything we know about geology, genetics, paleontology, and other fields) is some sort of highly contested scientific hypothesis as credible as "God did it" is embarrassing. Training without educating is embarrassing.

But then too how embarrassing is it that more than a quarter of the American public believes the sun revolves around the earth?

Galileo must be spinning in his grave.

Or is it that his grave is spinning around him?

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