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COMMENTARY

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A step in the healing

Following is the proposed text Mayor Kirk Watson read at the Wednesday press conference announcing the arrest of four suspects in the 1993 murders of four teen-agers at a yogurt shop in North Austin.

It's hard to know where to begin. In life — in each and all of our lives — we experience defining moments. Some define the joy in our life, such as the birth of a child, watching them grow and experiencing pride.

Others define negative emotions and points in time.

A community also has defining moments, some of which are negative, and create despair or fear.

So many times, I've had the opportunity as mayor about how wonderful this city is to talk about.

Now this community has a moment that is not a positive one. We have gone from a sleepy college town to a thriving high-tech city. How we have advanced forward in so many positive ways, there has probably been no other single event in our community that has made us feel less like a sleepy college town than the murders of four young girls in December 1993.

How could something so horrific, so inexplicable happen here?

No one could answer that question. And our hearts went out to the families and friends of Sarah and Jennifer Harrison, Amy Myers and Eliza Thomas.

So, for almost eight years, we have all waited to hear the words that our Police Department is close to solving this crime that has haunted our very souls — that they have been able to identify and arrest suspects that they allege are very responsible for one of the most heinous crimes our community has ever experienced.

Today, we finally get to hear those words.

On Dec. 6, 1991, we — as a city — lost our innocence.

Today, we regain our confidence. Today — as a community — we can hopefully finally begin the process of healing.

It's incredible how we have managed to get to this point.

Just last year — in 1998 — Austin experienced its lowest crime rate in 18 years.

Violent crime, including murder, decreased significantly.

Yet, even with that backdrop, Police Chief Stan Kene and other law enforcement officials know that this community would not be able to truly enjoy this dramatic change until the deaths of those four young girls were solved.

Our very lives were shaken by that unspeakable act of violence.

And, although murder is seldom easy to accept or understand, when four young girls lose their lives — it defies reason.

Frankly, I can't comprehend the grief of those parents. We are not built to bury our children. Particularly when we love them this way.

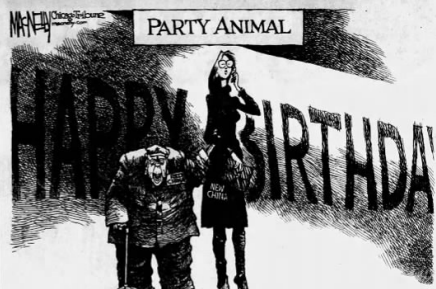
We try to keep our kids safe. When they are little, we teach them right at night in hopes that it makes them safe.

When they get a little older and more independent, it is harder, it is harder, but we still kiss them on the head and hope them on as light as we can, hoping that, somehow, that cloak of protection and love keeps them out of harm's way.

I want to commend Chief Kene and his investigators, District Attorney Kartz, the U.S. Attorney's Office and other law enforcement for the hard work and dedication they have shown in trying to solve this tragic mystery.

You make me unable to say Sarah, Jennifer, Amy, Eliza — We did not forget.

JEFF MACNELLY



Democracy gaps for air in a smog of 'news lite'

I wish every journalist in America could sit through that last hour of political strategy and punditry. Journalist Mark McDermott said the wowed crowd at the LBJ Auditorium. "That last hour" had been filled by an electrifyingly frank, pessimistic analysis of democracy's future in an age of corporate kingpins and media moguls.

The summary Deprieved of the "smog" of thoughtless, independent journalism, democracy is dying. McDermott, who thinks big when entering the image of presidential candidate George W. Bush, for once wished for too little. It is so further and wish that every growing on the planet would ponder the comments delivered in Austin last week.

On the internet

► The comments on journalism and democracy made by Mike Myers and Walter Cronkite can be heard via Internet audio recording at: www.austin360.com/news/Intero/19991002Cronkite.html.

A bright spot was shared by Mark Morrison, managing editor of Business Week, who said reporters are taking a harder look at important economic issues, such as income distribution.

The magazine's emerging work on corporate welfare made Dugger's short list of merrymen reporting. But he railed against journalism that panders to business oligarchs and skips through corporate power swaps that resemble the "divine right" of kings.

Media reporting leans neither left nor right, said strategist McDermott, but toward cynicism. Myers responded with fiery incredulity to charges of a liberal bias in media. Such allegations seem ludicrous as talk radio with its right-wing viewpoint.

The speakers' voices had hardly faded

from the hall when two important news stories blubbed up to demand their 15 minutes of attention. The largest corporate takeover in history (Banc's record set just a month or so ago) soon will unite AOL WorldCom and Sprint. The nation's second largest and third largest telephone companies hope soon to be one.

Announced almost simultaneously was the creation of the nation's largest radio conglomerate by the merger of two Texas companies, AMPM Inc. of Dallas and Clear Channel Communications Inc. of San Antonio. A "natural combination" of consolidation in radio, one analyst said, but of an "improvement" only.

Such consolidation was eroded in part by the Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996, which somewhat may be understood as a boogie with terrible consequences for the public. Dugger called the law "a \$70 billion giveaway of federal property." Even from the conservative side of the fence, the viewpoint of Representative Sen. John McCain, it looks like a stinky deal.

"Consumers stuffed again," the story of that giveaway might say. But first, a word from the speakers, some funny news about personalities who are more famous for being famous.

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'Speech-rationing'

On the eve of this week's Senate debate on the regulation of political speech, aka campaign finance reform, consider recent remarks by an ardent reformer, John McCain. His main aim is to outlaw "soft money" contributions — money used for purposes other than advocating the election or defeat of particular candidates — to politicians.

The Supreme Court says that because political money is essential to political communication, regulation of such money can only be justified if government compelling need to prevent corruption or the appearance thereof. Recently McCain was asked if he or any other Republican he could name has ever been corrupted by the Republican National Committee. He replied,

"Not by the Republican National Committee, but all of us have been corrupted by the process when big money and big influence — and you can include me in that list — where big money has bought access which has bought influence. Anybody who glances at the so-called 1996 Telecommunications Reform Act and then looks at the results, which are increases in cable rates, phone rates, mergers, and lack of competition, clearly knows that the special interests are protected in Washington and the public interest is submerged."

He was asked: "Does it seem to you that McCain is actually using this process to help the party — to the corruption of Republicans?" He said, "Of course."

Well, contributors are indeed apt to have an advantage in gaining access to, and therefore having influence upon, legislators who influence the creation and distribution of wealth. However, is this necessarily corruption?

Today legislators of both parties feel few competitors about regulating the economy. By constantly putting their thumbs on the scales of economic justice, they become complacent in what economists call "rent-seeking" — the process whereby private parties try to bend public policy to their advantage.

But what are the various economic interests affected by legislation proposed to do with legislators' legislators? Should they maintain a decorous silence, trusting the legislators to act as "fiscally guardians" — as unobdurate philosophers in splendid isolation? Understandably, economic interests usually spend substantially more on lobbying (\$1.42 billion in 1988 alone) than is contributed in "hard" money (\$713.3 million from all sources in the two-year election cycle 1997-98), and more is contributed in "hard" than in "soft" money (\$242 million, 1998-99).

Besides, studies of legislative voting strongly support the conclusion that constituents' views and the legislators'

ideologies are more important than campaign contributions in determining legislators' behavior. That conclusion is reinforced much more by the tendencies of legislators, than legislators' tendencies are influenced by contributions.

Much of what McCain calls corruption is the inevitable nature of politics under the modern system. That would be true, and admirably, against the rent-seeking process that does indeed define modern Washington. That would be true, and admirably, against the rent-seeking process that does indeed define modern Washington.

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PRI primary election a Pandora's box

By PETER M. WARD

On Nov. 7, for the first time ever, Mexicans will have the opportunity to elect a presidential candidate for the party that has governed Mexico continuously for more than 70 years — the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

The election is an open and secret ballot throughout the 300 electoral districts. The electoral district who takes the majority of district votes.

In Mexico this primary election is both unprecedented and dramatic. In the past, all PRI candidates have been selected behind closed doors by the outgoing president, in consultation with party bosses. The person tapped was guaranteed to win the presidency — at least until a decade ago, when the opposition began to challenge that monopoly.

Upon his election in 1988, President Ernesto Zedillo indicated that this process would end, and that he would not seek to designate his party's candidate for election on July 2, 2000. While there was a consensus that reform was long overdue and urgently needed, no one — not even Zedillo — knew how to get "there" from "here."

It was the grass roots, at the PRI's last General Assembly held more than three years ago, that took matters into its own hands. Disenfranchised with Zedillo for his aloofness from the party, and furious at the damage dealt to party fortunes by

former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the Assembly mandated that the primary candidates for the presidency most previously have held elective office. Most assumed that somehow the decision would be overturned in 1998.

Surprisingly, no such reversal occurred, and in April this year, the recently elected party leadership announced that primary elections would be held in November to select the presidential candidate.

But given this apparent procedural coup by the PRI, why is a primary election a potential Pandora's box? There are three principal reasons. First, an election, unless it is free, means that the candidate most favored by those in power — and longer marauded voters. The second potential problem is the prospect that powerful lower class members will run for another party, effectively splitting the PRI vote and delivering the country to the opposition. Thirdly, if candidates engage in a bare-knuckle fight during the election, there is the danger that accusation and dirt will be cast against the opposition next year.

Four candidates registered for the May deadline, including three former governors (Miguel Alemán, Francisco Labastida and Roberto Madrazo), and a former speaker of the house (Humberto Roque). Two have emerged as clear front runners: Labastida, who is rumored to be the establishment's favored candidate, and Madrazo, who is seen by that same establishment as a talented rebel, with considerable following

among the reformers within the PRI as well as among the grass roots.

Despite Labastida having the quiet support of President Zedillo and the establishment, Madrazo jumped to a lead in large part because he is considered by the perceived fallings of the Zedillo administration and is therefore free to criticize macro-economic policy. Moreover, his campaign to date has been brilliantly managed, employing top public relations and media advisors, and his competitors.

Thus two of the causes for concern are already firmly on the table. If either candidate has a relatively narrow victory (as seems likely), would the other jump ship? Labastida would seem less likely to break ranks if he loses, but Madrazo is less secure. If he took matters and left, then the PRI would be split, perhaps irretrievably.

If this Pandora's box scenario is to be avoided by the PRI, then it will require level heads and concerted negotiation within the party from now through the election. Any internal gears suggest that such behind the scenes discussions are already underway, although no one will admit to it. If they are not, or if things fall apart, then the advantage gained by the PRI with its primary election will turn against them.

But until that possibility happens, the PRI has the opportunity to be master of its fate.

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