

## Sweet things

Sometimes in a least-expected moment God provides us with sweet little things that make a little magic glow even if the subject is as mundane as National Public Radio.

Last month a struggling congressional sub-committee, desperate to balance the budget, idly suggested it may find some cuts in the NPR budget. NPR was already

### Media Meditations

by R.L. Taylor



tears from Congress.

Next, NPR's chief fundraiser, with all the swagger of a poker player with four aces, said NPR would be better off without federal funds anyway. The subcommittee obliged and cut off all their money. He resigned. The NPR board asked the lady to resign and wails of anguish were heard in Liberal Land. They think NPR is the one and only place on earth to find truth.

It is outrageous to suggest the government needs to pay for news broadcasts on radio, a medium almost 100 years old. Should we bring back the Town Crier as well? I listened to the program twice over the past 30 years. The first time was on purpose. The second was when the "select" button got stuck.

America currently has more broadcast news programs than we have English sparrows. Almost every commercial station on earth has some sort of news. Americans have four 24-hour television networks that provide news every day, every hour, every minute complete with the commercials.

Since my NPR experience is limited I do not know what charm, what magic, what ingredient they have that is so attractive. Do they use Swahili interpreters to help get us though dispatches from Somalia?

Does NPR still carry BBC dispatches? Children might not know BBC is the government-operated news network in Great Britain. It developed a reputation for straight-forward news in a monotone and there are no commercials.

The trouble is straight forward news is easily blended in with straight forward criticism of any or all things BBC is against such as American foreign policies, presidents and medical care, and commercials.

Every news organization needs money to operate, to pay reporters, engineers and janitors to turn out the lights at the end of the day. Even the town crier sometimes needed a new bell. There is a good thing about commercials. They allow the public, not the politicians decide what is news is and what baloney. Baloney programs go out of business early if they don't sell the products.

In truth, we know that every single political slant, twist, spin and interpretation is available right this instant in a great number of ways. We have broadcast television networks, cable television networks, movies, billboards, bumper stickers, sky writers, Google, blogs, 100 or more computer sources and countless pulpits to support and/or condemn any half-brained political philosophy cooked up in kooks.

But I am not a mean person and do not want to destroy any news organization so I have perfect solution. We can sell the NPR network to the fundraiser and the lady who once ran it. They did not need federal funds. That is great news. By all means, let them have it. We can make a little profit on the sale and save the millions we used to operate that old favorite National Public Radio.

## Public sector unions

By Don Lein

*"Action looking toward the paralysis of government by those who have sworn to support it is unthinkable and intolerable."*

— FDR

"The main function of American trade unions is collective bargaining. It is impossible to bargain collectively with the government," wrote George Meany in a New York Times magazine article titled "Labor's Future".

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's attempt to restrict the scope of collective bargaining for government workers was characterized by President Obama as "an assault on unions". Meanwhile, the President has unilaterally announced a two-year pay freeze for all civilian federal employees, which is not subject to negotiation. Of course, when we realize that the average federal worker compensation averages \$123,000, while those in private sector average \$61,000, there are few alternatives for the federal worker, unless she/he wishes to lower their standard of living.

How did we arrive at this juncture? For Governor Walker his epiphany occurred when Megan Sampson, an Outstanding First Year Teacher in Wisconsin for 2010 was given a layoff notice a week after her being named to that honor. With everyone decrying the lack of teacher quality, why was one of the best being let go? Very simply, the collectively bargained contract required staffing decisions be based upon seniority. When the Governor investigated he

found that the collectively bargained agreement costs taxpayers \$101,091 per year per teacher, protects 0 percent contributions by teachers for health insurance and requires staffing decisions be based upon seniority and union rules.

Surely, unions filled a need when there were sweat shops, child labor, etc., and the worker was largely unprotected, but have evolved over the years to where approximately only 6 percent of laborers in the private sector are unionized. Why? Very simply, Federal programs such as OSHA and myriads of other state statutes protect the worker and today we have lawyers protecting the worker the way unions used to do. The other factor that comes into play is that the private sector union recognizes that if the company for which they are employed is not financially successful, they lose their jobs. They tend to partner with management in reaching reasonable accommodations to both parties.

However, in the public sector, that constraint is not applicable. The union members do not fear that they will bankrupt their employer, since at a Federal and State level, bankruptcy is not a legally available option. Public sector unions are invariably for larger government since that means more jobs and more dues. With respect to dues, it is appropriate to point out that these dues come entirely out of taxpayer money which pays the salaries of the union members. It is also important to point out that unions give the vast

majority of their money to one party which is in conflict with the voting preferences of the taxpayers.

What has happened to states where the collective bargaining has been repealed? In Indiana, where it occurred six years ago, state employee pay has increased, but more importantly, high-performance employees are rewarded with pay increases and/or bonuses when they do something exceptional.

We have several different scenarios playing out before us of states trying to deal with the combination of politicians trying to buy votes (inevitable and, unfortunately, unavoidable) and union greed (inevitable, but controllable). California is exhibit A, where in 1990 the unions in conjunction with Governor Deukmejian emasculated their spending cap and California has been spending their way to prosperity ever since then. As a result California now has the worst credit rating of all the states, companies are relocating out of state at a record pace and while California has 12 percent of the nation's people it has 33 percent of it welfare case load and higher unemployment than Michigan.

Whereas there may be all sorts of appeals to our sympathy for workers, fiscal sanity has to rule, or we will fail, as individuals and as a nation.

*Don Lein is a regular contributor to Chatham County Line. A Chatham resident, he is involved in a number of civic organizations.*

## Strong civil service corps indispensable to civilized society

By Julian Sereno

I don't understand the vilification of civil servants. You see it in Republicans as they hack away at government payrolls, and demand the privatization of everything. You see it in newspapers such as the Democrat leaning News and Observer of Raleigh, where any state-funded training that involves travel is treated as a boondoggle — a vacation at taxpayer expense.

I'll confess that I'm biased. Although I've never been employed by the government, most of my relatives have, including my mother, my father for a while, two aunts (all deceased), and my sister, my wife, and now, my son.

When my aunt Olinda was a supervisor for the State of Illinois during the 1930s, the state got its money's worth. It was during the Depression, and she fired her own cousin for eating potato chips at her desk.

Flash forward to the early 1970s, when my mother, who reached the civil service ceiling at HEW (the Department of Health, Education and Welfare), just below the political appointees, commented that some of the younger staff members in the building on Constitution Avenue in Washington burned incense in their offices to cover the smell of marijuana smoke. She warned me away from government work after I graduated from college, saying it would break her heart to see me sucked into the maw of the federal bureaucracy. She retired a year or two later, as soon as she could.

It wasn't until Ronald Reagan was elected under the mantra that "government isn't the solution, it's the problem" that the Republican attack on civil

servants began. They put a freeze on federal hiring, and federal workers were fired, or "riffed" (reduction in force). When the Air Traffic Controllers Union when on strike in 1981, Reagan fired them all and replaced them with non-union controllers. That broke not only the Air Traffic Controllers Union but much of the power of organized labor as well, and Reagan ended up getting National Airport in Washington named after him.

But with all this freezing and rifting, government spending skyrocketed and the deficit continued to rise. Why? Because the work that used to be done by government employees got farmed out to Beltway Bandits — private contractors and consultants.

This, of course, is political patronage at its most basic. Civil servants vote overwhelming Democrat. Private contractors vote Republican — and raise funds for Republicans. Take work from opponents, give it to supporters. That simple.

This has been going on for 30 years now. The results have been dismal.

These contractors have not served this country well. They are the Haliburtons, which fed our troops in Iraq, cheated the government, and then moved off shore. They are the Blackwaters, whose high-priced mercenaries have made enemies for the United States wherever they have gone.

At the same time, a weak civil service corps has caved to the interests they are supposed to regulate. From the SEC letting Wall Street gamble away our nation's wealth and Bernie Madoff run a \$65 billion swindle to the Bureau of Mines signing off on the BP Deepwater Horizon rig that polluted the

Gulf of Mexico last Spring, toothless regulators do us no good. And a week or so ago, at Reagan National Airport, the lone air traffic controller on the night shift fell asleep at the switch, leaving planes to their own devices. Happily, none crashed.

It's time to quit bashing civil servants. We need a strong, professional civil service corp. Our society can't function without one.

*Julian Sereno is editor and publisher of Chatham County Line.*

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