

opinion

# Electric power to the people

By NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN

WASHINGTON (KFS) — The chairman of the board of Michigan's Consumers Power Company has given up his fight to be a completely private enterprise and is asking the Federal government for money. Consumers Power, with 1.2 million electricity customers and almost as many to whom it sells gas, is the nation's sixth-largest energy utility in operating revenue and its problems are indicative of what's happening to the private power industry.

Like every other utility the company's prices have been going up at the same time as its profits and bond rating have been going in the other direction. The reasons for its troubles aren't unique. Among other things, that nuclear power plant Consumers was counting on has turned out to be a multi-million dollar clunker. It's costing Consumers \$6 million a month to buy elsewhere the electricity it hoped its inoperative atomic plant would produce.

The company has a new, conventionally fired plant scheduled to come into service soon, but it will depend on expensive, imported Canadian oil, and will, therefore, be producing the most costly electricity in the state. These and similar difficulties with natural gas have driven board chairman Al Aymond to ask the government to buy a special \$200 million issue of non-voting stock in the company.

Mr. Aymond has been an opponent of government ownership or financing of public utilities, so when a capitalist such as he says he doesn't see how his company can make it over the long haul without this kind of help, this isn't the tiny voice of American socialism we hear squeaking for public ownership. Nor is this the voice of one of the inefficiently run utilities demanding that the taxpayers paper over management's mistakes. Consumers enjoys a reputation for being an intelligently run outfit.

Nevertheless, should the Federal government accept an invitation to buy into a company in trouble and yet have no participation in selecting its management or guiding its policies? If this is done for Consumers, it takes no prophetic talent to foresee many board chairmen from similarly distressed utilities lining up for assistance on the same terms. Pour the money in while we continue on the same basis that got us into hot water in the first place.

On the other hand, even the most convinced socialist would have to wonder about the wisdom of letting Washington vote stock and elect board members to dozens of public utilities. Under this sort of Mussolini-style socialism the opportunities for corruption, conflict of interest and misapplied zeal need no elucidation.

There is a third choice suggested by James Ridgeway and Bettina Conner in the current issue of *The Elements* (published by the Transnational Institute, 1520 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20036). They propose a complete, ground-up reorganization of our present garbled mix of public and private energy administration.

What they would do is divide the nation into Public Energy Districts. Each district would be run by a locally elected council which would have the power to plan and administer everything having to do with energy in their locality. That would not necessarily mean public ownership. A Public Energy District in Mr. Aymond's area could decide not to take over Consumers but rather to buy in and have local people on the utility's board of directors.

Above the Public Energy Districts there would be Regional Energy Boards, whose members would be elected by the local boards. The regional board people, in their turn, would elect a Nation Energy Organization. Thus we would have some hope of having policies in this area developed, not on the basis of a Secretary of State's interventionist megalomania, but on the actual needs and desires of the people who inhabit this continent.

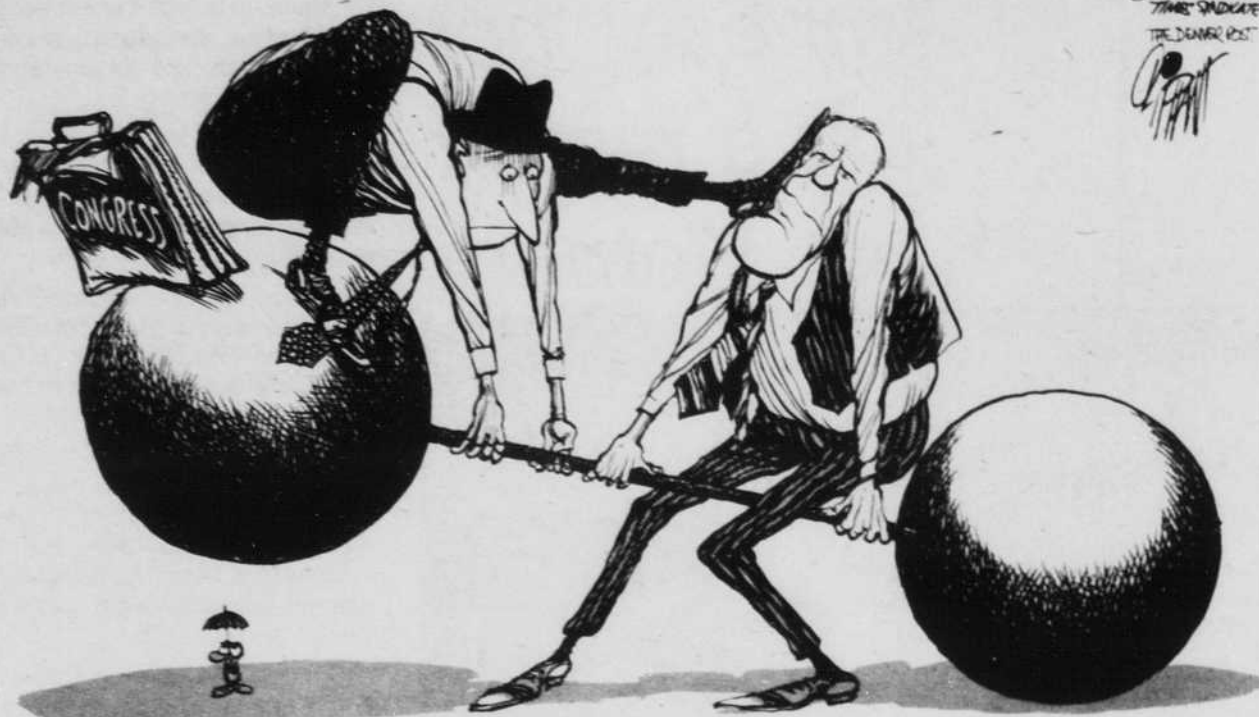
A system of this sort should save us from a repetition of what we saw the other day, when the governors from the northeastern states came to beg President Ford not to go ahead with the Administration's reckless energy proposals. They got nowhere except to underline the great contemporary truth of American public administration which is that, even with the computers, centralized planning and resource allocation is beyond our capacity to carry out satisfactorily.

Decentralization of decision making would also inhibit the national government's tendencies to put too much research money on one idea while neglecting other promising leads. We've done this with nuclear energy, which has turned out to be an expensive, unreliable bust.

The result is dozens of atomic plants which produce red ink instead of electricity at the same time solar energy research has been starved for years so that we're without other expedients to fall back on.

As long as we rely on top-down administration and continue to put the decision-making power in so few hands in a country as large and complicated as ours, we can expect nothing more than we're getting. Centralization, with its capacity to commit the whole nation to single, untried policies, is simply too impractical.

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THE WEIGHTLIFTERS

opinion

## Ma Bell may be listening

By RON HENDREN

WASHINGTON — Who can legally tap your telephone without a court order? (A.) the F.B.I., (B.) your wife or husband, (C.) the telephone company, (D.) the Pope, (E.) nobody.

Answer: (C.) the telephone company.

Under a little-known provision of the federal statutes, the Bell Telephone Co. can tap your line, and they don't have to say boo about it to anybody. The only condition: they must suspect that you are perpetrating fraud against Ma Bell, and that translates into using electronic devices to make free phone calls.

But a Houston grand jury, investigating charges that Bell employees helped local police make illegal wiretaps, forced AT&T to reveal that no fewer than 665 of Ma Bell's finest are involved in a wire tapping operation that covers most of the country, and may not be limited to surveillance of long distance freebie freaks.

If that were not enough, at least 76 of these company security people are former F.B.I. agents, and there are indications that Bell maintains close working relationships not only with local police but with the Bureau. According to Associated Press reports, one Houston attorney has charged that "several scores" of persons have been tried and convicted on information voluntarily supplied to the F.B.I. by Bell agents.

What is astonishing, of course, is that the government would permit a private company to spy on citizens in the first place, with or without a court order. Next we'll be giving A&P a license to frisk every customer at the check-out stand to find out who's stealing onions.

The astonishment turns to more immediate concern when we learn that Bell has hired a small army of spooks who have only themselves to answer to, and whose judgment on whom to tap, when and for how long is absolute and final.

Indeed, by the company's own reckoning, this earphone armada costs far more to equip and maintain than the total amount Bell loses in revenue from long distance cheating, at least in Houston where six security agents, three of them ex-F.B.I. men, work to prevent losses from fraud that company officials estimate to be in the neighborhood of \$100,000. Why, if these six were paid \$17,000 a year each, to be sure not an outrageous figure for

career veterans, Bell would be spending more on security salaries alone than it is losing from fraud. Not exactly a sound business practice, especially in light of the fact that Ma Bell, just like the rest of us, has the option of picking up the phone and calling the police when she thinks someone is stealing from her.

So what is this security army doing? It's a question the Justice Department needs to ask. Just how long has the tapping operation been in effect? How many phones have been tapped, whose, when, for how long and on what grounds? What information has been gleaned from the opera-

tion, where and how is it maintained, who has access to it, how much of it has been given out, to whom and for what purposes?

The federal courts should immediately subpoena and impound any evidence which might provide answers to those questions, and should order Bell to cease and desist its entire wiretapping operation for the duration of the investigation.

Congress, in the meantime, should move quickly to repeal the federal statute under which Bell's security agents have been operating.

Not too many issues are that simple. This one is.

## Return to basics

By KIT C. SEAMAN

After reading the two articles that appeared on the front page of the Jan. 28 edition to the *Emerald*, my own frustrations concerning "functional illiterates" have grown to the point where I believe the public should be made aware of the consequences that current teaching practices will produce. Since my graduation from Oregon, I have done a considerable amount of substitute teaching in the Eugene-Springfield area, and have taught in most subject areas on the secondary level.

Through my experience in various classroom situations, I have become increasingly aware of many students' gross incompetencies in reading and writing skills. I have read papers containing run-on sentences, sentence fragments, improper use of capitalizations, atrocious spelling, punctuation, penmanship, and use of wrong homophones (to, too, two).

Unfortunately, the *Emerald* articles states that publishers are encouraging authors to write college textbooks at the eighth and ninth grade reading levels to accommodate that segment of students that is lacking in basic reading and writing skills. The solution does not lie with the textbooks, but with the quality of teaching and/or subject matter being taught in elementary, junior, and senior high schools. Obviously the time has arrived to swing the pendulum back toward teaching fundamentals. Better college students should be allowed to use textbooks designed for their own skill level. The students filling up the remedial writing classes in college should never have passed beyond the high school level without having attained basic reading and writing skills.

Reading and writing are not the only areas that we should concern ourselves with. I have substituted in math classes where students in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades are still learning how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide simple two-digit numbers. These students should never have been permitted to pass beyond the elementary level without these basic math skills.

A serious problem exists, and teachers should not be afraid to retain students who are not ready to go on. Too many students have been promoted from grade to grade, year after year, without having mastered the skills necessary to successfully communicate in this society.

Seaman is a graduate in physical education.

## Letters policy

The *Emerald* will accept and try to print all letters containing fair comment on ideas and topics of concern or interest to the University community. Because of space limitations, letters must be no more than 250 words-typed, triple-spaced, dated and signed with the person's major or discipline. Longer letters will be shortened at the editor's discretion. Longer opinion columns will be published whenever possible after being submitted to the editorial page editor. The limit on opinion columns is 1,200 words, using the same format as letters.

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