

Syndicated columnist berates Reagan administration policy

By DANE CLAUSSEN
Of the Emerald

PORTLAND — Syndicated political columnist Tom Wicker said the Reagan administration could be perilous for American civil liberties.

The New York Times associate editor, addressed about 300 people Saturday night at the annual awards dinner of the Oregon division of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Wicker lashed out at recent proposals made by the Reagan Administration and members of the Republican-controlled Senate, which he said could reverse progress made in prison reform, voting rights, and the welfare and court systems. He also warned that these proposals may threaten freedom of speech and the press.

Crime will not decrease in the United States just because more prisons are built, said Wicker, who wrote a book on the Attica prison uprising in 1971. For example, the Michigan legislature recently forced the governor of that state to grant an early release to 600 prisoners to alleviate overcrowding, but the crime rate did not go up, he said.

Wicker said the theories of putting all criminals in comfortable prisons or abolishing prisons in favor of restitution and community work programs are impractical. "Middle ground solutions" such as smaller, better prisons and firmer sentences are more workable, he said.

"Prison reform is the most hopeless cause in America short of gun control," Wicker concluded.

The Voting Rights Act of 1964, described by Wicker as the "single most successful piece of public policy" formulated during the 1960s is being targeted by radicals in Congress, Wicker said. These Congressmen are interested in claiming political victories in social legislation in case the Republicans' economic package fails, he said.

Wicker said there are at least 23 "court-stripping" bills that would limit or prevent judicial action on issues ranging from busing, abortion and prayer in the schools to an all male-draft and the teaching of creationism in public schools. Some of these

bills seek to limit the power of state courts, he added.

There is a Constitutional provision which allows the Congress to pass legislation regarding the Supreme Court, Wicker said, but this provision has usually been interpreted in reference to "legal housekeeping."

"The reasons these bills are being put forward is because the radical conservatives in Congress...know they don't have the votes to get a constitutional amendment by the normal route," Wicker charged.

By limiting the court's power the Congress could pass legislation against the public sentiment, he said.

Wicker went on to attack administration cuts in the welfare program saying it would lead to more welfare families, an increase in crime and more people in prison. An increase in crime, in turn, will lead to a demand for tougher laws which the ACLU must carefully examine to ensure their constitutionality and morality, Wicker said.

Wicker also noted that there will be efforts to repeal the guidelines set on the activities of the FBI and CIA, despite objections from FBI officials who say the guidelines do not hamper activities and should not be lifted. He said some members of Congress have charged that the guidelines hinder efforts to combat terrorism, even though FBI director, Judge Webster, says there is no threat of terrorism in the United States.

He also criticized efforts by CIA director William Casey to exempt the CIA from compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which Wicker called a "boon to scholarly study, for those who want to find out what an agency is doing, and for those who want to find out what the government is doing."

"Operating in secrecy is not compatible with a democratic society," Wicker said, adding that such changes would allow the agencies in the government to do things that the public does not want them to do.

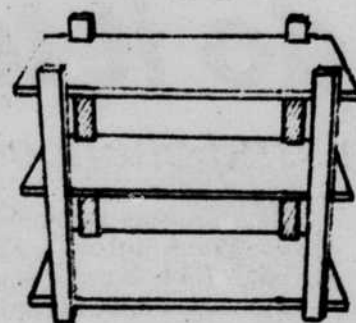
He speculated that the formation of a Terrorism Subcommittee chaired by Sen. Jeremiah Denton could result in activities

reminiscent of the witch hunts conducted by the Internal Security Subcommittee during the 1950s.

There have been charges that the American press is publishing Soviet misinformation, Wicker said. However, recalling the CIA's misinformation campaign during the 1950s, Wicker warned that attempts to label editors and reporters "dupes of the Soviet Union" could lead to a renewed witch hunt that would threaten freedom of the press.

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