

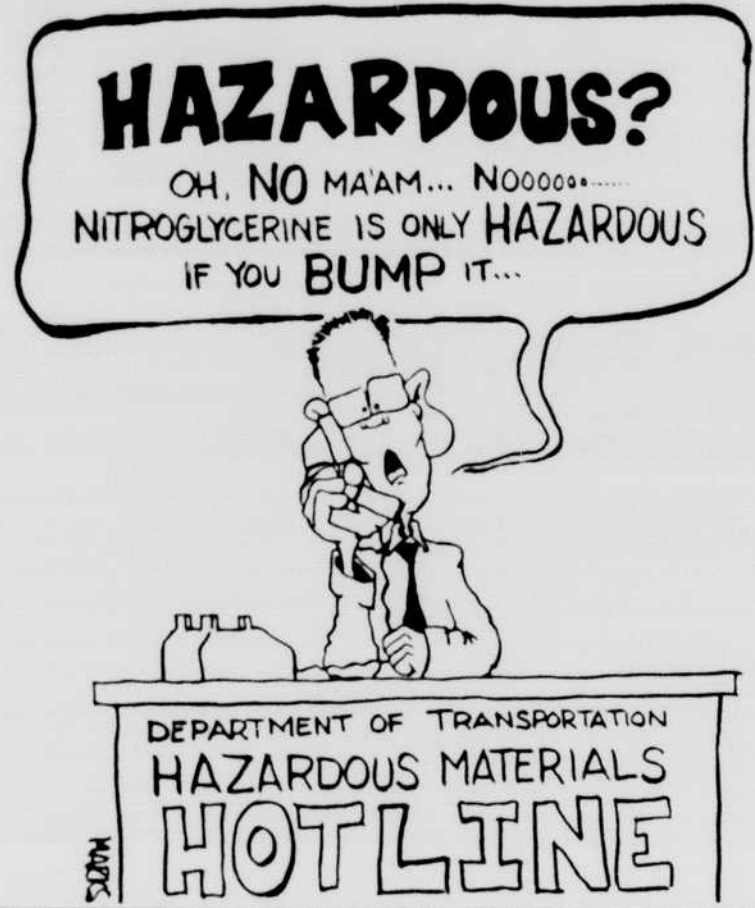
Local laws should set transportation standards

The recent spill of nearly 20,000 gallons of weed killer into Shasta Lake has raised concern about the effectiveness of regulations governing the transport of hazardous materials.

The real problem begins when the Department of Transportation lists only some of the materials identified as hazardous by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Materials considered hazardous by the Department of Transportation have to be carried in specially marked trucks or rail cars and are subject to some restrictions on when and where they can be carried.

The herbicide that was spilled into Shasta Lake was one of those materials that is listed as hazardous by the EPA and OSHA but not by the Department of Transportation.

Because these loopholes exist in federal regulations, city and state officials should take control of the situation by passing laws requiring disclosures and creating restrictions through zoning laws.



COMMENTARY

Right wing fuels racist agenda with class politics

By David Jarman and Jason Moore

Horatio Alger would be proud. The anyone-can-make-it myths he helped create at the end of the 19th century continue to thrive, especially among those who have "made it." Alger authored hundreds of dime novels extolling the virtues of hard work, honesty and thrift. He idealized an American system that allowed young men who stuck by these principles to triumph over poverty and other accidents of birth.

A typical Alger hero lived in squalor but was determined to pull himself up by his own bootstraps by selling newspapers or matchsticks. Without fail, this young man was visited by a capitalist deus ex machina who rewarded him for his virtue and industriousness by conferring upon him a more suitable class status.

Certainly, there are grains of truth to the Alger mythos. Some poor white males did succeed, climbing the class ladder to wealth and power. The experiences of individuals such as steel magnate Andrew Carnegie and oil baron John Rockefeller bear this out.

It should be noted, however, that "individual" is the key word here. For most white males, not to mention women, people of color and new immigrants, the rungs on the ladder of opportunity were a bit rickety, if not completely rotted. Today, despite nominal gains by oppressed social groups, success still occurs on a purely individual, never collective, basis.

Enter Clarence Thomas. The newest aspirant to U.S. Supreme Court membership is the very picture of the Alger myth today. Born into an impoverished Georgia sharecropper's family, we are told, Thomas was the beneficiary of a stern Catholic upbringing that gave him the virtue and reverence necessary to transcend his roots. Thomas was able to

obtain generous financial aid to attend Yale.

With enough hard work and initiative, he was able to become chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission during the Reagan years, when the commission was notorious for its complicity in the racist, sexist and essentially chauvinistic federal bench in the late '80s, where he spent several thoroughly unremarkable years.

Having established himself as a Reagan yes-man and a mediocre federal judge, it is hardly surprising that the Bush administration stresses Thomas' upbringing and not his qualifications. Thomas is the very personification of the Republican approach to race relations, which is best described as tokenism.

Thomas has indeed lived up to the Alger fantasy, climbing the ladder of opportunity with the aid of benevolent capitalists — but only to fulfill the elite's need to keep up appearances that this ladder still is intact, that there really is room at the top for everyone.

The Thomas nomination is merely one part of the Republican right's effort to paint itself as the good guy when it comes to issues of race. The Republicans have latched onto the formerly liberal notion that "color of skin doesn't matter; we're all equal at heart" and reversed it to suit their own self-serving needs.

This appropriation of liberal doctrine paints the Democrats as the ones enthralled with issues of race, but it works only as long as the right is able to create the impression that the problem is solved to the extent that no further legislation is necessary.

But this is only one point of the Republicans' multipronged attack regarding race. The right seeks to use the Thomas nomination and similar appointments to defuse dissatisfaction among middle class liberals, both black

and white, regarding the pace of racial progress, while pursuing ever more violent social policies against the black poor and working class.

At the same time, the Bush administration tries to have its cake and eat it too as they try to persuade the white working class that race is still a problem, that their jobs are imperiled because of the liberal insistence on quotas. This relatively subtle racism, cloaked in the language of economics, is paired with not-so-subtle racism in the form of Willie Horton campaigning and similar demagoguery. Democratic opposition is quick to realize that the Thomas nomination is merely a political maneuver, that Thomas has been picked not because he is a competent jurist but because he fills the needs of the Republican agenda. Hence, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine, gloats over the fact that President Bush has "fulfilled a quota." While this may be true, Mitchell and others fail to grasp the full realities of racial inequality.

The irony of the situation is that it is the Republicans who have made the essentially Marxist realization that modern racist politics boil down to questions of class. As the only social class with a definable political consciousness, the right-wing power elite knows that its long-term interests are best served when the working class and poor are set against each other along racial and ethnic lines. The Democrats, on the other hand, cling to outdated notions of racism as a social problem that can be legislated to death.

A decade of reactionary social policy has forced upon many progressives and even liberals the realization that most oppressive social relations, especially race, have their roots in class oppression. Richard Trumka, president of the United Mine Workers, recently exposed the fragmenting class politics behind the Republican racist agenda.

"Quota is a code word (for black)," he said. "The President is really saying, 'I like quotas, some of my best friends are quotas; I just wouldn't want to live next door to a quota.' Quota politics is racial politics is racial politics is anti-worker politics. It's got to stop," Trumka said.

If Trumka and the Republicans are right that racial politics is class politics, the nation's liberals need to understand that racism is a problem that cannot be vanquished through legislation and education. But then, such a realization would wreck the framework of today's liberal movement. They would be forced to realize that passing laws and talking ideals is nice, but that society is in need of a more radical overhaul — the abolition of class oppression — for justice to truly exist.

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COMMENTARY POLICY

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