

A new age for city if the voters allow it

Anthropologists and historians are wild about ages.

These are the folks who brought us the Stone Age, the Dark Ages, the Age of Reason and the Space Age. As history progresses, one age gives way to another, which is, in turn, supplanted by another, until we come to the present day. And what do they call the age we live in today?

The Information Age.

The Eugene City Council, in an appropriate burst of informed reason, recognized this new age on Wednesday, as it approved a plan to include computer technology in its plans for a new library. In all, \$1.5 million of the new library's total price tag of \$19 million will be earmarked for computer hardware and computer network capabilities.

Now, the Council has an even more important task ahead: it must convince the public of the need for the library, and it must do so before the May election. That's when the voters of Eugene will decide whether to approve a \$56.2 million bond issue, which, if passed, will pay the cost of the library and a variety of other civic projects.

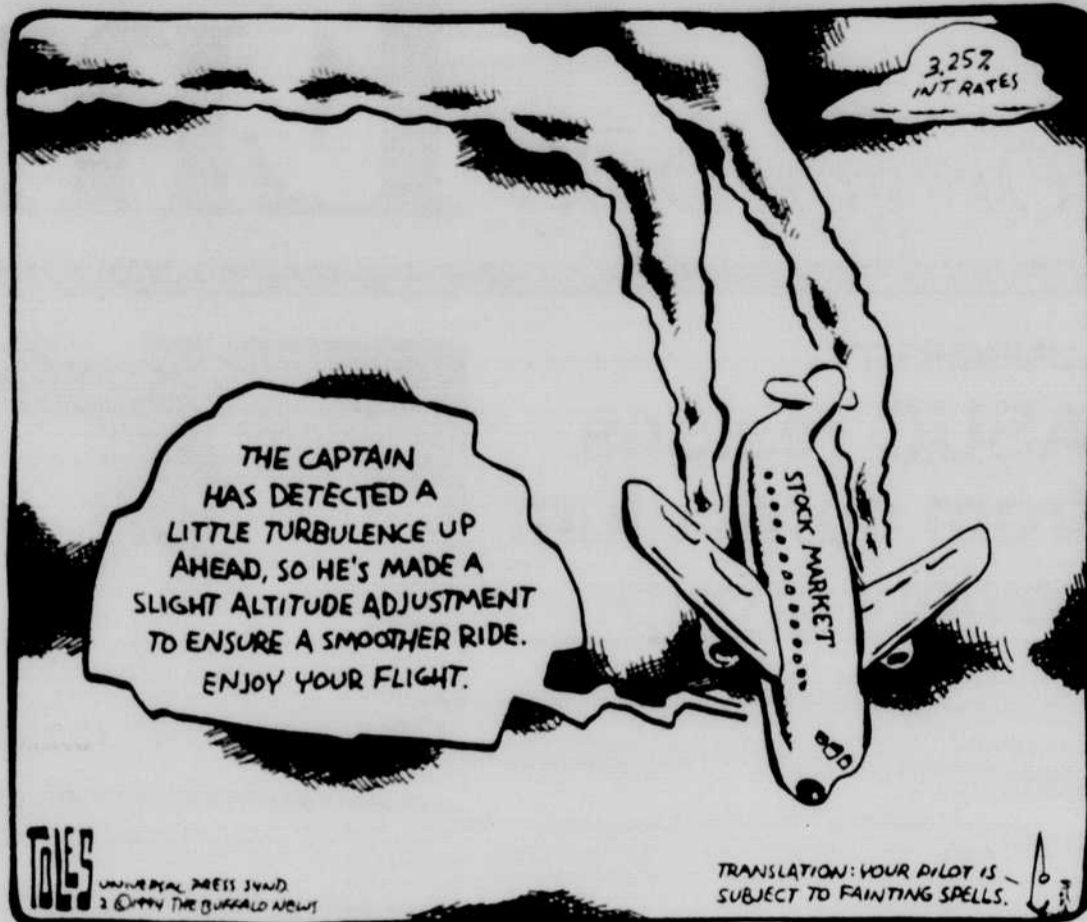
Improving the library will require more than simply creating more floor space and adding more bookshelves. It will require just the kind of technological improvements that the Council has outlined, as well as the capacity to expand when the time inevitably comes. That's why it is imperative that the voters realize the benefits of voting "yes" when they are faced with the bond measure three months from now.

Anyone who has used the facilities available in the University's Knight Library knows that the modern library can be much more than just a repository of books. It is a research Mecca, a place where one can sit down in front of a glowing video screen and access information that couldn't be contained in a dozen libraries' worth of ordinary books.

At the risk of sounding melodramatic, public libraries are a pillar of democracy. Like the public school system, libraries are a way to make people better citizens. The better the citizen, the better the city — state, country and world.

Libraries can be a great equalizer as well. Many social theorists are saying that the gulf between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is not so much a question of "Who has the money?" as "Who has the information?" If this is indeed the case, then the public library may be the only resource available which can help the "have-nots" shake off that title.

There are few services that a city can provide which truly serve everyone. Efficient, modern libraries are among those few services. Hopefully, supporters of the library will be able to make the case for a new library, and for the bond issue which will pay for it. They must inform the voters, so the public will be able to inform themselves.



OPINION

Right to pray not guaranteed for students



Marius Meland

The U.S. Senate just passed a law with an amendment proposed by the venerable Jesse Helms, stating that the federal government has the right to withdraw funding from any public school that denies its students the "constitutional right to prayer."

I beg your pardon? I don't pretend to be a legal scholar, but as far as I remember, there's nothing in the U.S. Constitution that could be interpreted as guaranteeing students the right to pray in school. In fact, I even looked up the Constitution in 1993's "Almanac," and unless there have been any dramatic changes since last year, I fail to see where Mr. Helms and his colleagues found the legal support for their claim.

A proposal such as this is, of course, to be expected from Mr. Helms, whose policies aren't exactly what you'd call progressive. Mr. Helms, who has spent decades in the Senate fighting civil liberties and equal rights for women and minorities, is paid for and owned by the American tobacco industry. The only redeeming quality about the North Carolina senator is that he makes it somewhat less embarrassing to say that you're from Oregon, home of Bob Packwood.

Much more disconcerting than Mr. Helms' proposal is the wide support that it has received from the U.S. Senate. Democrats and Republicans alike have welcomed his proposal in a time when the courts consistently have ordered students to restrict their religious practices to the private sphere. Bear in mind that this is the same Democratic Congress that was going to champion civil rights and liberties after

twelve years of Republican reactionism.

It's hard to explain why Congress would suddenly embrace Mr. Helms' ideas. But here's a golden rule in politics: If you want to find out why a politician votes inconsistently, look to the lobbyists. If you can't find anything there, look to the polls. In this case, the lobbyists are the powerful and financially strong Christian Right, and the opinion polls show that a vast majority of Americans support school prayers.

Let's take a look at the Constitution and see where the supporters of this new law could find arguments for the right to school prayers. The First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press..."

The troublesome thing about the First Amendment is that the first and the second phrases could be interpreted as contradictory. While an opponent of school prayers may emphasize the fact that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," a supporter would point to the fact that Congress shouldn't prohibit "the free exercise thereof."

Learning from previous mistakes, Mr. Helms and his supporters have been shrewd enough to try to avoid violating the first part of the First Amendment. If, for instance, he had proposed that the government support Christian prayers in schools, he would have been in deep constitutional waters. No matter how you interpret the Constitution, there can be no doubt that it prohibits the recitation of a prayer from a particular religion, such as the Lord's Prayer.

But no, Mr. Helms is a lot smarter than that. Rather than proposing outright prayers in schools, he appended to the law a subtle statement that the government could withdraw its funding from a school that denies its students what he calls the

"constitutional right to prayer." And prayer is defined more precisely as a moment of silence for reflection and contemplation.

Mr. Helms thought he was on the safe side, since the law doesn't favor a particular kind of religion, but allows students of all religious persuasion to pray in school. But he seems to have forgotten one thing: Although various kinds of worship exist in all religions, the "silent prayer" is practiced most often in Christianity.

Muslims, for instance, pray by lying down toward Mecca and reciting a certain formula. Although it's true that meditation is common in some Eastern religions, the classroom setting and the limited time will hardly afford the students the kind of environment required for meditation.

More important, however, is the fact that allowing prayers in school would be unconstitutional. Whether Mr. Helms' law discriminates against a particular religion or not is irrelevant. The point of the First Amendment is not only that the government shouldn't establish a particular religion, but that the government shouldn't establish religion at all.

There's a subtle difference between "Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion," which is what the First Amendment actually says, and "Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of a religion." In this case, one letter makes a great difference.

If people want to pray, that's fine. They have a constitutional right to practice their religion.

But there's no such thing as a constitutional right to pray in school. Pray wherever you want, Mr. Helms, but please don't force your religion on school children.

That's not only unconstitutional, that's un-American.

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