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Ricki should go after real welfare cheats

Imagine what the talk show folks would say if we told them how much tax money corporations take

The following is a complete transcript of my conversation with a representative of the "Ricki Lake Show." I called in after viewing a show entitled "Angry Friends Confront Welfare Mothers."

The show itself was pretty typical: people berating young single mothers either for a) not having a job and accepting welfare to feed the baby, or b) having a job, which leaves the baby in (horrors!) day care and away from the parent. Yes, these arguments contradict each other — but since the Republicans and Democrats don't seem to notice that one either, I let Ricki & Co. off the hook.

I did, however, give them an idea for a *different* show — and it started out like this:

"Hello, this is the 'Ricki Lake Show' calling. We're looking for Jeff Shaw. He had called about being a guest on one of our upcoming shows."

OPINION



Jeff Shaw

"This is Jeff. And actually, I just pressed that button in an attempt to talk to a live person; I've got a show idea for you!"

"Wait," the representative broke in. "So you don't

have a gay crush to reveal on someone?"

"No, not this week," I replied. "Although there is this guy named Barry Williams — he's a dreamboat! But that's another column. Anyway, I'm calling to tell you the welfare mother show was great. I hate lazy people who take tax dollars from us hard-working Americans such as yourselves in the fiercely competitive talk show industry."

"Matter of fact," I continued, "I know one guy who single-handedly soaks the taxpayer for over \$300 million every year in welfare handouts — and that's on top of the salary he earns!" I added in a tone of righteous indignation.

At this point he interrupted, outraged and a little dubious. "But you said this was a welfare case," he said. "How does this person get welfare in addition to this job of his?"

"Easy," I said. "He's the CEO of Archer Daniels Midland, a corporation which made over \$700 million in profits last year. See, if you work at McDonald's, you might make too much money to qualify for a welfare check. But if you own McDonald's, that's when the big welfare checks start rolling in. One example: The government kicked down \$1.6 million to pay for Chicken McNuggets advertising, for God's sake!"

"And speaking of giving money to clowns," I continued, "back to Dwayne Andreas from ADM for a minute. As if the \$300 million weren't enough, the price supports and subsidies we provide for the corn sweetener ADM sells cost the American consumer \$3 billion every

year. And that's just direct cost to the consumer — it doesn't even factor in the tax dollars that get handed to these people. According to Tim Weiner of The New York Times, \$170 billion in corporate welfare is disbursed every year. Bet you didn't know that."

"Well, no, I didn't," he muttered, more than a little perplexed. "But what does that have to do with ..."

"With your show? That's the easy part. Your show shouldn't be picking on welfare moms because aside from being sexist as hell, it's just plain wrong. Aid to corporations costs us over three and a half times what aid to individuals did even before Clinton slashed the social safety net. And what kind of return do we get on this investment?"

"Jack squat!" I shouted before he could cut me off. "Unless you count grants like the \$11 million handout to Pillsbury to promote the Dough-boy in other countries. That's the real tragedy: We'd rather invest in the images of cartoon characters than in raising the standard of living for real

people — investing in moms to help them raise their children right.

"We criticize young mothers for taking welfare, and if they get a job, we vilify them for not staying home with the kids. If you ask me, all these people yapping about family values ought to leave the welfare mothers alone. Aren't they supposed to be for parents staying in the home?"

"But parents can stay at home without welfare," he protested. "In a two-parent household, if one parent gets a job —"

I had to interrupt again. "OK, even if that was fair to single parents — the hardest-working people in America — it would still ignore the problem with these corporate welfare recipients. They don't take this money so they can create jobs. Sears, Roebuck and Co. took \$280 million in tax breaks and cash from Illinois — and then laid off 4,900 people there. Want to do a show about the welfare scandal? Put Dwayne Andreas and the CEO of Sears and the CEO of Lockheed on the show."

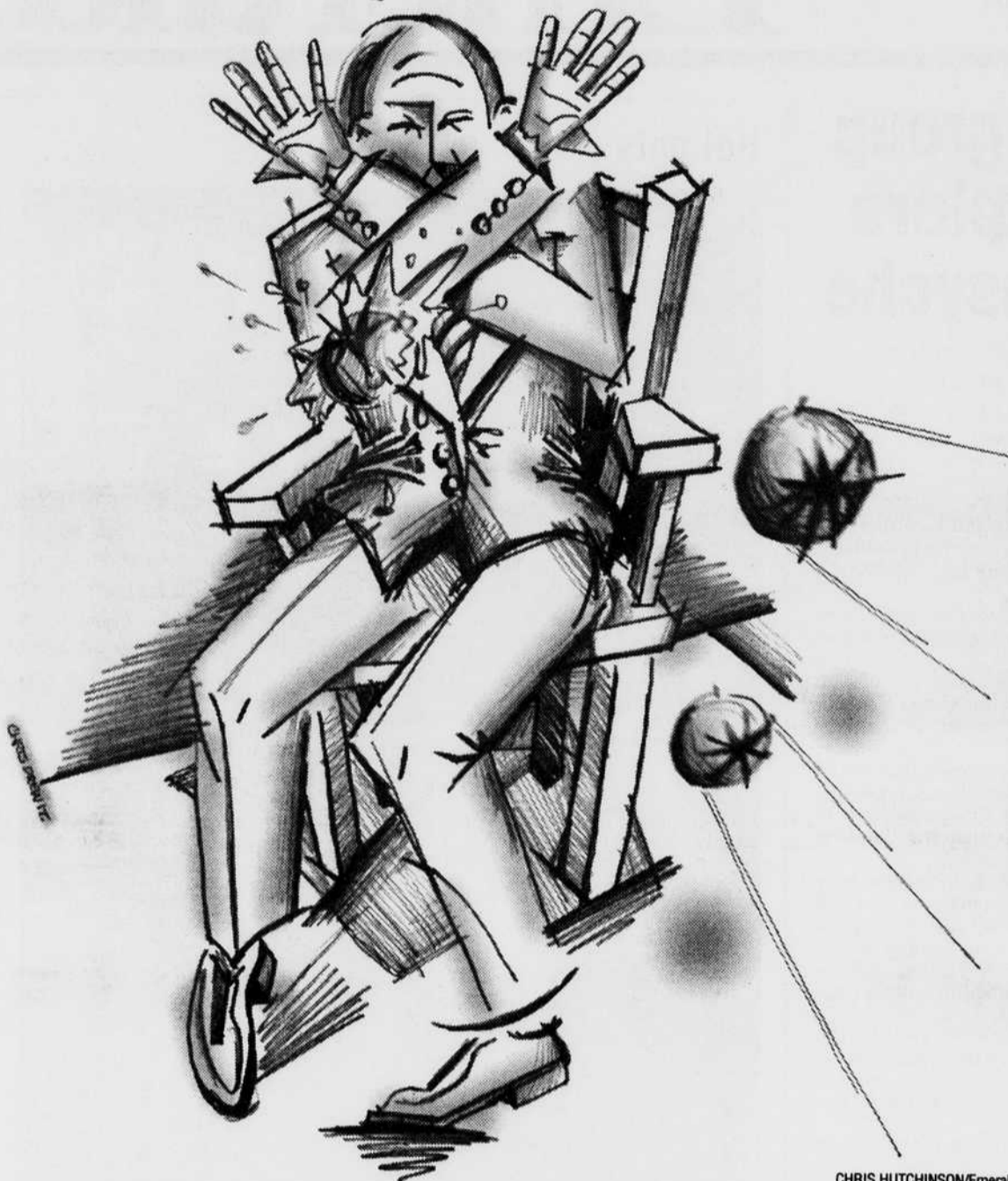
"But," he sighed, "it really would-

n't make an exciting program. We need action to keep the viewers interested."

"Action?" I screamed. "The average American pays \$1,388 every year in corporate handouts. That's my money! That's your money! What do you think would happen if you told your studio audience that — and then put these fat, old rich guys in suits in front of them and said, 'Here's where your money goes'? Hand out some rotten fruit at the door, and you've got a ratings bonanza."

OK, so you've probably guessed that this conversation didn't actually occur. Still, how about it, folks? I say call 1-800-GO-RICKI and tell them you think this would make a good show. But dibs on the first spot in line and the first tomato; after all, it's my idea.

Jeff Shaw is a columnist for the Emerald. His work appears on alternate Wednesdays. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

Thumbs



TO CLEANING UP MT. EVEREST:

A group of climbers are heading up the tallest mountain in the world, but instead of planting a flag, the San Francisco Chronicle reports that they are going to take out the trash. Everest is littered with climbing leftovers, including heavy metal oxygen tanks. The climbing party plans to haul the trash off the highest hill and back down to thicker air where it can be properly disposed of.



TO TRENT LOTT:

The Senate majority leader does live up to his promises better than some presidents, but only barely. Lott had pledged to allow a vote on campaign finance reform, which he did — eventually. Before he sent it to the Senate, however, Lott so drastically changed the bill that its original supporters wanted nothing to do with it. In the midst of an ongoing barrage of media coverage of alleged oral sex in the Oval Office, the move received alarmingly few headlines. Even if voters had started to put some pressure on Lott, however, he still has plenty of extra padding in his wallet that he can use to cover his ass. Knocking down finance reform managed to ensure that.