



ART YOUNG

RECALL

BY JIM WILKINS

Every so often I find an interesting story to tell and when I do, I like to tell it. As in the past, our fearless Editor Michael provides a forum for just such an occasion. I was recently recalled from my seat on the Astoria City Council, and therein lies the tale.

One Saturday night last summer, while my wife, Regina, was out of town, I was enjoying the music and the wine at a restaurant we own in Astoria. Toward the end of the evening an acquaintance came into the lounge. "Jim, let's go downtown and party," he said. "Sounds good to me," was my unthinking reply. Our first stop was at a tavern that featured exotic dancers who were just finishing their show. My host then proposed that we move the party, now including the dancers, to a more relaxed environment and, before long, I found myself in a room with topless dancers and various substances. What I didn't know at the time was the ever vigilant Astoria Police had seen and recognized me downtown and followed us to see what Councilman Wilkins was up to on his night off. As it turned out, both ladies had charges pending against them and when grilled by the police later on as part of a special investigation, said what the cops wanted to hear. Both of them received "special treatment" as a result of their statements.

The investigation resulted in a police report containing mostly false statements, suppositions and inconsistent gibberish which the D.A. assured my attorney was to be confidential information. Almost immediately, however, this report was leaked by the police to the local daily newspaper. It was then, with the relentless momentum of a tsunami, that stories, rumors, distortions and outright lies began to appear in the local media and to circulate through the community. I found myself confronted by a group of people who seemed to feel that the allegations regarding my private non-harmful activities that one evening in July were an outrage almost beyond comprehension.

Leading the charge was the pompous pseudo intellectual who unfortunately for Astoria has inherited the local newspaper. My alleged transgressions became a *cause célèbre* for him, and he and his like-minded bigots set out to take me down. As he proceeded with his campaign, and people began talking to me about it, I came to fully realize how horribly despised this poor fellow is in this area. No wonder he has an unlisted phone number. The composite image floating around town is of a plump and balding ruddy faced man, dressed in a Nordstrom sportcoat with his red neck ballooning over the edge of his perfect white collar, clenching a big cigar in his grinning mouth as he viciously shakes a small boy while opera music plays loudly in the background. I'm reminded of the quote by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, in 1936 in Great Britain, who was describing the journalistic methods of Lord William M. Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere, two of that country's press barons: "They are both men I would not have in my house," he said. "What are their methods? Their methods are direct falsehoods, misrepresentations, half truths...What the proprietorship of these papers is aiming at is power, and power without responsibility — the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages." The last dramatic phrase came from Baldwin's first cousin, Rudyard Kipling.

Joining in the fray was a retired lawyer from Chicago who came to Astoria to open up a property management business and, it seems, to impress his moral values upon the populace. Another key player was the general manager of a local radio station, one that features rightwing talk shows and other mean spirited tripe, including a "Hate Your Neighbor" call-in show in the morning. This outlet encourages anyone to call in and say just about anything about anybody — and they did about me, day after day. The station manager's wife is the secretary to the Police Chief. This fellow actually feigned surprise when I told him I no longer wanted to subsidize my own degradation with my advertising dollars.

This relentless media onslaught whetted the political appetite of the local District Attorney, who spends considerable energy to get his name mentioned in any media any time any where. He is known in the local legal community as a grand-standing carpetbagger, using his position here as a stepping stone to bigger and better things somewhere else. He received the police report and after sitting on it for a few weeks realized that he could get considerable political mileage out of the situation. It soon became clear to my lawyers that he was intending to charge me with something, allowing him the opportunity to waltz once again in the media spotlight. While the prospect of a long and very public trial wherein I would confront the only two witnesses available was certainly appealing to the local tabloid, I found it unacceptable. My attorneys agreed, and proceeded to make some arrangements with the Court. I would admit to possessing less than an ounce of a common herb, a violation, not a crime, under Oregon law, receive a conditional discharge, and after completing the Court ordered sanctions, I would be cleared of any wrongdoing and my record would remain clean. The Court ordered me to pay \$7,000 to charities chosen by the D.A., to receive an evaluation by a person licensed by the State of Oregon to do such work. I paid the money, received an extensive evaluation by a psychologist in Portland, including a long interview, an extensive battery of psychological tests, and a blood screen. The newspaper, as expected by now, could not resist the opportunity to continue to misrepresent the facts. They stated that I had been convicted of a felony, that I had been charged with possession of cocaine and with soliciting prostitution; all false statements. The Editor called for my resignation from the Council, and soon talk of a recall was circulating around town. This apparently stimulated the secretary at the Public Works Department to take action. This long time bureaucrat became the Chief Petitioner in the recall effort, and along with some like-minded cronies, started gathering the signatures necessary to put the issue before the voters. She actually came to my door asking for my signature while explaining there was nothing personal in all this.

Behind the scenes of this effort lurked the Man in Black, a local architect and anti-government zealot who was recently elected to the Council. He managed to obtain a copy of the police report which was passed out at the local Rotary Club, where I was once a member and past President. He also called up the company that handles the insurance and bonding for our construction firm and tried to convince them to their amazement, that they should no longer do business with me. I've worked with this firm for many years and had carefully kept my account executive apprised of the situation, and he assured me that the Man in Black would have no effect on our business relationship.



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As the recall effort gained momentum the local radio station maintained a "recall watch" and the newspaper ran stories almost daily featuring excerpts from the police report as well as other "news" of the Wilkins situation. Someone even arranged for copies of the report to be available at the local Laser Quick outlet, for a slight charge. The drum began beating even louder. Although we knew we faced an uphill battle, Regina and I decided to try to do what little we could to offset the misinformation presented for five months to the citizens. We sent a direct mail piece to every voter in our Ward and with the help of many friends tried to telephone everyone in the district. As we all know, it's hard to argue with a man who buys his ink in 55 gallon barrels. The recall was successful by about 110 votes.

Of the two main forces at work in the effort to run me out of office, the easiest to understand is the behavior of the Police Department. I learned first hand about police in the late '60s in Chicago where I was beaten and robbed by two of that city's uniformed finest. Police are usually so convinced of their own inherent rightness that they often disregard, or can't even recognize, other viewpoints. They certainly have no great measure of respect for fuzzy thinking elected officials who have the effrontery to think they can set overall policy for their Very Important Work. The way they handled the investigation of my alleged misbehaviors should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the police mentality. I'm reminded of a story that ran a few months ago in *The New Yorker* about a young zoologist, just out of college, who went to Africa to study animals in the wild. She ended up working as a caretaker in a compound that was attempting to treat various animals that had been wounded, orphaned or otherwise cast adrift by the vagaries of modern Africa. One of these creatures was a hyena, and the young zoologist would take water to its cage every day about noon. Each day she would carefully push the bowl of water into the door and back quickly away. One day, however, she reached in just a little too far and the hyena grabbed her by the arm, ripping flesh and tendons down to the bone. Hyenas are able to gulp down slabs of flesh without releasing their grip on the prey, and this one did just that, gobbling chunks of blood drenched muscle while continuing to tear at the arm. The zoologist was able to finally poke the animal in the eye, forcing it to release its hold, and she turned to get away. The hyena then grabbed her by the calf, again ripping and swallowing, trying to take her down. Hyenas typically like to rip open the soft underbelly of their prey, often causing the unfortunate victim to trip over their own entrails. About this time help arrived and the zoologist was taken to the hospital for extensive reconstructive surgery. During her convalescence, while reflecting on her experience she came to realize that no blame could be placed on the hyena; this is what hyenas do, it what they are. Likewise my experience with the Astoria Police Department; I put myself in a position of vulnerability, and the cops did what cops do.

More difficult to understand, at least for me, was the strange coalition of left and right, the Editor and the Chicago Lawyer, for example, or the Carpetbagger and the Man in Black, that joined with others to enforce some kind of neo-puritanical ethics on me. The issue was not my performance on the Council or my contribution to the common good of Astoria. One of the City Attorneys called me up to say that he had been watching local government around here for 25 years and I was the best City Councilor he has seen. "I appreciate very much what you have been doing for the City," he said, "but I can't say anything publicly." This was a common theme among my "friends". Only Councilman Don Morden had the courage to publicly say that I was an excellent and unique community asset, a valuable member of the City Council, and that everyone makes mistakes occasionally. A few other folks rose publicly to my defense, but the vast majority ran quivering for cover while privately telling me what a great job I had been doing for the town.

After a couple of months of reflection, I have come to think of this surprising coalition of forces in the context of what David Wagner in his just published book calls the New Temperance Movement. The war on personal behavior over the last 20 years is a reaction to the liberatory trend of the '60s and early '70s and parallels closely the late 19th and early 20th century social movements such as temperance, social purity and vice and vigilance movements. This emphasis on the regulation of personal behavior and morality can be viewed as a power strategy servicing state and class interests, as well as a popular social movement. This new mood in America includes a coercive tactic of punishment for those who fail to conform to the new norms. One of the key ontological devices used in the behavior wars is the de-contextualizing of isolated behaviors. This dry logic (the general logic of temperance) seems natural to us only because Western science and knowledge routinely de-contextualizes behaviors from personal, social and cultural experience and presents them to us as large scale data sets. Such data then becomes reified as it is conveyed to us daily by the media. This reification succeeds because it builds on a historical tradition for other "knowledge" such as Western religious lore and its pronouncements against sin. The reinforcement of our cultural/moralist/traditionalist agenda with secular rationalist support by professionals results in a kind of consensual fog, leading to anger against certain personal behaviors. When viewed from this perspective, it makes good sense to incarcerate a large and ever increasing percentage of our population for violating personal behavior norms while steadily reducing the amount of social effort spent on educating our citizenry. Years ago C. Wright Mills noted how limited people are in their ability to see within their own times the social structural, cultural and other issues raised by daily life:

"Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs in the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns in their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kind of men they are becoming and the kinds of history making in which they might take part."

Wagner argues that rallying against individual, non-harmful, personal behavior will move American society not in a positive direction but only toward the illusion that society's ills will be cured by increased repression. He is right, of course, but changes in our social perspective on issues like this happen at a very slow pace. It wasn't that many years ago that most people were certain that the earth was flat. They didn't change their minds — they died.

Jim Wilkins is a former Astoria City Councilman who was recalled by a district election earlier this year. He is a writer and musician and owner of a construction company and a restaurant.