

Mythical, undefinable policy rules Reagan's Washington

If, as Alexander Pope said, the proper study of mankind is man, then the proper study of Ronald Reagan's Washington is Salem at the time of the witches. Probably not since then has one town been so obsessed with the mythical, the undefinable and the downright fictional. In Washington, policy goes bump in the night.

Congress, for instance, recently forbade the use of federal funds to teach "secular humanism" — whatever that is. Neither it nor the Department of Education has defined the term, although if you see it, put a burlap bag over it and call Washington — collect. Like herpes, socialism and Keynesian economics, it might have something to do with evolution.



Richard Cohen

At the same time, an emerging cornerstone of national defense policy is the so-called "Star Wars" program which does not — and may never — exist. The president praises it, the Cabinet defends it and artists even draw it. It looks like a secular humanism.

Not until you come to the subject of the federal budget, though, is reality truly left behind. The first example of that is the president's insistence on a constitutional amendment that would require a balanced budget — this from a man whose own budget is more than \$200 billion in the red. Probably not since Spiro Agnew toured the country preaching propriety and morality has the country seen anything quite like this performance.

As often as the president asks for his stop-me-before-I-spend-again amendment, he also cites the so-called Grace Commission report, named after J. Peter Grace, the head of W. R. Grace & Co. Grace (the commission, the report and the man) claims that just by following 2,478 simple recommendations, the government could eliminate (trumpets, please) \$424 billion in waste.

If there's one place that claim is taken seriously, it's the White House where the president cites it every chance he gets. Along with a stupendous growth in the economy and the elimination of certain (many?) nondefense programs, Grace is the third leg of Reagan's tripartite plan

to eradicate the deficit. If that's the case, he does not have a leg to stand on.

That's the finding of Steven Kelman, an associate professor at Harvard's Kennedy School, published in *The Public Interest*, a neoconservative journal not known for questioning Reagan administration orthodoxy. After reviewing what the Grace Commission called "Ten Random Examples of Bureaucratic Absurdity," Kelman found the examples themselves absurd. Unfortunately, among the myths demolished by Kelman is the \$91 screw, the \$110 diode and the \$9,609 Allen wrench — handy tools with which to dismantle the bloated Pentagon budget. He discovered that these prices were mere concoctions — an accountant's way of assigning overhead.

Kelman learned that what was true for the famous but mythical Allen wrench, was true for the other nine "random examples of bureaucratic absurdity": They either did not exist or were vastly exaggerated. The commission, it turned out, was comparing the vaunted private sector with the much-maligned public sector when the two do different things. It's true, for instance, that private enterprise can construct a nursing home a lot cheaper than the government can. But then private enterprise doesn't have to meet government quality standards, doesn't have to take minority participation into account, and doesn't have to build its nursing homes in cramped spaces next to government hospitals. These are policy, not bureaucratic, requirements. In other words, it's what the people, through their elected representatives, want.

Kelman does not say that there's no government waste (there is) or that the Grace Commission is always wrong (it's not), but rather that its proposed savings are not economies at all, but radical changes in policy. Unless the political consensus changes dramatically, instead of just at the margins, Grace's \$424 billion remains yet another example of the Washington myth.

Still, this being Washington in the Time of Reagan, you can bet that the Kelman article will be put on the Presidential Index and no reference will be made to it. Instead, the chief alchemist will use myth, wish and error to turn the deficit into a surplus. If that doesn't work, a secular humanist will be hanged.

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Scientists ponder advantages of 'healthy' Paleolithic fare

Just when you thought there was nothing new in the diet world, just when you lowered your cholesterol, complicated your carbohydrates and swore off sodium, along comes a stunning leap forward into the distant past. We are about to reintroduce an ancient cuisine to the modern world. Ladies and Gentlemen, let us welcome the Paleolithic Diet.

This down-home, or down-cave, cuisine was touted last week in an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Two Atlanta health researchers reported on their exhaustive anthropological studies of prehistoric menus.



Ellen Goodman

They began with the theory that some of our modern diseases — stroke, heart disease and some forms of cancer — have spread because we are eating today's specialties with yesterday's genes. The food on our platters may be fresh, but we were created out of 40,000-year-old genetic stock.

These researchers came to the conclusion that the real way to be healthy in the 1980s A.D. may be to eat more like they did in 40,000 B.C. We are to eat the high-protein, low-fat produce of a hunter-gatherer world, in which even the red meat was not fat, happy and domestic, but lean, mean and wild. As the researchers put it: "The diet of our remote ancestors may be a reference standard for modern human nutrition and a model for defense against certain 'diseases of civilization.'"

Well, pass me the fried mastodon. This research may make scientific sense, but I have a strong suspicion it is part of a trend.

Just a few months ago, another researcher from Minnesota suggested that the potassium in the primitive diet might ward off the diseases of civilization. Sociobiologists are continually rooting about for mental-health tips in pre-history. Soon, we may all be told to wrap our happiness in skins.

After all, there are so many other health secrets locked into the lifestyle of our genetic ancestors just waiting for an enterprising researcher with a fertile, if backward, turn of mind. Consider how much the 20th-century American could benefit from following our forebears' method of acquiring their food. These were people who truly ran out to get a bite.

The Paleolithic people had another advantage on us, another built-in form of exercise that would make a splash in the magazines. As Mel Brooks explains in his routine on the *Two Thousand Year Old Man*, the basic method of transportation in the old days was "Fear." If modern Americans can get in shape merely because we want to eat, imagine what we could do to avoid being eaten. A Cro-Magnon Marathon would do wonders for the heart.

Then, of course, we could literally follow the Paleolithic diet for health and happiness. One of the staples of the period, a delicacy inscribed on the entire chain of cave restaurants was "mammoth." What a boon it would be to the average overweight modern gourmet to follow the latest "in-food," the all-mammoth diet. Fat would become, like the critter, extinct.

The lifestyle itself, or what we know of it, has further advantages, which researchers might boost for a pre-historic health kick. For example, the interior lighting of that period was not what it might have been. If we followed their decor, the midnight junk-food attack might disappear along with the refrigerator light. If all goes well, perhaps we can set up a series of health spas in caves all across the West, where, for a mere \$950 a week, we can learn to dig roots.

Do I sound suspicious of this back-to-primeval-basics movement? The truth is that I fully accept my genetic ancestors as health mentors. Some of them did develop medical problems — lion-bite, for instance — that we rarely see in the civilized world. But I am convinced that the average Paleolithic person was the very role model of good health when he died at the ripe old age of 32.

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