

# It's in the cards

## Keep spending with credit cards limited and legal



Kids, I've been down that rocky, pothole-filled road known as Financial Disaster Due to Excessive Use of Credit Cards, and I'm here to ensure that you don't wind up in the breakdown lane. It's an ugly, ugly place, and trust me, you really don't want to go there.

While charging a cherry Jolly Rancher at the bookstore last week, I was elated to discover a little gem of a guide called "Credit Rules." This is a bookmark-sized pamphlet put out by the Federal Trade Commission on how to manage credit cards once you've gotten your grubby little hands on them.

According to the FTC, there are six official credit rules (and one asterisked note!) that we should all pay careful attention to. Let's break them down together, shall we?

**Rule One: Credit cards are just like a loan — you have to pay what you owe.**

Now, if you are a freshman or just a highly inexperienced upper-classman, and you're asking yourself, "Duh ... what's a loan?" I'd like to personally smack you upside the head. For the rest

of you who are enlightened, yeah, you actually have to pay back what you charge to your card.

This is a very difficult concept to understand when you have a little piece of plastic in your hand that makes you feel like you're getting stuff for free. If you don't pay your debts off, you could spend some fun time in bankruptcy court. This is currently what I'm trying to avoid. Good times.

**Rule Two: Keep track of how much you spend. Remember that incidental and impulse purchases add up fast.**

Yes indeed, those trips to Amigos and Super K can turn into a big ol' pile of debt before you know it.

I can't tell you how crucial it is to pay attention to where your little cards have been. I'd had mine for only a couple of weeks, and before I knew it, I had a wallet full of dirty little plastic whores. They were all over the place, and I had no idea where all of those magnetic strips had been swiped.

**Rule Three: Save your receipts. Compare them with your monthly bill. Promptly report problems to the company ... blah, blah, blah.**

God knows those little receipts are lost in an over-stuffed backpack more easily than your homework. But, for Pete's sake, hang on to 'em for no reason other than to look at them a few days after they've been printed and kick yourself repeatedly for how stupid you were for buying your roommates pizza and beer.

And I doubt you'll have accuracy

problems. Nothing gets by the credit card Nazis.

**Rule Four: Never lend your card to anyone.**

Not even your Mom, babe. Trust no one when it comes to plasti-cash.

**Rule Five: Owning more than you can repay can damage your credit rating. That can make it hard to finance a car; rent an apartment, get insurance — even get a job.**

I learned recently that my freshly developed bad credit rating will probably follow me around for the next seven years. Seven years.

That's longer than it's going to take me to graduate from this school. The sad reality of bad credit is that it's embarrassing. When you have to have a co-signer to purchase an asparagus spear, it's a sad, sad life I'm, er, you're living.

**Rule Six: Pay your bill on time, and in full when possible. If you don't, you'll have to pay finance charges on the unpaid balance — and it takes forever to get caught up if you just pay the minimum.**

It's pretty easy to pay the minimum balance when it's 10 bucks, but here's a tip: If you keep paying 10 bucks a month, you'll be paying 'til you're 112 years old. If you've ever tried to pay off anything with an 18 percent interest rate attached to it, you know that it's about as impossible as finding a non-white trash guest on Springer.

If you credit card-less fools absolutely insist on getting a card, I'd

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recommend getting an American Express card. You're required to pay off your balance every month, which, in theory, is really what you should be able to do anyway. If you're not going to be able to do that, DON'T GET A CREDIT CARD. Pretty simple.

**\* Federal law limits your liability for unauthorized charges to \$50 per card.**

Please note: This does not mean that if you have a \$700 bill coming your way that you should leave your card out for someone to steal, thinking you'd have to pay only that 50 bucks. This would be a brilliant idea, but apparently you'd have to prove that you didn't charge that \$700. Good luck.

Standing there in the bookstore with my bookmark-sized, er, bookmark, all I could think was, "Why in heckfire didn't they put this out four years ago when I really needed it? This could have saved me years of shame and despair! I hate the Federal Trade Commission!"

Well, I don't really hate the FTC. I

hate the predicament that I've gotten myself into over the last few years. And believe me, trying to get myself out of it has been no picnic.

I wish that I would have listened to my parents when they tried to convince me that I'd end up screwing myself in the end if I gave in to the evil credit machine. I told everyone that I was going to use it only for emergencies, but after awhile, everything became an emergency.

Fellow students, listen to me, and listen well. Credit cards can become the scourge of your day-to-day existence if you're not careful with them.

Sure, go ahead and get yourself a bag of M&M's and a Visa T-shirt, but only if you're ready to handle everything that goes along with them. Heck, get your candy and then cut up the card when they send it. That way you can enjoy your goodies and stay out of trouble, just like Mom would want you to.

The moral of the story is this: Keep your head about you and your card in your pants. Believe me, you'll thank me

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# Playing the odds

## If Democratic voters want a Democrat in office, Gore is the only way to win

Yellow Emerald with Samuel McKewon

Murmur ... murmur ... murmur ... murmur ... murmur ...  
A hell of a battle took place between Bill Bradley and Al Gore in Des Moines on Saturday at Iowa's annual Jefferson-Jackson dinner. If there was any question that Bradley was a threat to Gore before their sparring match, there isn't any now.  
It had all the trappings of two heavyweight boxers puffing out their chests with a little pre-fight banter. Gore claimed Bradley bailed for cover when the Republican revolution occurred in 1994. Gore chided Bradley for bailing on farmers.  
Even Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin was on hand to say Bradley wasn't his "type of Democrat." Bradley kept to the high road — largely because he, right now, is the chic pick. After all, nobody ever gave him much of a chance anyway, and here he is, right in the middle of things.  
While radical

Republicans try their darndest to knock presidential hopeful George W. Bush off his bird's eye perch (memo to Pat Buchanan and Steve Forbes: it ain't happenin'), the Democratic presidential game seems to be heating up. And unlike the Republican race, which was decided long ago, the time for Bradley to usurp Gore is now. Gore knows it.

Bradley's making a run, serious enough to get himself on the cover of Time magazine. Now you know that's a big deal. And Gore, a man who has gone decidedly unchallenged for so long, has started to sweat. The murmurs and the whispers have become audible.

Gore's moved his political home base from Washington back to home-state Tennessee, which is a mighty wise move. Mighty wise.

Regardless of what Bradley can do, it's important to understand that if there is a man who can beat Bush, it is Al Gore. Those who champion Bradley, including myself, lament this fact, but it's an undeniable statistical truth. If the Democrats want a president in the White House come 2001, they must push Gore. The southern

United States leaves them no choice.

A particularly insightful editorial in The Washington Post on Sunday sheds light on that notion. Patrick Reddy, the pollster for California's State Assembly for Democrats, nails the presidential race right on the head.

The numbers Reddy pushes are these: The South controls 29 percent of the electoral vote. Bush, a Texan, whose brother, Jeb, is the governor of Florida, plans to do very well in the South. If the Democrats get shut out there, it's lights-out for the cause. So the old donkey needs southerner Gore to pull through the primary, plain and simple.

Time was, the South was a complete bastion of Democratic strength. It holds 20 percent of the minorities in America, who usually vote Democrat.

The entrenched white South has been strongly Democrat since the Civil War, when Southerners figured it was the Republican Party that wanted to destroy them.

Reddy points to the death of Franklin Roosevelt as the beginning of the white Southern Democrat erosion. While John F. Kennedy still carried the South in his narrow victory over Nixon in 1960, his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, cemented white

Southern hate with his Civil Rights Act, signed in 1964. He commented at the time he had handed the

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Republicans the South for the next 50 years.

And largely, he was right. Religious developments in the last 10 years have further polarized the South as white vs. black, — the blacks being Democrats; whites, Republicans. Since 1964, Reddy points out, Democrats have averaged less than 33 percent of the white vote.

Furthermore, out of the four Northern Democrat presidential candidates since 1964, only one, Hubert Humphrey, has captured a Southern state, Texas, in 1968. The other three, Michael Dukakis, Walter Mondale and George McGovern, haven't won any. Consequently, they lost handily.

Bradley, a fiscal conservative, liberal socialist, is the quintessential New Northern Democrat. Born and raised there. Pro-welfare. Hell, he even played the most Northern of all professional sports: basketball. So even though Gore accuses Bradley of being an elephant in donkey's clothing, it is Gore who represents a better choice for conservative white Southerners.

Either one of them could win the minority vote, as Republicans have rarely offered minorities a positive outlook. But the key, Reddy asserts, is the white South, whose money and influence can make or break the next election.

That has got Gore whistlin' Dixie. Say Bradley wins the nomination and loses every Southern state, which he probably would. He'd have to win every industrial state — Michigan, Illinois, Ohio and New Jersey — to have a chance at the presidency. All of those states have had Republican gov-

ernors and GOP majorities during the 1990s. And get this: A couple of those states, Reddy points out, have large Baptist populations just like the South.

Gore, who has fared well in the South in the past, could carry those people, too.

But here's the quandary: Early primaries are New Hampshire, New York and California. Bradley just might win them all. And Gore might be finished, which is why the vice president is putting on the press right now.

Now is key to what Saturday night's fireworks were all about.

Any nominee still faces a daunting opponent in Bush, who hasn't even broken a sweat yet in his campaign.

Gore, who didn't expect to, is perspiring freely.

It's painful to see politics come down to numbers, and though we believe it just got invented 10 years ago, it's been around forever.

It's called playing the odds, and Gore, though he may not have them in the primary, is the only one who can have them in the general.

The AFL-CIO is probably days away from officially backing Gore. Same goes for other groups. And they're smart for doing it. Other Dems should get in line. Because whether I or any other Bradley-supporter likes it, the road to the White House must pass through Al and Tipper's explicit lyric-free and ecologically sound household. It's the only way it can be.

If Democrats want a Democrat in the White House, it will have to be Gore. History doesn't have a habit of lying, especially when it still exists in the present.



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