

"TOWN MEETING AT WOUNDED KNEE"

By Frank Bryan

"There is a time" it is said, for "every season under heaven." Autumn is a time of passing; a season of hillsides once brilliant turning dull, of woods matted with the residues of summer, of cattle steaming in barnyards under clouds bloated with the season's last rain. But death in the fall is natural, acceptable. It comes with the seasons and triggers our instincts for warm fires and a woodshed well-stocked. We accept it with a melancholy of hope found in the lyrics of Judy Collins:

Across the morning sky all the birds are leaving.

Oh, how can they know it's time for them to go.

Before a winter's fire we'll still be dreaming. I do not fear the time.

I do not fear the time.

Death in the spring is another matter. What follows is about a death in the springtime, this year in Vermont. It is about the death of democracy.

Soon after Town Meeting, 1985, two headlines appeared in the state and local section of the state's largest newspaper. One noted that a town had voted to support a kindergarten. The other said that another town had voted down a kindergarten. The stories told were of communities locked in debate, of votes and motions and nervousness and tempers and foolishness and wisdom. The stories were of citizens engaged in face to face decision making on an issue of great importance. They were human stories of neighbors wrestling with a profoundly personal issue — the future of their children. They were little stories, little stories about Democracy.

Color them gone. Color them gone forever.

The legislature and Governor Kunin have mandated kindergartens. They snatched away from the towns one of the last issues that calls forth the best of democratic politics: open, heated, meaningful debate and decision on something that counts. The state elites have said "we know best." They have said they will not allow decisions to be made democratically if there is a chance that the outcome will be inconsistent with their views. They have insulted once again the people in the towns that have fought long and hard on both sides of the issue.

Color them arrogant. Color them authori-

tarian. But never, never color them democrats.

Let me be clear. If a kindergarten vote came up in my town I'd most likely support it. Most educators agree that five years old is a proper time to begin the process of public education. But the case for kindergarten is NOT uniformly positive. It varies most importantly with the nature of the community and the support and integration of family and neighborhood. But let us assume that the case "for" outweighs the case "against" in Vermont. And let us overlook this particular law's potential to discriminate against the "outback" kids and especially the poor outback kids. Let us even forgive the supporters of the bill for hiding behind language and calling it the "kindergarten access bill" — a technical truth, but a political falsehood.

The law is still bad. The towns have been in the business of developing kindergartens on their own for years. Given the present rate of acceptance all of the towns would probably have accepted kindergarten on their own in ten years or so. But we sacrificed the democratic process and the community support that comes with it when a town opts for a kindergarten on its own. Supporters of public education should be applauding the town meeting process, which has slowly but surely provided kindergartens — kindergartens enveloped in the robes of community receptivity, not state mandates. The politics of human-scale deliberation have once again been replaced by the politics of the fast lane, for the politics of brute force.

Town meeting has been called a school of citizenship. It truly is. And make no mistake. Laws like this one are killing it. It would be far better to have our children raised where there is a healthy, boisterous town government and no kindergarten than where the town hall is silent in March and there is one. Better to bring up our future voters in a community of free people where liberty is the fundamental principle of concern, where politics fairly oozes from the rafters of the town, where conflict and debate and "rules of order" and petitions and public outcry are part of a child's early recollections.

But the true test is a human one. Let Mrs. Kunin (or any of the legislators supporting this law) go to a town meeting. Let her listen to the debate. Let her wait for the vote. Let

her then stand up before the town's people and say: "Listen to the results of your vote. 122 YEA, 167 NAY. You have voted against a kindergarten. But because I am a more important citizen than you (even though I live in Burlington and not in this town) and because I know better than you what is good for the children of this town and because, fundamentally you are wrong and I am right. I hereby decree that the vote shall be recorded as 167 YEA and only 122 NAY. You will have a kindergarten."

The best way to judge public policy is to try to imagine yourself administering it. That's why I am against the death penalty. In our imagined town there would be 289 citizens who would "boo" Mrs. Kunin all the way to the door. She knows that. But things are easier when you pull the switch from Montpelier.

When Dee Brown wrote *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* he tripped a cord in the American consciousness. He told the story of how one culture brutalized and finally destroyed another. The dominant culture in Vermont is fast becoming a centrist, perfection at any cost, monolith that is destroying our human-scale environment, a way of life manifested most gloriously in our town meetings.

There were many, many battles on the way to Wounded Knee. One of them came under the frost glow of dawn in the Bear Paw Mountains of northern Montana when Chief Joseph (after a campaign still studied for its brilliance in West Point), facing the cannons of the cavalry, his villagers starving and bleeding and freezing in the snow behind him, laid on history these incandescent words "From where the sun now stands, I shall fight no more forever."

A century has now passed and we hear these words with sorrow and we lament the great wrong we committed. Town Meeting has no Chief Joseph, but I predict history will show a society many generations hence that will lament its passing, that will be sorry and ask why. Autumn hangs heavy on the horizon — a time of death eased by the hope of spring. For Town Meeting there may be no April. We may have to say, "Bury my heart in Montpelier. In the springtime — 1985." □