

Observer

RUSSELL BAKER

Systems Going Down

Nobody wants to go back to the age when there was nothing in the house to read but "Pilgrim's Progress" and the Bible, but the other extreme isn't so wonderful either. Just yesterday I blew six fuses after plunging into David McCullough's new 992-page Truman biography, titled with merciful brevity, "Truman."

It was lucky all my circuits didn't go out the way HAL's did after Keir Dullea yanked his computer chips in "2001." Come to think of it, though, what's so bad about just sitting under the apple tree singing, "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do...?"

It certainly beats reading another 2,500-word newspaper piece about Ross Perot while feeling guilty about not having watched last night's McNeil-Lehrer report on the fighting in Moldova, and then feeling even worse about not having followed the news closely enough to know when they quit calling it Moldavia and started calling it Moldova, or am I thinking of another place, Bratislava maybe, or Belgravia or Moravia? We are talking serious information overload.

Li Xiannian.

That just flared across the back of my skull: Li Xiannian. It's a symptom of information overload. The other day while trying to digest the Su-

We are talking serious information overload.

preme Court's latest decision, debating whether the latest Bush-Clinton-Perot polls were fraught with anything but spiritual confusion, smacking my forehead in amazement while reading that Germans — Germans! — don't want an army, trying to overcome compassion fatigue while reading the news from Sarajevo —

Where were we? Right: Li Xiannian. While taking in all the foregoing information and conjuring up mental and emotional responses which I hoped were appropriate to each — while doing all that, I read that Li Xiannian had died.

Here was proof that no matter how fast you take in information nowadays you will always be 20 billion facts behind the flow. First, I couldn't even pronounce Li Xiannian. Since he was Chinese I knew his name wasn't pronounced "Lee Eksianian," because newspapers have quit spelling Chinese names as if anybody bothered to pronounce them.

Years ago I'd meant to read an explanation of why newspapers did that, but I'd had no time for China. The information assault was too heavy. I hadn't even known who Li Xiannian had been when he was alive. Now that he was dead I was shocked to learn he had once been President of China.

A President, and you hadn't even known it, dummy! To atone, I resolved to remember who Li Xiannian had been and how to pronounce his name correctly (Lee shee-enn-nee-enn, according to The Times). That was on Tuesday; by today, having forgotten it all, I had to look it up in Tuesday's paper.

Back to "Truman." Got to read "Truman" even at 992 pages. It's by David McCullough. Anything by McCullough is a "must read." But what about "Sickles the Incredible," a 390-pager by W. A. Swanberg? Ought to read that first. It was a gift from Shirley, who deserves a note with brief review.

On the other hand, if I read "Sickles" to get to "Truman," when will I ever get to Boswell's "Life of Johnson" with its 1,402 pages? Boswell has been waiting in line for three years. I'd promised to get to him as soon as I finished Henry James, and I still have "The Ambassadors," "The Golden Bowl," "The Awkward Age" and four volumes of the Edgel biography to go.

Wait a minute, here come the morning papers: the Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Washington Times, Baltimore Sun. Got to get on top of this M.I.A.-P.O.W. story, South African massacre, New Jersey budget, what's wrong with the Mets, Bush behaving like an old crosspatch, Clinton and Orioles pitchers struggling, "Batman" socko at B.O., Israeli elections...

Mail's here: New Yorker, New York magazine, New York Review of Books, Washington Monthly, Nation, National Review. What! Another New Republic? They publish a new New Republic every hour nowadays? Ah, Vanity Fair, you make me feel so chic.

What's this? Ten pounds of directions for latest computer program. New health-insurance rules explained in demotic Egyptian. Bulletins from Ed McMahon. Can't read 'em now. Time for McNeil, Lehrer, Dan, Tom, Peter, Ted, Jay, Arsenio, CNN, ESPN, Donahue, Oprah, Geraldo, C-Span, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Reportportportportport...

Daisy... Daisy... give me me... your... answer... do... do...

Reading Between the Polls

By Kathleen A. Frankovic

On June 1, CBS News reported that President Bush was the choice of 35 percent of the voters, Gov. Bill Clinton the choice of 27 percent and Ross Perot the choice of 26 percent. That day, ABC News put Mr. Perot at 34 percent, Mr. Bush at 31 percent and Mr. Clinton at 29 percent. A week later, a Time-CNN poll had Mr. Perot at 37 percent and Mr. Bush and Mr. Clinton tied at 24 percent. A Newsweek-Gallup the same week showed Mr. Perot at 35 percent,

Kathleen A. Frankovic, president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, is director of surveys for CBS News.

Mr. Bush at 33 percent and Mr. Clinton at 25 percent.

Who's right? Probably not one. But that doesn't mean any of the polls were badly done — or even wrong.

Why? Nearly half the voters in survey after survey say they don't know enough about Ross Perot to have any opinion. A third or more admit to similar ignorance about Governor Clinton. Under these circumstances, voter preferences are anything but solid.

With such a volatile electorate, it's not surprising that the choices expressed in surveys can be shifted simply by the order in which the questions are asked. Here are some examples:

• The New York Times/CBS News poll consistently reports lower numbers for Mr. Perot than other published surveys. Since 1976, the poll's

Keys to voter indecision.

practice has been to ask respondents to rate the candidates — or say they don't know enough about them — before asking their choice for President. Those who have said they don't know enough about Mr. Perot have probably been inhibited from saying they would vote for him — though some might otherwise have said they would.

• The Time-CNN poll regularly reports the least support for President Bush. A possible reason: Before asking preference questions, the survey asks a question that yields high nega-

tive results, "How well do you think things are going in the country these days?" This may deter many voters from saying subsequently they want to re-elect the incumbent.

• The Gallup Organization does the polling for Newsweek and CNN-USA Today. It has twice found that Ross Perot does better after voters have been asked to choose between Mr. Bush and Mr. Clinton. Mr. Perot gets less support when the three-way choice — Bush vs. Clinton vs. Perot — is presented first. A recent poll by Princeton Survey Associates for the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press confirms the pattern.

Having a three-way contest for the Presidency will make the fall election look more like a multi-candidate primary than a typical general election. Under these circumstances, polls could be less reliable predictors than

usual. This will be especially true if voters start using the polls the way political insiders do — to make strategic choices based on the perceived viability of the candidates on Election Day. Voters may even abandon their most preferred candidate to insure the defeat of their least favored candidate.

It is also possible that the polls will converge closer to Election Day, as voters think through their choices. Then, differences will be due more to who is asked what questions than the order in which the questions are presented. In the meantime, polls give us critical signals of distress and confusion. Those findings (on which all the surveys agree) are more important than the malleable figures of candidate support.

Texas Word Slings

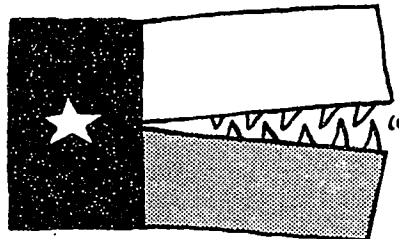
By Marie Brenner

Let's talk Texas.

The peculiar exchange Ross Perot and President Bush had this week on the subject of Mr. Bush's sons was the very stuff of Texas double message-sending, potentially ominous in its implications.

The feud was triggered by reports that in December 1986, Mr. Perot had warned then Vice President Bush, "one father to another," that rumor had it that the Bush boys were involved with gun-runners and Nicaraguan anti-communist rebels. On the surface, Mr. Perot seemed to be the very picture of concern.

Growing up in south Texas, I have long been accustomed to hearing this hidden code. The Texas way is to plaster on a mirthless smile, sugarcoat every word and shy away from unpleasant remarks to someone's face. The standard greeting of the state's country club set is, "Ewe look



Niculae Asciu

so good," applied like buckshot to the halt, the weak and the lame.

Our finest modern practitioners of the silver tongue — John Connally and Robert Strauss — now have new competition in Ross Perot and George Bush.

So what did it really mean in Texas parlance when Mr. Perot called the Vice President to tell him that his sons were being trashed around Dallas?

The answer is obvious: Mr. Perot was putting the Vice President on notice, perhaps letting him know that should he not get the access he desired, he might have sources that could potentially harm Mr. Bush's kids.

Ross Perot's "concern" for the Bush boys must have been heart-rending for George Bush. I'm sure the Vice President, like any devoted father, was eternally grateful for a call that insulted his children on the basis of unsubstantiated rumors.

I am also sure that Mr. Bush, a consummate Houston smoothie, saw right through Mr. Perot's hardscrabble effort. His response was equally camouflaged. His letter to Mr. Perot was subtle, very Texas — and leaves no doubt in the mind of any Lone Star State native about how annoyed he truly was.

Let's analyze. First, the very fact of the letter itself. Mr. Bush, the man of a million thank you notes, would not have wanted to defend his children in writing unless he was sending Mr. Perot a powerful message. A phone call would have done the job nicely and left no record.

But the Vice President chose to write a note, in perfect penmanship, on Christmas Eve. He spared no hyperbole, telling Mr. Perot that it was the time to "count one's blessings."

I can imagine his deep rage at having to defend his sons to the bossy Dallas billionaire, compelled to put his words down for the files. "My kids... are all straight arrows, uninvolved in intrigue and yet the rumor mill links them; and Ross it hurts 'em — You understood all this — What counts in life are honor, family and friends..."

How many drafts did he write of this note? How many times did George Bush turn to Barbara and say, "This will fix the little S.O.B." The message was pure Texas: I am the Vice President, you are the petitioner. Buzz off, Ross.

Marie Brenner, special correspondent of Vanity Fair magazine, is writing a memoir of her south Texas childhood.

Head Start Falls Behind

By Edward Zigler

NEW HAVEN, Conn. The Head Start program is not controversial these days. Everybody loves it. Republicans and Democrats extol its merits. President Bush was photographed at a Maryland Head Start center announcing his proposal to increase funding by \$600 million. Yet this highly publicized love amounts to no more than public whispers of sweet nothings. When political push came to budgetary shove, Head Start lost.

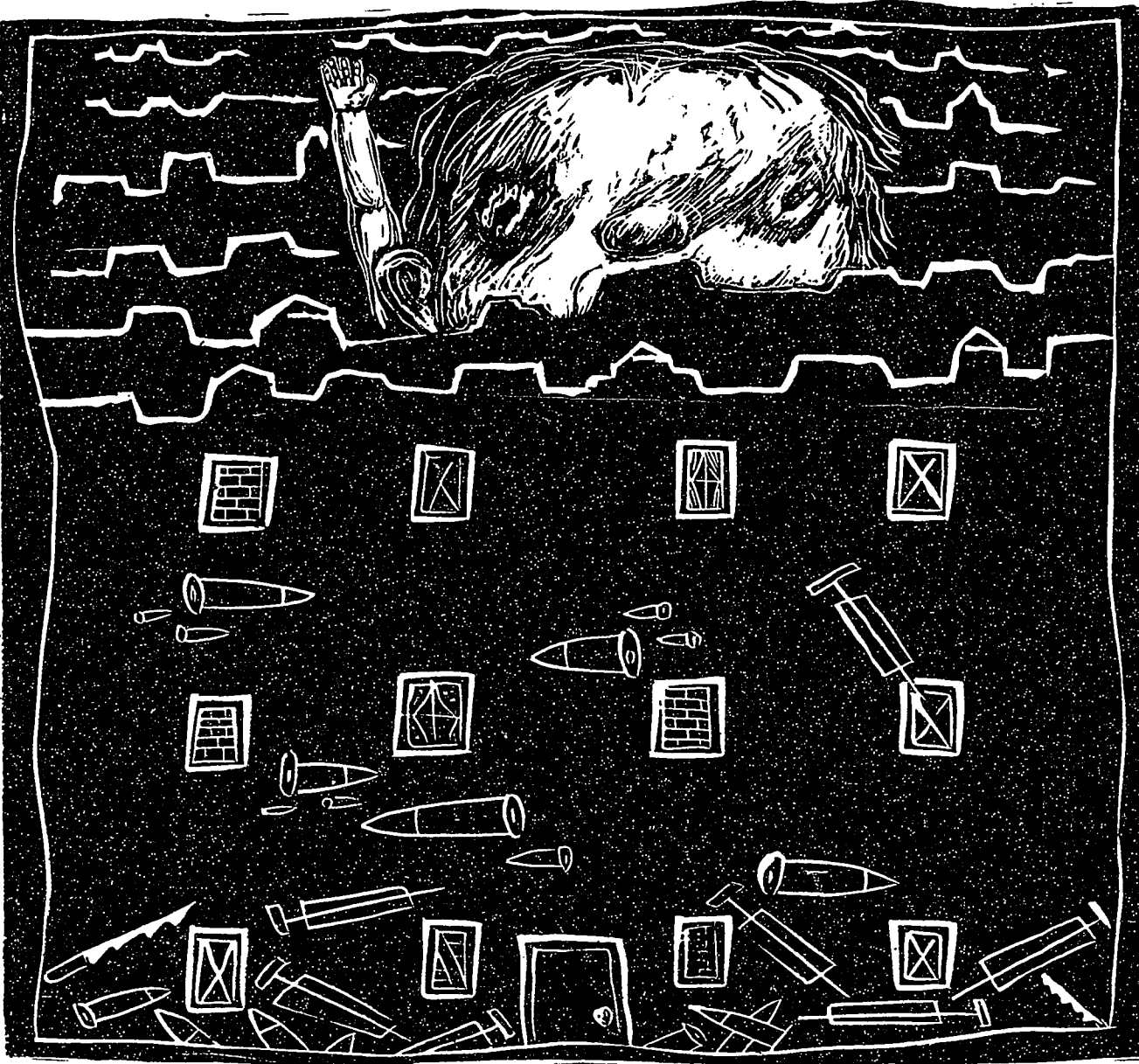
In negotiations between Congress and the Administration, \$250 million that would have let centers for 220,000 children stay open this summer was dropped from the emergency urban aid bill passed last week. Instead, 95 percent of the centers have closed until fall, and inner city preschoolers have lost a safe, familiar place to play and grow away from hot apartments and violent streets.

This is a familiar story. This year's Head Start budget is \$2 billion below the financing level set in the 1990 Head Start Reauthorization Act. And President Bush's proposed \$600 million increase for next year falls \$3 billion short of the schedule set in 1990.

Head Start has earned its good reputation. Government research shows that its graduates are less likely than their peers to be held back a grade or to need special education services. The program may even reduce criminality: I oversaw a review of juvenile delinquency programs (American Psychologist magazine will publish the findings this year) that indicated that early childhood programs like Head Start are more effective in steering children away from juvenile crime than are traditional preventive efforts like homes for delinquent children or parent counseling.

Despite its performance, the program is still threatened. Quality began to slip in the 1970's because of rapid inflation. In many locations, full-year programs shrank to 10 months, then to eight, even six, months. Teacher training was reduced, salaries did not grow and staff turnover reached unacceptable lev-

Edward Zigler, professor of psychology at Yale, is one of the original planners of the Head Start program.



Frances Jettler

els. It is not surprising that teachers leave Head Start: 47 percent will make less than \$10,000 this year.

Head Start family support services are crucial to combat increased drugs and violence, yet in 1990 case-loads for social service coordinators were almost double the recommended level in seven out of 10 programs. The Administration's concern with the number of eligible 3- to 5-year-olds served (now 30 percent), rather than the quality of care received, has diluted Head Start's success formula.

Since Head Start began in 1965, 11 million low-income children have passed through its doors. They have received free health screenings and nutritious meals, and have learned how to play in groups. Their parents have participated as volunteers; one-third gained employment through Head Start. Yet during the same 27 years, 50 million children who qualified for Head Start were left out.

We can offer poor children more than sweet nothings. Congress can make sure that at least a \$1 billion

increase for Head Start is part of the second urban initiative it is planning. Congress and the President can support Senator Edward Kennedy's School Readiness Act, which guarantees money to enroll every eligible child in Head Start by 1997 and sets aside adequate funds for improving the quality of care. And we can apply Head Start to more years of a child's life, from birth through the early elementary grades. Every low-income child could benefit from a longer, stronger dose of the Head Start formula. □

The Case of the Missing Pharaoh

By John Anthony West

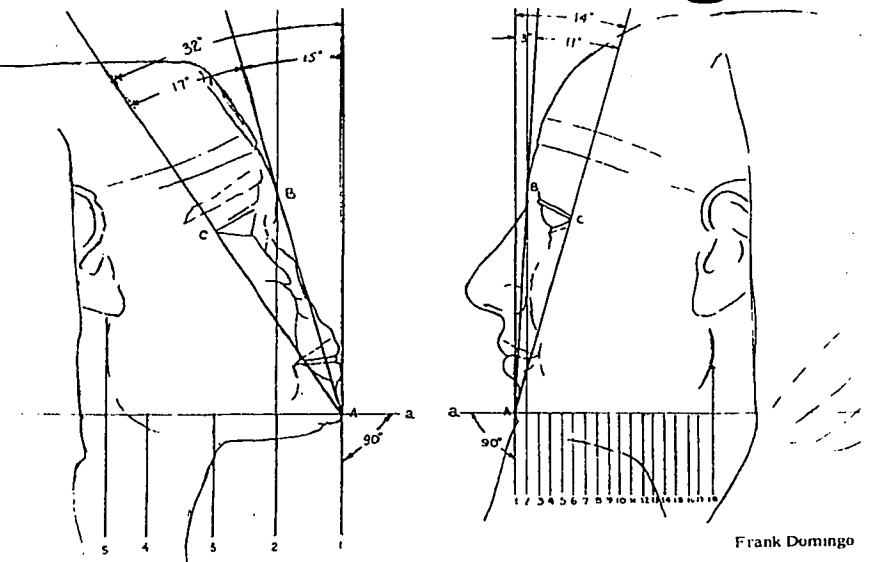
SAUGERTIES, N.Y. The police seldom work on a subtle but critical crime of scholarship. But a New York City detective's forensic art apparently has exposed a case of academic malpractice. His work lends credence to theory that the Sphinx is thousands of years older than Egyptologists and archeologists think. If it is, we must radically revise our ideas about ancient civilization before the rise of the Egyptian culture about 3000 B.C.

Egyptologists insist that the Sphinx of Giza was built about 2500 B.C. by an Old Kingdom pharaoh, Chephren (or Khafre). But a Boston University geologist, Dr. Robert M. Schoch, argues that, at a minimum, a civilization that preceded the pharaohs built the limestone Sphinx between 5000 and 7000 B.C. and he suggests that Chephren did further work on it.

He thinks rain caused the extensive weathering on the Sphinx. Many nearby Old Kingdom structures built from the identical limestone do not show such weathering; the inescapable conclusion is that the Sphinx was hewn earlier than they were, when the climate was far wetter.

Dr. Thomas L. Dobecki, a geophysicist with a Houston seismic surveying company, strengthened this theory.

John Anthony West, a proponent of the hypothesis that the Sphinx is older than scholars think, is author of "The Traveler's Key to Ancient Egypt."



The Sphinx

Museum statue

Just how old is the Sphinx?

His analysis of sound waves that penetrated the subsurface limestone of the floor around the Sphinx showed that the front and sides are twice as weathered as the rear; this suggests the rear was carved out of the bedrock much later than the other sides.

The belief that Chephren built the Sphinx is based upon purely circumstantial evidence and unproved assumptions. The most cherished is a fancied resemblance between the

Sphinx's ravaged face and the face of Chephren perfectly preserved in a magnificent statue in the Cairo Museum. Only Egyptologists think the Sphinx looks like Chephren; but since resemblance, like beauty, may be in eye of the beholder, revisionists felt no need to challenge the resemblance until it was "proved."

Using computer graphics, Dr. Mark Lehner, a University of Chicago Egyptologist, reconstructed the ruined face of the Sphinx as part of a three-dimensional model of the Sphinx as it appears today. He concluded that its facial features were originally Chephren's, as traditional Egyptologists believe. But since he used the museum's Chephren as his model — it made the 3-D Sphinx

"come alive," he wrote — his "proof" is a technological tautology. This circular logic can be used to "prove" the Sphinx was Elvis Presley.

Last fall, Detective Frank Domingo, the New York Police Department's senior forensic artist, traveled to Egypt with a Sphinx team I assembled. He carefully measured the Chephren statue and directed the photographer to get exact profile and full-face views of the Sphinx.

Despite the damage to the Sphinx's face, the statue and the Sphinx share enough undamaged reference points for Mr. Domingo to compare their facial structures. Using his police procedures, he produced an artist's impression of the Sphinx as it might have looked originally.

His report concludes: "After reviewing my various drawings, schematics and measurements, my final conclusion concurs with my initial reaction: the two works represent two separate individuals. The proportions in the frontal view and especially the angles and facial protrusion of the lateral views convinced me that the Sphinx is not Chephren. If the ancient Egyptians were skilled technicians and capable of duplicating images, than these two works cannot represent the same individual."

Profound technical knowledge went into building the Sphinx and adjacent temples. If the revisionist theory is correct, this implies that pre-Egyptian culture was more sophisticated than we ever imagined and that our ideas about social evolution and world history will need radical overhauling.