

# Much at stake in fall elections

**D**uring the summer lull before the fall ferment of the 1998 congressional races, let us examine today's political playing field.

This early in the campaigning, certain truths have already emerged. Truth No. 1 one is that, unless upset by an unforeseen political earthquake, voter turnout will be lower than ever.

Turnouts for the U.S. House races in the non-presidential years have been dropping for decades — from 49 percent of registrants in 1966 to 39 percent in 1994. And the 1998 midterm could be the lowest in our history, according to Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

There are several reasons for this bleak assessment of our electorate's voting habits, including: good times, so why rock the boat; no gut-wrenching issues to energize the average citizen — i.e., Vietnam or Watergate; and a broad-based turnout by too many disenfranchised, cynical citizens.



**HARRY SAYEN**

and thereby take back their various committee chairmanships, Mr. Starr's long and expensive run would end — in a whimper.

This scenario explains Mr. Clinton's interest in this year's House results compared to his less than enthusiastic help in 1994 when he was gearing up for his own reelection.

Though still far out-gunned by Republicans who have big business — insurance, tobacco, et al. — in their wallet-pocket, the Democrats, led by the president's efforts, have raised more congressional money than ever before. And, from what I've read, they intend to spend it wisely — only back possible winners, forget the sure losers.

**WHAT DO THESE** two truths mean? Very simply, they drive the tactics being used by both parties. The GOP and the Democrats must appeal to those groups which are ideologically driven and form their core and, therefore, more likely to go to the polls than the average person who has no large axe to grind.

This need to energize the true believers explains the antics of Newt Gingrich, the GOP speaker of the House, and Trent Lott, Republican majority leader in the Senate.

Gingrich, after spending months trying to soften his public image, suddenly does a volte-face and viciously excoriates the president. The same with Sen. Lott. After more than a year of trying to be the consensus-builder and work with the Democrats, he started ranting, the other day, about the sinfulness of homosexuality. Both men were shoring are their purist, Christian-right base.

Do the Republicans have anything to worry about in this off-

year when the usual odds favor the party not in the White House? They do — in the House, but not the Senate.

First, there's that razor-thin GOP majority. Just a dozen or so well-run Democratic races against right-of-center GOP incumbents could return the Democrats to power.

Second, the GOP is split between the centrists and social conservatives who feed on the emotional issues of abortion, school prayer rights and homosexuality.

**NOR CAN THE** Republicans agree on impeaching the president, tax cuts, government spending, the United Nations, or even on their own House leadership.

However, these rents and tears, so reminiscent of the Democrats when they were in power, will have a minimal effect on congressional races, most of which turn on local needs and wants.

All of the above points to the importance of the 12th Congressional District — a strictly suburban area stretching across the waist of New Jersey from Monmouth County to Hunterdon — this coming fall.

The first-term GOP incumbent, Michael Pappas, with an ultraright, anti-choice voting record is vulnerable because he won such a close victory in 1996 in a district overwhelmingly carried by Clinton-Gore and because the Democrats have wisely chosen Rush Holt, an appealing issue-oriented candidate.

So, this November every vote will count more heavily than usual in the power struggle for control of the U.S. House.

And I know whereof I speak concerning the power of the organized few. I still remember vividly my deep disappointment, near the end of my own political years, in the defeat of a fine and brave GOP governor, William Cahill, in the 1975 primary when a willful few zealots denied him a second term.

So I say to Mr. Holt: By all means, activate your base but, in the final results, the moderate center will hold the key to victory.

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## As Maine goes, so goes the nation

**A**UGUSTA, Maine — Steve Brooke steers his Boston Whaler up the Kennebec River, past half a dozen Great Blue Heron standing like dignified sentries along the banks.

"Above us are the ospreys and beneath us are the striped bass who have found their way back home. But looking out at this bucolic scene, he says flatly, "This was an open sewer 20 years ago."

Brooke, who has helped coordinate the Kennebec Coalition to restore this waterway, traces his ancestry back to the beaver trapping party that ventured here in 1629. He knows that the history of rivers is, in some ways, the history of America.

"Once the Kennebec was a fishery so full of shad and salmon, alewife and sturgeon that in 1723, a French priest wrote "a person could fill 50,000 barrels in a day, if he could endure the labor." In time, it became a waterway for the sloops bringing granite to the big cities, a power source for the mills, and then finally, disgracefully, a watery waste dump.

"WHEN THE smell of sulfur peeled paint off the walls of buildings along the banks, the city of Augusta turned its back to the river, warning children away from its dangers. As Tim Glidden of Maine's Natural Resources Council, our other companion on this summer day, remembers succinctly, "It was vile."

But today Maine is moving forward by running the reel of history backward. The mills are long gone and in the wake of the Clean Water Act, chemicals and sewage have been reduced. The fish are coming back. All that remains now is the dam.

We drop anchor near the Edwards Dam, a 917-foot relic built in 1837. For 161 years, this dam has blocked at least 10 species of fish



**ELLEN GOODMAN**

from 18 miles of ancestral spawning grounds.

This morning, as if on cue, a 4-foot sturgeon leaps out of the water, as if to make Brooke's point: "They are all right here, waiting to go up."

By this time next year, the fish and the river will once again run free.

This is the remarkable story being played out on this waterway. When the dam was built, water powered the industrial revolution. A free-flowing river was seen as wasteful and a dam was cheered as progress.

Here, hydropower once ran a mill that employed 800 workers. But when a coalition of anglers and environmentalists finally won out over a power company this year, the dam's removal became the symbol of progress.

**FOR THE FIRST** time ever, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission refused to relicense a hydroelectric dam. For the first time, they chose the future of the fish over the power of the past. They ruled that restoring the river was more important than maintaining a dam that produces a mere one-tenth of 1 percent of Maine's electricity. Now an agreement has been signed to restore not a single species, but an entire habitat.

So the dam is coming down. To describe this as a sea change, the turning of a historic tide, is far too

## Planting wildflowers is a crime?

**T**he District of Columbia is undergoing its first election without Marion Barry in some time, and we intend to enjoy it. The only trouble is there are 11 candidates for mayor, and we hardly know them. I have, however, found a flashlight in the murk. I will consider anyone who is against arresting people for planting wildflowers.

This is not some esoteric or fringe issue here. Someone was pinched in Anacostia for sowing seeds on an island that Washington prefers to consider a dump. His name is Bob Nixon, a television producer turned environmentalist, who is trying to clean up the Anacostia River and reclaim two islands, Kingman and Heritage, for local people.

He runs the Earth Conservation Corps, a private environmental organization, and on Friday, June 12, he led a group of volunteers, some from AmeriCorps, which helps fund his group, to Kingman and proceeded to scatter a thousand dollars worth of wildflower seeds. He came with a bulldozer; to get it in, he had to take apart a gate with a decrepit "No Trespassing" National Park Service sign on it. The crew flattened huge mounds of trash and decayed leaves in a central clearing — superlative fertilizer, which the locals are forbidden to take away.

**THE FOLLOWING** Monday, he returned to inspect his work, and 10 police cars converged on him, ordered him to put his nose against the bark of a tree and put him in handcuffs. They also arrested his dog, a Brittany spaniel named Jasper. Jasper was taken to the pound, supposedly as an accomplice. Nixon was not charged and was released from 5th District police headquarters hours later.

To him, the most interesting member of the arresting party was Larry Goodwin, vice presi-

dent of Island Development Corp., which has been trying to get its hands on the islands since 1983 for a theme park. The residents of Anacostia do not wish the influx of traffic and trash that accompanies a "virtual reality interaction education center" into the neighborhood. Nixon says Goodwin told him, "This is our land."

That's not quite so. The Anacostia islands were created in 1916 by the Army Corps of Engineers as a reclamation project. The locals used to go over to fish or walk in the woods. Sometimes their teachers sent them to find tadpoles for science classes. The "No Trespassing" signs went up some 15 years ago. The Park Service began to dump leaves from other parks and the District illegally dumped garbage.

In 1983, an Indian-born Italian contessa, Bina Sella di Monteluce, entered the picture with her scheme for a theme park. She had millions to spend, and, according to a letter from Goodwin, has spent \$11 million, without a shovel of earth being turned. Nixon has hired investigators to find out how.

D.C. Councilwoman Sharon Ambrose asks rhetorically, "What do you think would happen if someone came along and wanted to build a theme park on Roosevelt Island, with McLean on one side of the river and Georgetown on the other? It just wouldn't happen."

**SHE REPRESENTS** part of Anacostia and the wrath of her constituents. Anacostia is thought of as the ward that God forgot, the one that's used to being dumped on. It has neat middle-class houses along the river, but most residents are low-income. It has the highest unemployment in the city, the most violent housing projects, and too many random shootings — five of Nixon's volunteers have been killed in the six years he has been trying to clean up the river. Hope does not run high in Anacostia.

The Island Development Corp. was encouraged by the D.C. Council. Congress, which pays no mind to Anacostia, went along too. The president was reluctant to transfer custody from the Park Service to the District, but signed a bill after a tongue-lashing letter from District delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton about not interfering in a local matter. The council then voted to give the contessa a 99-year lease and Anacostia braced itself for another low blow.

It took the D.C. Control Board, which was invented to circumvent Marion Barry and his big deals, to top the kibosh on the action. It tore up the lease.

Now the islands are in limbo. I can report that Nixon's attempt to make them beautiful has been thwarted. The black mounds are back. No flowers will bloom. We entered illicitly. We saw two great blue herons unfurl their wings over the polluted water as a Metro train rumbled by in the distance.

Eight hundred young native Americans, visiting Washington for a convention, were invited by Nixon to come in for more cleanup last weekend. Councilwoman Ambrose had to arrange for them not to be arrested.

Washington has a reputation as a city where no good deed goes unpunished. I'm looking for a mayor who will change that. Anacostia is the perfect place to start.

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**MARY MCGRORY**

## Disasters are a part of nature

**D**isasters are seldom what they first seem. Famines are less about failed crops than about the politics and inequities that impede sharing food in a bounteous world.

The environmental impact of large oil spills often is less than the damage done by attempts at a quick cleanup.

Of all this country's natural killers, by far the greatest — surpassing floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning, mudslides and blizzards together — is hot weather.

And on that heated note, the blazes that riveted national attention on Florida are less about the need to "pray for rain" — Gov. Lawton Chiles' plea — than about a desperate need to set more fires.

To make sense of this, and for insights into the nature of disaster in the Chesapeake Bay region, consider the pine forests that dominated Florida's landscape for thousands of years.

They were not the dense stands of slash pine, the species one sees nowadays all over Volusia, Flagler and Brevard counties, where a half-million acres lie charred, where tens of thousands of Floridians had to evacuate their homes. Most of the slash was planted since the 1930s by timber interests in search of a faster buck. You can clear cut and replant it every 20 to 30 years for pulpwood.

**THE NATURAL WOODS** it replaced were slower-growing longleaf, a magnificent pine that can grow for five centuries and whose wood is so hard and durable it seems more like oak or teak.

The longleaf forest, which in Colonial times stretched from Virginia to Texas, was as dependent for its growth on frequent fires as a field of corn is on the farmer's fertilizer.

From remnants that remain, we know it was an open, sun-spangled forest, almost a treed prairie, with widely spaced pines amid a waist-high, undergrowth of tawny wiregrass that rippled beautifully in the breeze.

Fires set by lightning (Florida is the lightning capital of the United States) surged routinely through the longleaf forest every few years, the flames carried along by the wiregrass.

The pines, even in their tender, seedling stages, were superbly adapted to survive the flames, without which the slow-growing longleaf could not have out-competed other plant species.

Also notable: As forest fires go, those among the longleaf were seldom that intense, as the frequent burning allowed little excess fuel to accumulate.

That all changed with the advent of slash pine plantations, where excess fuel — fallen limbs, needles, and dense, shrubby undergrowth like palmetos, has been accumulating for decades in some cases.

The result was a time bomb that went off this year after a drought left the piney woods supremely vulnerable to the high-intensity wildfires that now ravage northeastern Florida.

This is what causes experts like Geoff Babb, the regional fire manager for the Nature Conservancy's extensive forests in Florida, to say, "What is needed is to be more aggressive in setting (controlled) fires. ... to keep fuel supplies low."

The ecology of fire in the forest is less spectacular around the bay watershed, whose tree species never needed to burn with anything like the frequency of longleaf pine.

**BUT THERE IS EVIDENCE**, nonetheless, that our modern history of treating forest fire more as disaster than as a part of nature is leading to real problems here.

Research is showing that wide areas of the eastern United States are undergoing a marked shift, from oak-dominated forests to maple and other shade-tolerant species.

### TOM HORTON

On a heated note, the blazes that riveted national attention on Florida are less about the need to "pray for rain" — Gov. Lawton Chiles' plea — than about a desperate need to set more fires. To make sense of this, and for insights into the nature of disaster in the Chesapeake Bay region, consider the pine forests that dominated Florida's landscape for thousands of years.

And if the oaks go, so do the acorns that are an important food staple for a lot of creatures we consider part of our heritage — including deer, wild turkey and squirrels.

Suppression of forest fires — fires which the oaks need in order to out-compete maples — is not the only factor. Gypsy moths, which favor oaks over maples, are another, for example.

Still, forest ecologists like Marc Abrams at Penn State University conclude that fire does seem to be the "common denominator" in oak forests' flourishing.

We not only misinterpret the real nature of disasters, we fail to appreciate how changes in our habits cause disasters to mutate.

Chicago's "worst" heat wave, for example, killed 550 people in 1995. In fact, the city had several longer, hotter spells in the 1930s, with far fewer deaths.

But back then, vulnerable old people sweltered and even slept in the street, where neighbors could check on them. In 1995, victims typically stayed shut up alone in apartments for fear of crime, or used air conditioning too sparingly for fear they couldn't afford the electrical bill.

Similarly, Florida is perhaps the nation's most progressive state in regard to using controlled burns to prevent bigger wildfires.

But the counties under siege are ones where people have increasingly moved into the forest in recent years, fragmenting the landscape and making fire management both physically difficult and legally risky (as in, "I'm suing you for smoking up my laundry and making my asthmatic kid cough").

**ALSO, WHILE SLASH PINES** can withstand some burning, they are not nearly so well adapted as were longleaf (which Florida now is restoring wherever possible).

And so, inconvenience is avoided — for a time — and then the bills come due, and whole counties are evacuated.

We have much to learn about the nature of disasters, which are not just quick and fiery.

When same-size rainstorms in Maryland's metropolitan counties cause "worst-ever" floods each decade, the key may lie in all the paving we have allowed upstream, with still-inadequate storm-water detention measures.

A sea-level rise around the Chesapeake is hardly as attention-getting as a forest fire, but it is happening, even as we continue to allow waterfront development. In many of our lifetimes, we will have to deal expensively with the consequences.

Coexisting peacefully with nature may be possible; but only if we do a better job of understanding how the natural landscape worked and let enough open space remain to buffer the effects of fire and storm and flood.

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