

The Art Of Skinning

The Iraqi Jews, most of whom have never met an American politician, have a saying: "By the time I prove who I am, I can be stripped of my skin."

The saying comes from an ancient story about a fox in flight. Asked why he is running, the fox says: "Because there are hunters out looking for camels to kill and to skin." His audience protests: "But you're not a camel, you're a fox aren't you? Why are *you* running?" The fox replies: "By the time I prove who I am, I can be stripped of my skin."

By the time we figure out what some of our public officials are telling us these days, we can be stripped of our skin. Take the question of mental



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health facilities in San Francisco. We are told by our Governor that the state mental hospitals are going to be closed out, because it is better for patients to be treated in local facilities, in their own communities. That seems to make a certain amount of good sense. The mental health movement has long pushed for an increased emphasis on community services. But then we're told that funds are being drastically cut for community mental health services in San Francisco. That's a neat double play which leaves us—out.

The funds for community health services are being cut, we are told, for the sake of the taxpayer who wants priority attention to be paid to such matters as crime. But, as Al Lehman points out in a communication to this column, the series of bizarre and violent crimes which have jolted Bay Area citizens (and taxpayers) recently, have not been committed by professional criminals for the most part, but by clinically ill people who needed more of the medical treatment which it will soon be more difficult to get. The more we fight crime that way, the more criminals we will produce.

Our mayor who has been valiantly leading the national fight against cuts in such needed social programs—has provided another example. He announced last week that he was appointing someone to the school board partly because he had finished eighth in a recent election for the seven-place board. That has a logical ring to it—unless for some reason, you stop to think about it. Finishing eighth also means that an awful lot of people out there specifically *rejected* you, when you offered yourself to them. It's not exactly a vote of popular confidence. But that's what we were told, camels that we are.

We were then told that a clergyman was, in this case, being appointed to the Board of Education because it's time that we put the talents of clergymen to use in public life. Again, a persuasive sound. The talents of clergymen *should* be put to use in public life, and hopefully the day of bigotry against churchmen of this or that persuasion is past. But, after a moment's reflection, it becomes clear that that's not the point at all. Is there not a question about appointing to a public school board a man who has been *professionally* associated all his life with a private religious school system? It would be hypocrisy to say that these two school systems are not in competition. One of the open arguments for support of the private school system is that such competition is good.

The competition is not just in terms of bodies—which it is—but in terms of ideologies. One system has a sacred educational basis, which is proper and necessary for it; while the public school system has a secular educational basis, which is proper and necessary for *its* survival.

So, there seems to be a conflict of interest on a couple of levels, and it's a little like asking the vice-president of Macy's to sit on the board of the Emporium. He may be an exceptionally fine and conscientious man, but he represents a conflict of interest, and doesn't do anything to inspire confidence in that second institution. And the public school system is one institution which needs more public confidence at this time. Whether the question had merit or not, that was the question that had been raised. So we were skinned by a good explanation which had nothing at all to do with the question.

As a somewhat different example of skinning, a little quote from William H. Brown III, Chairman of the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The Commission has done a magnificent job over the years in fighting discrimination, but is not above some bureaucratic skinning in evading a complicated issue like quotas: "This agency does not," writes Brown in a memo to his staff, "nor have we ever imposed quotas . . ." adding, however, that "numerical proportions might well be included as a necessary portion" of his Commission's action. He concludes that "I hope that this memorandum will serve to clarify the Commission's position on the subject of remedy, and eliminate any confusion . . ."

That old Babylonian fox knew what he was running about.

SAN FRANCISCO JEWS

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