

WILLMOTTS & WHY NOTS

DAVID J. WILLMOTT SR., EDITOR

Cutting Sales Taxes Or Real Estate Taxes

Suffolk's Legislative Counsel Paul Sabatino, Budget Review Office head Fred Pollert and Legislator Fred Towle have convinced us there is a way to cut taxes in Suffolk County.

On December 1, the state will stop imposing a 4% sales tax on clothing and footwear (for items less than \$110). Towle offered a bill that would eliminate Suffolk County's 4.25% sales tax on those items as well.

Four weeks ago, BRO issued a report that contained many "if" scenarios. The report indicated ways to reduce spending by more than \$30 million which would make up for any sales tax not collected.

Initially, we questioned whether county government had the will to reduce spending so it could financially afford to dismiss its portion of the sales tax. By cutting spending, the county could create a surplus which

would cushion the elimination of its sales tax.

In a recent discussion, Pollert, Sabatino and Towle did a good job of convincing us that if the county executive's office had the will, this could be accomplished.

The legislative budget for this year contains \$21 million in contingencies that, if not spent, could make up two-thirds of the revenues needed to fund the sales tax shortfall.

Towle warned that these contingencies are already being eaten into by the county executive without input or consent from the Suffolk County Legislature. He noted that the county executive plans on bloating county government by hiring 250 people (some for patronage positions) by issuing "skins," a method the county executive can use to avoid legislative approval for new positions. Towle also alleged the bureaucracy has more people in it today than it has

had over the last seven years.

He charges that the county executive is using about \$2.5 million of these contingency funds to purchase new cars.

A recent court ruling states that the legislature has no right to establish contingency fund accounts because it has no right to hold the public's money.

That decision is now being appealed. If the appeal is successful, the county executive and those involved in using these funds before the appeal has been heard, could be held personally liable for any money that is spent.

Pollert projected that funding through the New York State Dormitory Authority could be used to refinance the Cohalan Court Complex, saving the county \$2.3 million in interest payments. That savings would be put toward any sales tax shortfall.

Currently, there are job positions in the county budget that have not been filled for almost two years. The amount of funds allocated for these positions amounts to \$9 million this year and \$11 million next year. Pollert reasons that if we have been able to get along without filling these positions for this length of time, why can't we do without them in the future?

When the allocations for contingency

funds, the refinancing, and the unfilled positions are figured together, the total savings could amount to more than \$30 million — enough to fund the sales tax elimination, or a 50% reduction in the county portion of real estate taxes.

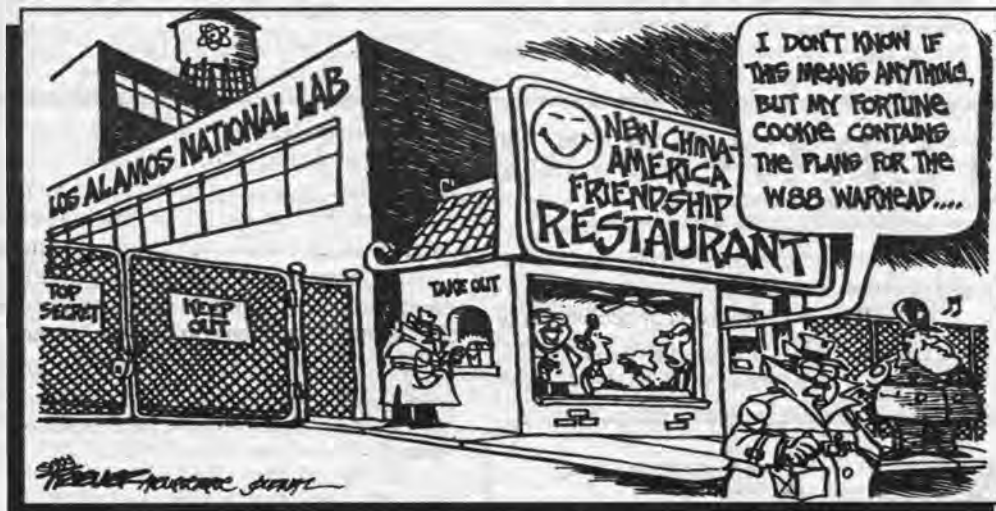
The discussion led to what the people want most: a cut in sales taxes on clothing and footwear, or a 50% reduction in county real estate taxes. Sales taxes are paid by everyone who purchases something in Suffolk County. Real estate taxes are paid only by property owners and those who pay rent.

Whatever tax is addressed, it appears there may be money in this year's budget that could be used to justify a cut in taxes — if the legislature and the executive's office are committed to cooperating with each other.

It will be a sorry statement this November if both the legislature and the county executive come before the people seeking reelection and say, "We could not agree on whether to cut sales taxes or real estate taxes so we spent that money."

The opportunity is here to cut government spending by \$30 million. Let us not blow this opportunity. It will bring about some serious tax relief.

And why not?



Keep Suffolk in Scouting

Several Boy Scout leaders are concerned that a proposal to eliminate the Suffolk County Council of Boy Scouts will seriously damage the area's scouting movement.

Long Island is currently split between two councils, The Suffolk council and one in Nassau called the Roosevelt Council. Each is responsible for the Boy Scout troops and Cub Scout packs within their geographical boundaries.

Suffolk County has its main office in Medford, which is geographically centrally located. The Roosevelt Council of Nassau has its headquarters in Massapequa.

Serious discussions have arisen about merging the two councils into one (called Roosevelt) and moving Suffolk's council headquarters to Massapequa.

If this is done, Suffolk would lose its identity and troop leaders and other volunteers involved would have to drive to Nassau to file the numerous forms and reports documenting individual scout achievements.

Parents of scouts would also have to journey to Massapequa to buy official scout uniforms and scouting equipment.

A number of leaders we spoke with said the hassle would be too much. If the merger goes through, they would seriously consider resigning. If volunteers find it is too much trouble, and time is wasted in travel-

ing, troops will quickly find themselves without leadership.

Some Suffolk officials feel Suffolk County's presence will be overshadowed by Nassau. They feel they will not be able to have the independence, freedom or community ties that are provided by having a Suffolk chapter.

They also question whether fundraising will be as effective if conducted by a Long Island council, rather than by Suffolk and the county's numerous local chapters. They raise valid concerns.

We have long admired the Boy Scout movement. We have seen how it gives children a solid foundation based upon hard work, achievement, discipline, values and beliefs. Do not let scouting be buried by bureaucracy.

Suffolk troop leaders have called for an independent audit of the finances of both councils. They are of the opinion the Nassau council is pushing for this merger not only to save money but to salvage itself financially.

The largest concern amongst Suffolk's scout leaders is that this proposed merger is already a done deal. We agree with their push for a review that would allow all the facts to come out. It is important that scouting's voting leaders make intelligent decisions. An open vote on this issue should be required.

And why not?

Standing United

For the past 12 months, the Suffolk Legislature has been legally attempting to prevent LIPA from collecting any portion of the \$1.4 billion certiorari suit awarded to LILCO because of the overassessment of its Shoreham nuclear power plant. And County Executive Bob Gaffney's support was nowhere to be found.

Less than a week after Suffolk Supreme Court Judge John J.J. Jones Jr. ruled that LIPA had no legal standing in its demand to collect any portion of the certiorari award, Gaffney is said to have chastised Republican legislators, and, like a mouthpiece for LIPA, advised them they are fighting a losing battle.

Since Judge Jones' decision saved Suffolk taxpayers \$1.4 billion, there was also some confusion among legislators when Gaffney refused to join them at a press conference announcing that decision. The people of Suffolk won, but their county executive declined to make that wonderful announcement along with his legislators.

According to our sources, Gaffney suggested at the GOP caucus that the county could not win a LIPA appeal, which will be heard before the governor-appointed judges of the state Appellate Division.

At the caucus meeting, we are told, Gaffney said even if Suffolk were to win the appeal, Suffolk taxpayers would still be strapped with refunding LIPA about \$450 million in PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) funds it has demanded back.

Legislators argued that LIPA may not be entitled to all of that money, especially since LIPA illegally gave different refunds to Suffolk residents (\$101) and Nassau residents (\$232), and because the author-

ity illegally charged Suffolk residents 2% higher electric rates than Nassau residents.

Gaffney's people deny these reports, but the county executive obviously has been afraid to stand up for the people of Suffolk County on this issue. He will be running for office again in November and does not want this controversial matter to be festering in any way. What he is trying to do is sweep his and the governor's mess under any rug he can find.

Gaffney does not represent Nassau. He does not represent the governor. He does not even represent himself. Bob Gaffney is supposed to represent the people, the taxpayers, of Suffolk County.

To wimp out before anything happens because there might (or might not) be a fix in at the Appellate level is about the lamest thing an elected official could do.

Gaffney ran four years ago touting himself as the LILCO dragonslayer. He promised Suffolk residents he would do everything in his power to protect the public's interest, but he has done nothing but play political ostrich.

Gaffney is a bright individual. He is, without doubt, a strong family man. If he would carry those qualities over into his political life in an honest manner, the public would have the representative who once promised to protect its interest.

Win or lose, Gaffney must unite with the legislature on this issue so Suffolk County speaks with one voice. As representatives of the people, the county executive and legislature should be fighting to the end to make sure the rights of the people and their money are protected.

And why not?

WILLMOTT & WHY NOTS

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Should Parents Have A Choice?

Under current New York State law, low- and middle-income parents have few options on where to send their children to school.

Private and parochial schools are often financially out of reach for the average citizen. Parents are then forced to send their children to public schools. Public school boards and the administrators assign the children to area schools, rather than allow parents a choice of where their children may attend.

In an effort to give parents a degree of choice, last December Governor George Pataki hammered out an agreement with the legislature to allow the establishment of a limited number of charter schools. New York City may become the initial testing ground for charter schools.

Charter schools are educational facilities owned and operated by parents or special interest groups. They can be non-profit or for-profit, and are free of many of the restrictions imposed on public and private schools by the Board of Regents. Charter schools must, however, offer a curriculum that leads to a Regents Diploma. The sponsoring organizations can determine additional curricula as well as class size.

If the enrollment of a charter school is more than 250 students, the faculty and staff must unionize. Some believe union work-rules are a contributing factor to the weaker quality of education provided by public schools. This mandate could severely hinder the establishment and operation

of charter schools, but, at least it is a start.

A companion to charter schools is a voucher system for secular and non-secular private schools.

Suffolk Life has been a long-time advocate of establishing a voucher system in the State of New York. Under such a system, the state would issue vouchers to parents who would then use the voucher's monetary value to help pay for tuition in private schools. These schools submit the vouchers to the state and are reimbursed with funds to help operate the school. It has been argued that the issuance of these vouchers and the implementation of this system violates the constitutional rules defining separation of church and state.

However, New York State's constitution mandates that the state help pay for education.

The City of Milwaukee in Wisconsin developed a system that allowed for a voucher system. Both the state and federal courts have upheld this plan. The U.S. Supreme Court turned away a challenge, thus leaving the lower courts' ruling intact.

The Milwaukee experiment has been remarkably successful. The enrollment in private and parochial schools in Milwaukee is up 600% since the program was started and, as expected, the student achievement level is substantially higher than that of students in the public schools.

The public school establishment has consistently waged a battle against this concept even though the goal is to improve the educational opportunities for the chil-

dren.

Despite this, Mayor Rudy Giuliani has been the most vocal politician calling for the establishment of a voucher system. There is strong support among the black community since it has witnessed the achievements their children can make when offered this kind of opportunity.

Black ministers have been engaged in a campaign to support a voucher system in New York. Schools located in predominately black communities have traditionally been the most downtrodden in the field of education. Today, minority students make up more than half the school population in parochial schools in New York City, and have shown huge gains in comparison to their peers in public schools.

Children attending private and parochial schools are the lucky ones. Their parents can either afford to pay tuition for

private school, or they are willing to sacrifice more than other parents. The Diocese of New York has set up special scholarship funds to pay tuition for more than a thousand students whose parents cannot afford the full tuition.

Private and parochial schools generally open their doors to everyone regardless of race, religion or creed. They demand adherence to strict rules and regulations. There is a disciplined environment and the emphasis is on core curriculum and family values. There is a low student to staff ratio, and the students receive individual attention which encourages them to excel.

This year, the governor and the state legislature should take a serious look at establishing a voucher system. It is good for the kids and that should be the first priority of education.

And why not?

Government Against The People

Many people, from the aviation community, professional scientists and engineers, to the average resident on Long Island, do not believe TWA Flight 800 was brought down by a "mechanical accident" as suggested by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and FBI.

Many firmly believe this commercial aircraft was attacked by a missile or other military ordnance. Such an attack could have been from subversives, or from friendly fire — a tragic mishap by our own armed forces.

Much more tragic is the fact that the federal government is prosecuting a Virginia couple, James and Elizabeth Sanders, because they attempted to bring out the truth about FL800. James is an investigative reporter with three books to his credit. His wife is a former TWA flight attendant trainer who had worked with most of the crew on FL800.

The Sanderses were attempting to prove that a patch of upholstery from a seat on the plane contained traces of missile chemicals. The couple obtained the swatch of cloth from Tyrrell Stacey, a senior investigator for TWA who worked with the NTSB and FBI on the crash. Stacey allegedly took the swatch from the Calverton site where the commercial aircraft was being recon-

structed.

To avoid prosecution for "stealing" the swatch, Stacey apparently has been cooperating with the prosecution against the Sanderses.

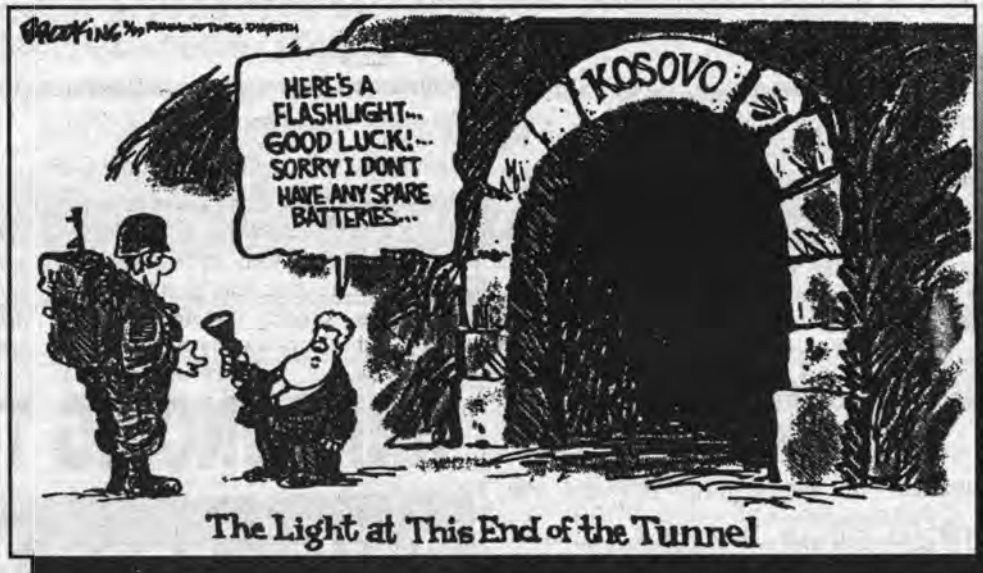
From where the majority of us are sitting, the government is pulling out every stop; it appears that government has been willing to go to whatever lengths are necessary to prevent the truth from coming out.

One of the founding principles of this nation was to provide a "government of the people, by the people and for the people."

We have never read anything in the U.S. Constitution that would suggest the needs of government supersede those of the people it was created to protect. We can think of no clause in the Constitution that states government can do whatever it wants to cover its own actions. This is exactly what the government is doing when it comes to FL800.

Our democracy was founded on the premise that the people are the real government, and each time they have stood to demand responsible representation that has been made evident. Contact your local, state and federal representatives. We deserve a complete Congressional hearing on this grievous tragedy.

And why not?



Why A Ward System

New York City operates under a system where council candidates are elected from specific districts rather than city-wide. In such a huge metropolis, ward systems make some sense, but this has led to government by and for special interests. Elected politicians have a tendency to look out for their own backdoor interests rather than looking at the government of the city as a whole.

Periodically, Democrats have pushed for the creation of ward systems in several Suffolk County towns. Politically, they have difficulty winning town-wide elections because of the well-oiled Republican machines that also have a party enrollment edge. Democrats, who often cater to special interest groups, believe they could win council seats if they were divided into wards.

Babylon Town has decided to allow the voters to decide the ward system issue by holding a special election in the middle of July. The argument being raised in Babylon involves the racial card. It has been difficult for an African-American to win an election in town-wide races. The thinking is that if council districts were gerrymandered into African-

American districts, an African-American would be elected and that segment of the community would have representation on the town board.

At first blush, this concept seems reasonable. But, when you look at the position and the fact that it is a town-wide office, should the office holder be catering to a specific racial orientation? Babylon, like most other towns, is beginning to experience a heavy influx of Hispanics and Asians. If you are going to have a district solely for blacks, shouldn't you have a district to represent each one of these other special interests? Are we not better off electing council people from the entire town that will be equally responsible for every resident?

Residents of Brookhaven have also petitioned for a vote on the ward system. The politicians found a way to turn them down. We congratulate Babylon for bringing the issue to the forefront. Let all the citizens have a vote and then abide by the results. Brookhaven Republican politicians should do the same. Let the citizens be heard. Let them choose their own form of government.

And why not?

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LIPA announced last week that it is instituting a program of choice for rate payers throughout its service area. Theoretically, businesses and homeowners will be able to choose an energy provider. They will be able to negotiate a price with that provider. The energy then will be delivered through the LIPA system of transmission and distribution lines.

This all sounds good until you realize that the only two providers acceptable to LIPA are KeySpan and Con Edison. LIPA has promised to approve other vendors in the future. Even if you were able to obtain free energy, you would still pay almost the same fees LIPA is charging because of the transmission and distribution (T&D) charges that will be tacked onto your bill.

The T&D charges are for the maintenance, upkeep, repair and renewal of the wires, poles, generators and transformers that are used to bring electricity into your home.

The biggest part of the T&D charges, however, is the principal and interest required to pay off the bonds issued by LIPA to take over LILCO. The energy portion of your bill is actually one of the smallest components. If you were successful in negotiating a better price than

Choice But No Choice

the one you receive from LIPA, you still would not see much savings.

Realistically, while consumers in other parts of the country are paying 6 cents and 7 cents per kilowatt hour, Long Island will not see rates much lower than they are now, regardless of who supplies the energy.

Florida Power and Light (FPL) recently negotiated a settlement with the Florida equivalent of the Public Service Commission, to reduce rates by several billion dollars. The company agreed that it had made too much profit and had overcharged its customers.

FPL currently sells electricity for about 6 cents to 7 cents a kilowatt hour. What a difference a state makes. Florida obviously has a Public Service Commission that understands its responsibilities are not only to the bond holders, Wall Street and the utilities. A Public Service Commission is supposed to be looking out for the average ratepayer.

Long Island's situation is more complicated than most areas because LIPA is an "Authority", and is exempt from Public Service Commission oversight. Only if LIPA

raises its rates more than 2.5% in a year does it need PSC approval.

The hope for Long Island is self-generation of electricity. It is anticipated that within two to four years fuel cell technology will be widely available. Homeowners using these means will be able to generate electricity in their own homes, and will avoid LIPA's T&D charges — unless LIPA is allowed to impose an exit fee.

Last year, Assemblyman Steve Engle-

bright authored a bill that would ban any utilities or authorities from imposing an exit fee on consumers who choose to self generate electricity. The bill went nowhere. He promised that if he were reelected, which he was, he would reintroduce that bill this year.

State Senator Owen Johnson promised he would co-sponsor the bill in the Senate. That will give the bill a serious chance.

Let this editorial serve as a warning that we expect Englebright and Johnson to keep their promises. The time to act is now.

And why not?

Thank You For Your Support

In January, we asked every reader of *Suffolk Life* who wished to continue to receive a free copy at their home to fill out the separate subscription card found in the mail or the form that appeared on the front page.

The United States Post Office requires that at least half of our subscribers indicate their desire to receive the publication in order for us to be mailed at periodical rates. Our current postal bill well exceeds \$3 million per year. It costs us over \$10 per year for postage and handling to bring you your individual copy of the paper.

In the newspaper world, *Suffolk Life* is unique. Each edition of the paper has an average of one-third of the pages devoted to news about you, your community and your county. In a sense, we are your traditional, local newspaper. We differ in the way we circulate our paper. A traditional newspaper charges you in advance. If you choose not to subscribe, you can generally pick up a copy of the paper at your local newsstand by paying as much as \$1 for it each week.

Suffolk Life is sent to your home. If you like it and feel it is worthy of support, we ask you to subscribe. We also are a powerful advertising vehicle because we reach every home in Suffolk County.

Shopper-type publications do the same, but they do not contain the local

news that we do. They do not maintain the same full-time news staff you see at town and school board meetings or out investigating and recording the news of your community.

Although *Suffolk Life* is a business, we have a vision of service to the community. We like to think of ourselves as your eyes, your ears and your watchdog. We are the fabric that binds every resident from Montauk to Babylon and from Huntington to Orient Point.

For those residents who can afford to, we ask you to enclose a voluntary subscription payment of \$15 to help cover some of the annual cost of bringing you the paper. In January, tens of thousands of people renewed their annual subscriptions. We thank each of them from the bottom of our hearts.

Please, if you have already sent in your subscription form or have paid for your subscription, do not take this notice as an additional request.

If you neglected or put off renewing your subscription, we ask you to wait no longer. Please fill out the card found in today's mail and mail it immediately. If you do not have the card, you can use the form printed on the front page of this newspaper.

Thank you for your cooperation and your support.

And why not?



While several of Suffolk's legislators are working to make it easier to engage the county's Initiative and Referendum (I&R) process, Brookhaven Town has inappropriately gone in the opposite direction.

The I&R process allows the average person to legally petition the government to enact public-supported laws. This inalienable right is guaranteed under both the federal constitution and the state constitution.

In Suffolk, the I&R process states that "...the people of Suffolk County may write their own proposals to amend the Suffolk County Charter." Under the Suffolk County Charter, a petitioner has up to 12 months to collect the signatures of 5% of the voters in the most recent gubernatorial election. The petition and those signatures must then be presented to the legislature's clerk, the county attorney, and the Board of Elections.

While it has yet to be legally determined whether Suffolk's towns are obligat-

Revamp The I&R Legislation

ed to adhere to the county's I&R regulations, it makes sense for any town looking to establish such a process to coordinate it with the county statute.

In Brookhaven, the town board recently adopted a law that reduced that time period from 12 months to 90 days, and that is preposterous because it inhibits the process.

Brookhaven's law was adopted because a group of town residents (some say Brookhaven Democrats) began working last year on a petition to force a referendum on councilmatic districts, where a town board member would live in a particular area of the town and represent only the residents of that area.

The argument, made by some Republicans, suggests that Brookhaven Republicans have historically controlled town election positions. The Democrats believe they would have a better chance of being

elected to office if the town were divided into six councilmatic districts. The supervisor would represent all town residents.

Town officials have argued that the intent of Brookhaven's law was not to complicate matters, but to "establish a clear and uniform procedure" because of past confusion and litigation on the issue.

Board members claim they are not infringing on anyone's rights to voice his or her opinion, but quite the contrary is true.

Brookhaven residents who wish to engage the I&R process for any reason, must collect about 5,732 signatures before presenting the petition to the appropriate authorities. These petitions must have exact names, exact signatures, exact addresses and election district numbers on them and that forces the process to take time.

For Brookhaven officials to limit the period to collect those signatures to only

90 days is clearly a insult to our constitutional rights, and it reeks of backroom politics.

When discussing the reasons for imposing their new law, Brookhaven officials dodge the point by discussing the merits of councilmatic districts instead of why they further encumbered an I&R process that is already cumbersome.

Town officials do make sense, however, when they defend the law's requirement that all referendum votes must be scheduled during regular November elections. Town officials note that it can cost as much as \$450,000 to hold a special election in Brookhaven. This portion of the law will save taxpayers money and should be maintained.

But the 90-day clause in the law is blatantly political and must be reversed before Brookhaven officials begin spending taxpayers' money legally defending something that is distinctly unconstitutional.

And why not?

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Republican Suffolk District Attorney James Catterson Jr., and Republican County Sheriff Patrick Mahoney have one thing in common: They are both of Irish descent. The two have been feuding with each other for the last several years.

Personal feuds are always fun to watch, but when they spill over into running the county and jeopardizing good government, those feuds stop being funny. In fact, such a feud not only makes a laughing stock out of the individuals involved, but it also makes the whole county look like a bunch of fools.

Catterson is alleged to publicly have called Mahoney his "arch enemy." Mahoney ridiculously calls Catterson's

Stop The Irish War

son, an elected New York State judge, "Jimmy boy."

Catterson wants to bring allegations against Mahoney before a grand jury. Mahoney has asked and petitioned the court to have Catterson removed from the position of county prosecutor and has requested that an independent prosecutor be assigned to the case.

To those of us who watch politics intensively, it seemed more than a coincidence that Catterson indicted Mahoney's head mechanic on the same date that Mahoney announced he was forming a committee to explore the pos-

sibility of running a primary against incumbent Republican County Executive Robert Gaffney. Catterson and Gaffney are close associates. Mahoney's announcement date had been pre-disclosed.

Since then, Catterson has stepped up his efforts to bring alleged illegal activities in the Sheriff's Department before a grand jury. This is all too cute for words.

Catterson has also been accused of threatening to bring other county officials before a grand jury, when they have crossed him. The district attorney has never been found guilty of any charges.

In response to the Irish War of Suffolk County, a New York State Assemblyman, Sam Coleman of Rockland County, wrote a letter to his fellow Assemblymen and State Senators about these shenanigans.

He is asking for a change in the state law that, if imposed, would mandate that all grand jurors be given written and verbal instructions as to their duties

and responsibilities. He charges that grand juries often rubber stamp the district attorney's assertions and are not aware that they have responsibilities to protect those who are charged but may be innocent.

We firmly believe that jurors, and particularly grand jurors, unequivocally should be told of their rights, their responsibilities and the powers vested in them.

A grand jury is essentially the first jury that an accused faces. The grand jury has as much responsibility as the second public jury has: to ascertain all the facts and not just accept the prosecutor's word as truth.

If this bill was passed into law, Mahoney might be less concerned that he is walking into a political trap. Unfortunately, this is not the law at this time and Mahoney is right in asking for an independent prosecutor.

In the meantime, if these two hot-headed men would like to bury their embarrassing differences, we would be glad to sit down with both of them over a taste of Irish reserve. Let the war end.

And why not?



What We Have Bred

Sickening. Appalling. Tragic. Frightening. Downright disgusting. These are just a few of the words used to describe the massacre of Columbine High School students in Colorado by two fellow students.

Then again, what do we expect?

We give our children electronic games that are generally designed to promote hate, violence and insanity. These games glorify winning — if you kill enough opponents. Zap, bang, crash: They are all dead.

As an alternative to video games, we plop our offspring in front of a television for hours on end. Who monitors what they are watching? Who cares? They are quiet, they are out of the way, and they are not bothering us.

Most afternoons start off with soap-operas, which are rife with pure sex: Mary is sleeping with Sally's husband and Sally is sleeping with someone else; Harry has a girlfriend and boyfriend too. Throw in a little nudity and you have piqued the kids' interest. This is show-and-tell about how the macho male beds down the first available female whether she is willing or not. But hey, that is life, and the kids will get used to it.

All we have to do is turn on prime time television for a demonstration of cars flying through the air, bullets whizzing around and people dying agonizing deaths. But hey, it is good for the ratings.

Or perhaps we shut the TV off and send our kids to their rooms to do some research on the computer. Without much difficulty, this is where they can find how to make a gun, build a bomb, watch triple-X-rated porno, or perhaps send a violent e-mail over the net.

We send our children to school where, instead of being made to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, they can be free thinkers who progress at their own speed. Apparently, free thinking is more important than possessing enough self-esteem to respect themselves and those around them.

Let us continue to keep God out of our schools and to ignore family values so that today's youth will continue to believe that anything that feels good is great.

It is becoming more commonplace to accept the idea that it is old-fashioned to send our kids to Sunday school or insist that they participate in religious services. This might get in the way of their participating in a sports activity or interfere with our free time.

God forbid the thought of asking our children to help clean up around the house or do some weekly chores. That borders on the abuse of child labor laws.

Do we expect the family to have breakfast or dinner together every day? Not in this day and age. Important schedules do not allow for it.

Do we have regular conversations with our children? Do we ask them questions? Observe them? Hold them accountable? Of course not; that takes precious time and we might be violating their privacy.

We all hang our heads in shame and look for a scapegoat when something like the Columbine massacre takes place. Have we allowed our society to go insane, or have the seeds we have sown with our inattentiveness produced this bitter fruit?

Once again, we are being given a wake up call. We must heed its warning. And why not?

Can We Change Culture?

When the former Yugoslavia started to unravel and the independent states regained control of their sovereignty, we were amazed to find a century-old hatred emerging again.

We do not live there. We do not understand it. We thought that after at least a generation under the heel of dictator Marshal Tito, the people of Yugoslavia would have buried their ethnic hatred for one another.

For almost 50 years, they befriended each other and accepted each other's beliefs. But then we watched as little bouts of political positioning became "cleansing" epidemics, where thousands of human beings were slaughtered because they looked a little different, spoke a different dialect or praised God in a different manner.

As time went by, and the United States became more involved in these Balkan conflicts, we were uneasy with the fact that our nation easily could be drawn into a much larger regional war. After having committed our air power and sophisticated war machines through NATO, we are now on the verge of sending American men and

women into battle on the ground. Such a commitment can only promise to be a bloody reenactment of another Vietnam.

What purpose will sending our ground troops accomplish? Thousands of human beings on both sides of the fight will die. Will there be an end to the conflicts? We doubt it. The hatred that has been there for almost a thousand years will still exist.

Things may go well for a few years, particularly if the region is occupied, but there will always be someone on either side who will enrage followers by making false accusations and drumming up the past.

Right or wrong, our troops do not belong in the middle of this kind of fight. A war, even a successful one, will not change the mindset of the Balkan people. More importantly, no war will eliminate their hostilities toward each other.

Our troops must not become involved any further. Our best bet is to confine the fight with air strikes. American blood will not change Balkan culture.

And why not?