

economy, and a boost to many families that need extra income, even if it does lower taxes on the rich.

Nor will Lindsey be shy about pressing the Fed to lower rates to stimulate the economy. This could be very important in the next few years, as there is likely to be some inflation resulting from the decline in the dollar, which the Fed will see as a reason to keep interest rates high. Lindsey was a critic of the Clinton-Greenspan high-dollar policy, and should feel little hesitation about its abandonment. He is likely to insist that Greenspan ignore the inflation that results from the dollar's inevitable decline, and instead concentrate on maintaining high levels of growth and employment. ■

VOUCHING TIGER

By Hans Johnson

If the "president-select" were seeking an accomplice in his bid to transport the federal education agenda across mainstream lines, he found his man in Rodney Paige.

While Bush's designate to head the Department of Education is expected to sail through the Senate confirmation, the 67-year-old Houston superintendent and former football coach is under fire from gay activists for allowing

anti-gay harassment to go unchecked in the 200,000-pupil system whose board he sat on from 1989 to 1994, and which he has helmed for the past six years.

The Houston area has seen a spate of anti-gay hate crimes—including anti-gay murders, some of them involving local teens—stretching back to the late '80s. A 1997 report by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network flunked Houston schools on its handling of discrimination and harassment of gay kids. GLSEN also faults district leaders for failing to implement a 1999 report aimed at dispelling anti-gay prejudice in schools and issued by the very federal department Paige is slated to head. GLSEN is now leading a letter-writing campaign to Paige urging that he address the concerns of gay students and their parents when he becomes education secretary.

Paige's endorsement of school vouchers is also worrisome. At Senate hearings on January 10, Paige showed that he would keep step in a GOP retreat from support for public schools. Paige noted that he forgoes the term "vouchers" because of its icky ideological baggage, opting instead to promote "federal funds" for "nonpublic schools."

Sen. Edward Kennedy read between the lines and warned the nominee not to "abandon our schools." But even Vermont Republican James Jeffords, who in previous sessions has thwarted conservative bids to pass voucher schemes, joined a generally adoring chorus. Fellow senators, Jeffords said, would all "just run out and declare your victory right now," were it not that Paige still needed to pass an up-or-down confirmation vote. ■

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The Generous Frontier

By Philip Connors

William Kittredge grew up in the first half of the last century in the Warner Valley of southeastern Oregon, a place of great cultural isolation where, he writes, "The way in was the way out. Sagebrush

The Nature of Generosity

By William Kittredge

Alfred A. Knopf

276 pages, \$25

deserts on the high and mostly waterless plateaus to the east were traced with wagon-track roads over rimrocks and salt-grass playas from spring to spring, water hole to water hole, but nobody ever headed in that direction with an idea of the future."

Kittredge's friend and longtime colleague in the creative writing department at the University of Montana, the poet Richard Hugo, once wrote in an essay: "Given our lean cultural holdings we grabbed at almost anything that offered escape or amusement." For Kittredge that meant books. He became a classic autodidact. Even when he was looking after his family's ranch in his twenties and thirties, he would wake each day at 4:30 a.m. and put in an hour with a book before heading out to breakfast with the men who worked for him.

It was a beautiful life for awhile, something near paradise. He lived in age-old intimacy with other creatures, watched the huge flocks of waterbirds wheeling overhead off the swamplands and helped sculpt the valley into a huge playground garden. But as the ranch's intricate irrigation system grew ever more complex, draining the swamps and flooding the fields, the waterbirds ceased to come. Kittredge and the men he worked with killed badgers with carrots dipped in strychnine; they poisoned coyotes, and the rodent population exploded. They sprayed 2-4-D Ethyl and Malathion and Parathion, and they shortened the lives of their fellow creatures and their own. Family rifts developed. Desperation supplanted caregiving. And, finally, half-crazy with confusion over how life in paradise

could go so wrong, Kittredge fled toward another dream of what he could be. "The point of things, I was beginning to sense, was cherishing, not owning," he wrote in the essay collection *Who Owns the West?*

In *Hole in the Sky*, a fine memoir written before the current fixation with the genre, he put it this way:

Over something like three decades, my family played out the entire melodrama of the nineteenth-century European novel. It was another real-life run of that masterplot which drives so many histories, domination of loved ones through a mixture of power and affection; it is the story of ruling-class decadence ... that we reenact over and over, our worst bad habit and our prime source of our sadness about our society. We want to own everything, and we demand love. We are like children; we are spoiled and throw tantrums. Our wreckage is everywhere.

Coming to terms with that wreckage, for Kittredge, is serious business. But he also has a knack for seeing to the heart of things with a wry sense of humor. "A Redneck pounding a hippie in a dark

Kittredge has come to believe that storytelling is politics, insofar as stories help us name what we consider invaluable.

barroom is embarrassing because we see the cowardice," he wrote in *Owning It All*. "What he wants to hit is a banker in broad daylight."

In his books, Kittredge has fashioned a highly personal and sophisticated reckoning with the mythic story of the American West. Far from merely charting the damage, he seems intent on altering the very vocabulary of his culture. Certain words and phrases appear

repeatedly in his work: "complexity," "actual," "healing," "cherish," "taking care." His tale is a cautionary one; his project, in essence, is the naming of those things he has come, through hard-won experience, to value.

"We are what we can say or sing," he writes in *The Nature of Generosity*, his most ambitious book to date. Composed as a kind of montage, it moves across memories of his entire life, ruminations on his visits to Venice and Machu Picchu and the caves at Lascaux, and references to perhaps a hundred of the books he has read and been moved by. Part travelogue, part armchair philosophy, it's an exercise in what might be called anthropology of the self.

For instance, he quotes Simone Weil's "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force": "To define force—it is the X that turns anybody who is subject to it into a *thing*. The hero becomes a *thing* dragged behind a chariot in the dust." He then recalls reading *The Iliad* as a young man and tries to see his family's story through the dual prisms of Weil and Homer. "The pleasures of reshaping the world had led to betrayal and blood," he writes. "And families, hired hands, livestock, waterbirds in great flights on a summer morning—they also become *things* dragged in the dust behind the chariot of our ambition to own the world."

Through a sophisticated juxtaposition of scene and quotation, memory and dream, he advocates what he calls "extreme long-loop altruism," or "generosity toward strangers and ways of life we never expect to encounter as a method of preserving both biological and cultural multiplicity."

Kittredge elsewhere has said that for many years he had little use for politics. Even after escaping the ranch and beginning a new life as a writer and teacher, he understood storytelling as the main endeavor and politics as a dirty, far-off, unconnected business. But he has come to believe that storytelling is politics, insofar as stories help us name what we consider invaluable.

In *The Nature of Generosity*, he finds people spinning narratives of hopefulness, in ways both practical and philosophical. A neighbor in Missoula, Doug Bleecker, has transformed an