

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF CONGRESSMAN DAY

... or the
great golf hoax
unmasked



Cousins

By Norman Cousins
Editor, Saturday Review

In Saturday Review's first April issue, a communication from one K. Jason Sitewell appeared on the Letters-to-the-Editor page. The letter called on the editors and readers to oppose H.R. 6142, a bill introduced by Representative A. F. Day and co-sponsored by 43 Congressmen. The stated purpose of the bill was to restrict the size of private parks as well as to democratize public parks which were sparsely used. Mr. Sitewell asserted he was in a position to say positively that the actual purpose of the bill was to abolish golf. He had known Congressman Day since early childhood and could bear witness to his persistent and "psychotic" hostility to the game. This aversion, Sitewell said, was perhaps understandable in view of the Day's family tragic history in the sport. Day's grandfather had perished in a sand trap, the victim of massive exasperation. Less than a decade later, Day's father expired soon after hitting 19 balls into a pond in front of a par-three green.

Sitewell detailed yet other unspeakable horrors and abominations associated with the sport that had caused young A.F. Day to grow up with a fierce and fixed purpose. He was determined to destroy the so-called sport that had brought untold suffering to his mother and sisters and that had produced, across the nation, hundreds of thousands of coronaries, ulcers, broken homes, lost jobs, etc., etc.

Sitewell's letter was of course a spoof, full of absurd concoctions and broad hints, the broadest of which was the connection between the Congressman's name and the one day of the year when spoofing and nonsense have glorious sanction.

What happened? Enough to warrant a serious major sociological study. I have learned of emergency meetings called by boards of governors of golf clubs for the purpose of taking vigorous and far-reaching action to defeat Day's bill. At least a dozen Congressmen or their assistants telephoned to say that opposition to H.R. 6142 had turned up high on the daily tally list of what constituents were protesting. One of the nation's leading golf weekly magazines reprinted

Sitewell's letter on its editorial page under the title, "A Frightening Bill," and called on its readers to defend the sport against this sudden and malicious legislative assault. The wife of a Federal judge in Illinois telephoned the Saturday Review to ask for reprints to send to her husband and his cronies who had gone off on their annual golf holiday, leaving their wives at home.

So it went, incident piled on incident, until the Wall Street Journal ran a delightful front-page story disclosing the spoof. Among the disclosures was the fact that H.R. 6142 is actually a bill to limit the liability of national banks for certain taxes.

As usually happens in a hoax, there are interesting implications and even things of value to be learned. First of all, it became apparent soon after Sitewell's letter appeared that non-golfers were far quicker to recognize the letter as an open-faced satire connected to April 1st than were golfers themselves. Is it possible that the absurdities immediately perceived as such by non-golfers were regarded by golfers as reminders of poignant reality? Is there a golfer who, upon hitting into a sand trap, does not fear deep in his subconscious that he may never get out? Is there a golfer who does not suffer more anguish over hitting expensive new balls into ponds than he does over reverses in his business or profession? Can any canard or calamity be concocted about the sport that does not have a parallel in the golfer's own experience? We ask these questions not only from the editorialist's chair, but from the confession box, as an addict who is himself mercilessly hounded by double boogys.

It is also significant perhaps that in none of the clamorous protest against H.R. 6142 were any questions raised about the devastating "facts" assembled by Congressman Day in support of his bill. No attempt was made by those who protested the bill to refute the long laundry list of dreadful consequences Day attributed to golf. It is of course not true that the game in an average year, produces 75,000 coronary occlusions, 83,000 cases of hypertension and ulcers and 9,300 golf car fatalities; nor that golf courses occupy twice as much land as all the natural parks put together;

(Continued on page 35)

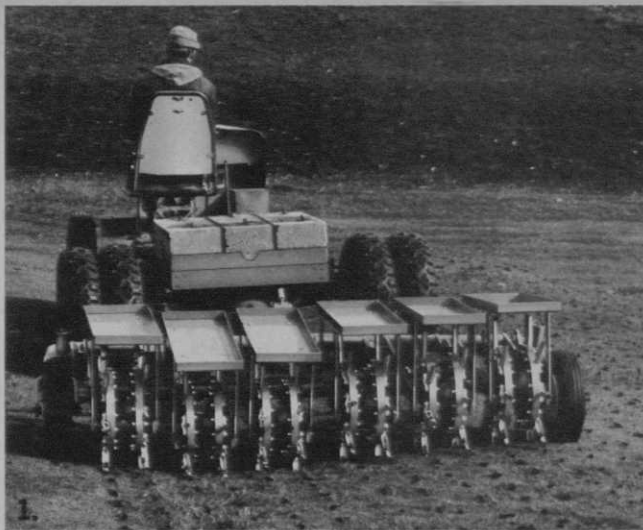
nor that golf has caused 60,000 broken homes (although one wonders whether this latter figure may not be on the low side). None of these statistics were challenged in the valiant defense of the sport. Are we to believe that, even if these horrible facts were true, this would make no difference to golfers? Or is this an example perhaps of a larger truth: that many people who are directly affected by an issue are less concerned with facts than effects? Students of private and public psychology—or, for that matter, students of sociology and public opinion—might find the entire story of the Sitewell-Day affair replete with rewarding and significant material.

Finally, who is K. Jason Sitewell and why did the Saturday Review publish his letter? I confess to being Sitewell, who has appeared under that name in SR before—generally about the same time of year. The reason for the letter is that it is part of the Saturday Review's editorial philosophy to place the highest value on laughter. SR is a serious magazine and it deals with serious issues in a serious way, but it tries to make a distinction between being serious and being solemn. In the catalog of human assets, few things provide people with greater strength than the love of life, of which the ability to laugh is a prime manifestation. Persons who survived the horrors of the concentration camps tell us they did so largely because they never lost their ability to hope and to laugh, the two being intimately related.

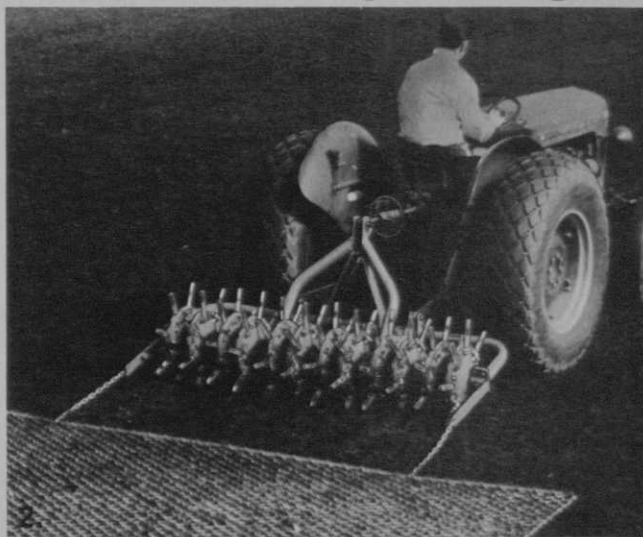
I see nothing inconsistent in publishing articles about grave world problems while interspersing them with humorous cartoons. I readily acknowledge that the choice of cartoons is the one task I retain for myself—not because I think I am a better judge of humor than other members of the staff, but because I relish the job.

As for my golfing friends who threaten to have me barred from every course in the nation: Please don't. I suffer enough every time I play. Penance waits on every tee. There is kinship in suffering. We need each other. □

"Decline and Fall of Congressman Day," by Norman Cousins, May 8, 1971 Saturday Review. Copyright 1971 Saturday Review, Inc.



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