

Needed Accessory for Lawmakers — Backup Lights

ONE WAY you can tell the difference between Israeli and Egyptian tanks, the story goes, is that the Egyptian tanks have backup lights. Depending on your politics, the story may be funny.

Politics and fighting ability aside—and if the story were true—there would be a lesson worth studying. The presence of backup lights would indicate preparedness on the part of the Egyptians to make an abrupt change of direction, if and when they decided they had made a mistake.

We believe a most-needed accessory for lawmakers today is “backup lights.”

Contrary to what many people are saying, we believe the Democratic process is working better today than at any time since the idea was conceived. Contrary to what many young people are saying, we believe “The Establishment” is quicker to respond than ever before to pressure from any quarter, no matter how small.

Cry wolf (for real or fake) these days and the rattle of legislative bills would drown out a buffalo stampede.

Consider the legislative outbursts over thalidomide, the cranberry episode, automobile safety, gun control, cigarets and cancer, prayer and public schools, civil rights (in recent years), individual rights of citizens in trouble with the law, cyclamates, pesticides, and now with increasing momentum pollution of various sorts.

Responsiveness of government to people makes the Democratic process that much stronger.

The great failing to date, however, is the assumption that every law that goes on the books is good; that every law that goes on the books should remain there for eternity.

Let's face the reality that some laws are mistakes. We need to back up. Let's face the reality that while some laws served a purpose in an earlier day they need to be wiped off the books.

Though ignored and pretty much harmless, the “blue laws” are an example. Unless lawmakers have backed up in the last year or two, it's still illegal to eat peanuts in church in Massachusetts. Barbers in Waterloo, Neb., are breaking the law if they eat onions between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Some new laws have been mistakes. The outright ban on DDT is a mistake. The restriction on 2,4,5-T is a mistake. Stack the arguments high, but they boil down to a laboratory test and emotion prevailing over more than 20 years' field experience.

Given the possibility that DDT is contributing to the extinction of the eagle, falcon, and osprey, we predict these bird species would have become extinct anyway. And we hate very much to see them go.

Subtract the human element from DDT and

there's still a defense strong enough to warrant its continued use in some areas. Take the American Elm.

If we must sacrifice the American Elm species to save the bird species, we vote to back up. The tree has given us beauty, shelter, enjoyment, purified air, coolness from its shade in summer, and warmth in winter from its logs in a fireplace. What wild bird has done so much?

A trip to Washington, D.C., a few weeks ago reminded us of how different and beautiful that city is compared with all others. A great contribution to that beauty is its elm trees. The species accounts for well over 90% of all trees growing there. Some date from 1890.

We noted several trees dead and dying from Dutch Elm Disease. We were concerned. Reassurance came from Horace V. Wester, plant pathologist of the National Park Service, who told us DED has been in Washington since 1947 and that he loses only about 1% of the elms a year. Remarkable! Some District parks, he said, were being treated with DDT until about a year ago, though he switched to using methoxychlor four or five years ago.

Just the same, if the situation gets worse, we would like to think he could return to his best weapon—DDT!

The announcement that an additive has been developed to break down DDT (see story on page 36) is heartening. Spurring that research could mean a great deal to cities, such as Kansas City and Denver, that haven't had as much success against DED. The pesticide is desperately needed to hold the line until a cure for the fungus is found.

But back to lawmaking, generally. There are many who would say that if we backed up in some of those areas previously mentioned more criminals would be behind bars. Some would call for backing up on Civil Rights, meaning to some more integration and to others more segregation. Perhaps if we had more prayer in public schools, we would have fewer drugs and riots.

There is more than a need for backing up on the subject of pesticides. There has been too much responsiveness—and to the wrong kind of pressure. Other pesticides are under fire. Before acting, what's needed is a careful weighing of benefit versus risk and more value placed on field experience than on laboratory improvisation. Then, perhaps, there won't be a need for those backup lights.

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