tirement is being secured in a way that is good for the country, its economy and their grandchildren. And small businesses, which have long pointed to payroll tax cuts as their number-one legislative priority, should also be strong supporters.

The more surprising allies may well come from big industry. After all, service- and knowledge-based industries, which tend to be labor intensive but consume relatively little energy, now constitute 80 percent of the economy. It stands to reason that these would reap significant benefits from reduced labor costs in exchange for increased pollution fees. Even the auto industry is beginning to see there is money to be made in the efficiency revolution: General Motors recently announced its support for higher energy taxes.

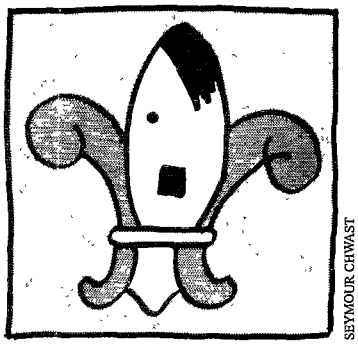
The Democratic Party has everything to gain from forging a new political alliance around cutting payroll taxes and protecting the environment. Democrats could not only reclaim the high ground in the nation's tax debate but also restore their credibility as the party of working people. Substituting pollution levies for payroll taxes could symbolize a much broader message: that Americans should be able to keep more of the fruits of their own toil, but that they ought to pay for the costs they impose on current and future generations. Isn't it time we bring our economic incentives back into line with our shared values? ■

THE TEMPTATION TO ACCEPT THE NATIONAL FRONT AS A PARTNER HAS SPLIT THE RIGHT.

Supping With the French Devil

DANIEL SINGER

Cartoonists can beat journalists at their own game of first oversimplifying and then exaggerating. In France, where everybody knows about the trial of Maurice Papon—sued for his role in the wartime deportation of Jews and pleading ignorance of the gravity of Nazi crimes—Plantu, the brilliant cartoonist of *Le Monde*, drew a similar court case, but staged in the year 2030, with the prosecutor saying, "In March 1998 you collaborated with the National Front," and the accused replying, "But at the time nobody knew they were so dangerous." Naturally, the analogy is overdramatized. History does not need to repeat itself, and France will not awaken tomorrow under the rule of the Nazis. But the image conveys the historical significance of the political crisis now shaking the country. The respectable right, i.e., one that has hitherto refused any collusion with National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, is in disarray, as a vital taboo has been broken: The xenophobic, semifascist National Front has ceased to be the untouchable of French politics.



SEYMOUR CHWAST

To understand these events we must cut through the maze of local politics. For ages France has been divided into departments, now ninety-five, which are split into cantons. In 1986 a structure of twenty-two regions was superimposed, on the assumption that larger units are needed to compete in Europe; the prerogatives are ill defined, and the whole system clearly needs revision. Cantonal and regional elections were held simultaneously on March 15. It was the latter poll, with councilors chosen through proportional representation, that precipitated the upheaval of the French right, possibly foreshadowing the end of the Fifth Republic.

Paradoxically, the great political realignment was not brought about by a major shift in voting patterns. Admittedly, in 1992 the left was at its nadir and the respectable right (made up of the R.P.R., the neo-Gaullist followers of President Jacques Chirac; and the U.D.F., the rather fragmented conservative coalition once headed by former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing) captured twenty of the twenty-two regions. It was bound to lose some of them this year, but, having won only about 35 percent of the vote, it did no better but no worse than in last year's parliamentary poll. The plural left—Socialists, Communists and Greens—with only a fractionally bigger share of the vote, lost ground compared with the previous year, partly because the predominantly Trotskyist far left climbed to an unexpected 5 percent. As for the National Front, with just over 15 percent it barely gained on its presidential or parliamentary score. But under the influence of its crafty deputy leader, Bruno Mégret, it radically altered its tactics.

Le Pen is a loudmouth willing to shock. On the eve of this election, he delivered a commemorative oration for a comrade in arms, an openly pro-Nazi revisionist, leaving his potential partners no illusions and no excuse. The small, Goebbels-like Mégret, a clever technocrat, wants not to bully but to corrupt the right; this was a golden opportunity. If they were simply willing to transgress the rules, he was ready to save the skin of right-wingers in about ten regions. To ease matters, the front was asking little. The eager candidates merely had to proclaim that they were against higher taxes and for law and order. Though the Parisian headquarters of the right condemned any contact with Le Pen as morally wrong, tactically stupid and strategically suicidal, when it came to picking regional executives on March 20, a really Black Friday, five "honorable men" belonging to the U.D.F. accepted presidencies with the backing of a party whose leader proclaims that the races are unequal and the Holocaust is a "detail" of history.

If you sup with the devil you have to pay the price. The following Monday, with five regional presidencies still to be decided, Le Pen told the right it could get four of them if it voted for him in the Southern region, which includes Marseilles, Toulon and Nice. This was too much, or too soon. The strong popular reaction to this wholesale betrayal had its effect. The no longer respectable right decided to return to the old rule and leave the remaining

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presidencies to the left rather than soil itself with Le Pen's support. That very evening, President Chirac solemnly addressed the nation, reminding his side of the principles of the French republic. He promised to get the democratic parties together to think about necessary institutional changes, leaving the "xenophobic and racist" front beyond the pale.

The total collapse of the right was thus avoided, and two of the ill-elected presidents resigned under pressure. But the damage had been done. Cleavages going back to the struggle against the Nazis are vanishing. Principles having been shattered all over, the right will have to be divided no longer between neo-Gaullists and classical conservatives but between those who would have sided with Hitler for the sake of office and those who, for moral or political reasons, will not accept an alliance with Le Pen. But the future does not depend only on the right or on institutional change.

Much having been written here about the resistible rise of Le Pen, we can sum up the spread of the disease in shorthand. When François Mitterrand was elected president in 1981 the front was insignificant. Deprived of office, the right invented the myth that growing unemployment was due to immigrant labor, forgetting that however low it would stoop, Le Pen could get lower still. Thus he acquired his stock in trade, imposing a phony debate on the nation. But he was able to consolidate his position only because the left failed to offer a radical alternative. With France experiencing a vague consensus on economic policy combined with rising social misery, Le Pen could appear to be the only outsider, gaining support notably among workers and the unemployed. His queer mixture of Reaganomics at home and opposition to globalization is incoherent, so whenever the social movement is active (as in the 1995 winter of discontent) the front is cast aside. But it recovers, feeding on the economic failure of the other protagonists.

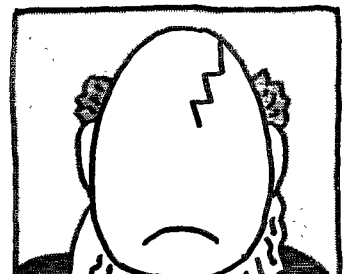
Thus the fate of the National Front is really in the hands of the left. If it listens to the international financial establishment, opting for a deflationary policy and the dismantling of the welfare state, it will encourage the spread of the disease, which no changing of the electoral thermometer will cure. Only if it tackles unemployment head-on, radically reshaping French society, will the left be able to contain a cancerous growth that is already serious, although not yet fatal. The responsibility is historical because, even if the cartoonist has overemphasized the analogy, the corpses of the past are still unburied. *Pace* Hegel and Marx, history may repeat itself not as farce but as tragicomedy. ■

HOW FOOD-DISPARAGEMENT LAWS GAG REPORTING ON ISSUES OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY.

Veggie Libel, Wilted Press

KEN SILVERSTEIN

"Free speech not only lives, it rocks," Oprah Winfrey exclaimed after a federal jury in Amarillo ruled against a group of Texas cattlemen who claimed that the talk-show queen had illegally bad-mouthed American beef during a show on mad cow disease. The February 26 verdict was certainly good news, but its real lesson may be that free speech rocks loudest for rich folks like Oprah, who spent up to $1 million defending herself against a lawsuit filed under Texas's "veggie libel" law.



SEYMOUR CHWAST

Oprah's trial was expected to be a test case for veggie libel statutes—under which thirteen states now make it a crime to "disparage" agricultural goods—but the judge ruled it didn't meet the criteria, so the case ended up being a routine matter of business defamation. Indeed, as Oprah was uncorking the champagne, two other food-disparagement lawsuits were very much alive in Texas. Emu ranchers are suing Honda over a commercial in which a character remarks, "Emus, Joe. It's the pork of the future." The plaintiffs claim this caused severe damage to the market for emu meat. And A-1 Turf has charged James McAfee, a Texas agricultural agent, with making libelous remarks about its sod.

In perhaps the most obnoxious lawsuit, Buckeye Egg Farm is targeting the Ohio Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) and its director, Amy Simpson. The case stems from OPIRG's denunciation of the company's practice of repackaging old eggs and selling them in cartons with new expiration dates. "The kind of hard-hitting public expression you find in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* would today almost surely be met with a defamation suit," says Ronald Collins of Foodspeak, an emerging coalition organized by the Center for Science in the Public Interest and including Public Citizen, the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way and others.

Located in Croton, Ohio, Buckeye is one of the nation's largest egg producers, shipping about 5 million eggs a day under such brand names as Health Ray and Flavorite. Formerly called Agri-General, it is not known for enlightened business practices. Its owner, Anton Pohlmann, was convicted in his native Germany of cruelty to animals following a 1994 incident in which his firm was ordered to kill 60,000 salmonella-infected hens. Pohlmann gassed the hens with carbon monoxide. In 1996 a German court also convicted Pohlmann of selling contaminated eggs.

Pohlmann's record in Ohio is little better. Last year OSHA fined the company $1 million for miserable working conditions at its chicken houses and poor living quarters afforded its migrant workers. Inspectors found human sewage backing up in basements, inadequate heating and dangerous electrical wiring. In

Ken Silverstein is the author of Washington on $10 Million a Day: How Lobbyists Plunder the Nation, *just out from Common Courage Press.*