

HOWARD HENDRIX

Elegy Written in a Country Schoolhouse

School's out

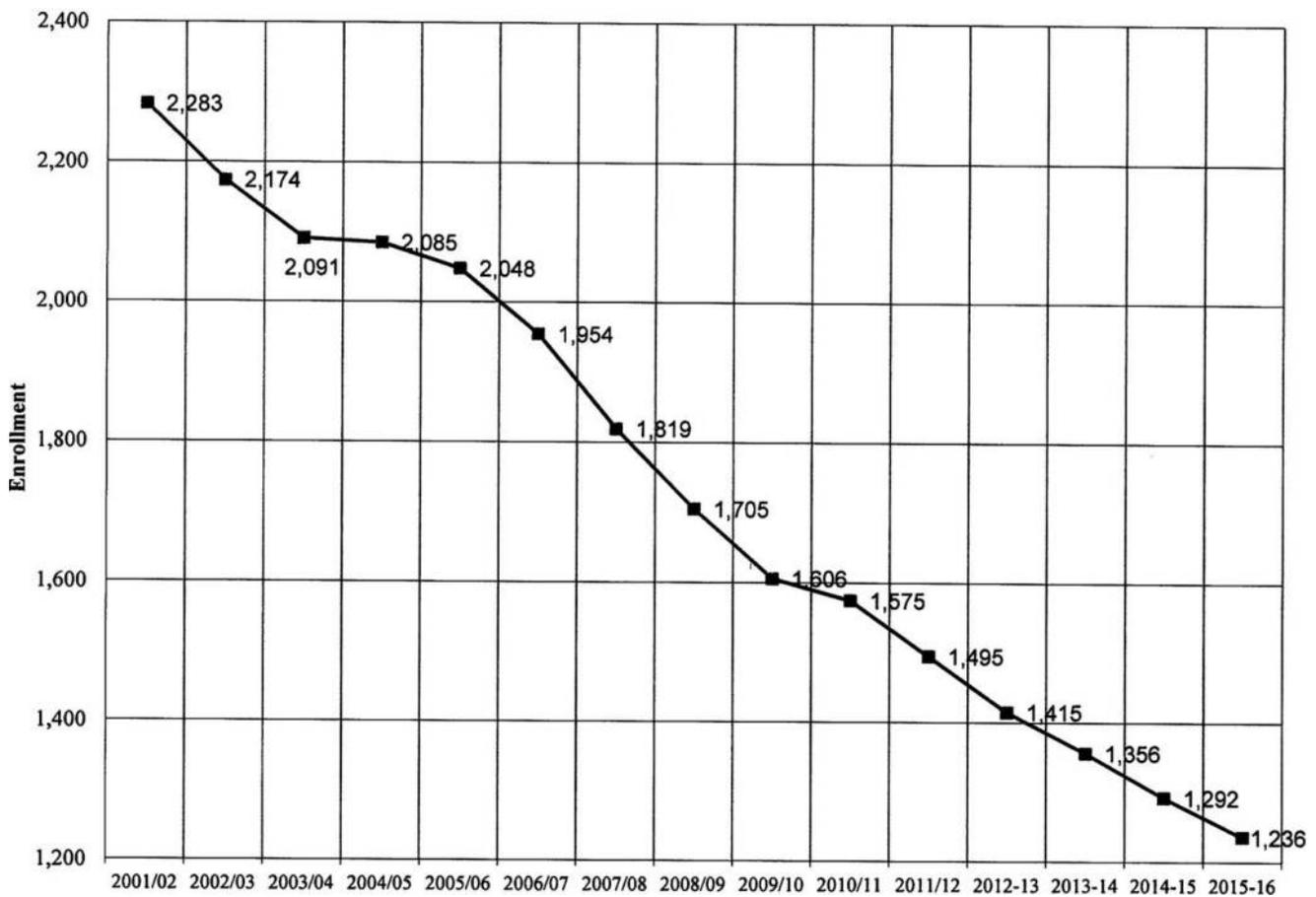
CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC is a disquieting sign to see outside a public school. It is nonetheless the sign I see on the fence in front of Auberry Elementary School as I wait for the director of maintenance for Sierra Unified School District, Jim Harris, to take me on a tour of the twenty-five acre campus.

Standing outside the padlocked fence, I peruse the printouts I received half an hour earlier during a conversation with District Assistant Superintendent Janelle Mehling at her office on the Sierra High School campus. Auberry Elementary, which dates back to 1939, was officially “temporarily closed” in Spring of 2011 along with its sister school, Sierra Elementary. Mehling informed me that in the decade between the 2001–2002 academic year and the 2011–2012 academic year, the enrolled student population of the 3,000 square mile Sierra Unified School District declined from 2,283 to 1,495.

The decline in student population, however, was underway before the turn of the millennium. Sequoia Forest Industries’ saw mill, the major employer in Auberry, closed in 1994, laying off the mill’s remaining 125 workers. “Tired of high wood and paper prices? Wipe your ass on a Spotted Owl,” read a blunt bumper sticker from that time.

Here in the foothills of the Sierra that poor politicized bird still gets blamed for a lot of things, but clearly neither it nor the mill closure adequately explained the ongoing slide in student enrollment. Mehling suggested many other contributing factors: changes in welfare-to-work laws, resulting in a declining number of local families with school-age children; unintended consequences of Proposition 13, which even the revenue-sequestering K-12 fix-it, Proposition 98, did not manage to cover; unsuccessful attempts, despite nearly twenty years of effort, to revive the mill site as a biomass energy generating facility; the crash in construction and construction-related jobs due to the economic meltdown of 2008—with the result that many locals of child-rearing age lost their homes in the foothills and mountains and had to “move back into town” (Fresno and Clovis), where there were still a few jobs and/or relatives they could stay with.

Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 3, Number 1, pps 41–49, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2013 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2013.3.2.41.



Sierra Unified School District historical enrollment 2001–02 through 2011–12, estimated through 2015–16.

The District’s situation was also not improved by cuts in per-pupil support, and a pronounced decline in Forest Reserve funding, through the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act (see Table 1). The voters’ three-time rejection of three separate school bond issues—intended to pay off the Certificates of Participation incurred in the building of Foothill Elementary in the early 1990s—hasn’t helped either.

Jim Harris, a tall man with a calm demeanor, pulls up in his pick-up truck and interrupts my woolgathering. He opens the gate in the school fence and leads me around the grounds. Much of the landscaping is no longer irrigated. Many of the perennials in the landscaped beds are dead or dying. In the long, dry, gone-to-seed grass that was once lawn, California quail call and scurry about. Most of the trees—including at least one sequoia—are still alive, however. An acorn woodpecker flashes black and white wings as it flits among the live oaks.

Jim checks for any windows that might have been broken out since he last stopped by, then turns off the alarm system (located in an office which still has the 2010–2011 school calendar on the wall). He tells me that, so far, there has been little vandalism to the closed school: a few broken windows, now boarded up; a cafeteria door, now reinforced at the spot where teenagers kicked it in so they might throw a party in the abandoned hall.

Once Jim lets us into the cafeteria, I see that the kitchen, its big mixers and other food-processing equipment, even the “Kids’ Café”—all of them, despite the break-in, look as if they would be ready for business if there were only staff on duty. In the main hall (“Capacity: 648 for Dining, 1318 for Assembly”), chairs are stacked atop each other, while tables are folded and stacked throughout. In the wall-mounted case at the back of the hall the school trophies, some going back to 1941, stand unmolested. Even vandals, it seems, still respect the ghosts of departed school spirit.

TABLE 1 Forest Reserve Funding, Sierra Unified School District

Year	Funding
2001–02	\$426,705
2002–03	\$434,634
2003–04	\$442,695
2004–05	\$451,009
2005–06	\$465,141
2006–07	\$469,648
2007–08	\$467,133
2008–09	\$425,194
2009–10	\$378,111
2010–11	\$334,122
2011–12	\$262,584
2012–13	\$262,584 (1-YEAR REAUTHORIZATION)
2013–14	\$0

After leaving the cafeteria Jim and I walk toward a classroom wing at the south end of the campus. There, the lawns have been kept watered and the play equipment has been maintained as a park for the surrounding community. He tells me that for most of its history Auberry Elementary covered kindergarten through eighth grade, but in 1996 it shrank to K-5, and by 2008 it was K-3. I nod, aware of some of the larger history embedded in those statistics: not only shifts away from local cattle-grazing and timber industries, but also the downsizing of the local hydroelectric workforce as a result of increased automation.

The wing Jim walks me through last housed first through third grades. When he opens the classroom doors (which the kids painted with scenes of Amazon rainforest flora and fauna), I see that the rooms are only storage space now. Many of the usable furniture and hardware have gone on to take their places in rooms on the Foothill campus of the district. Nonetheless, considerable numbers of desks, cabinets, bookshelves, green boards, and white boards are piled upon or against each other. An ancient, blank, slate blackboard with a wooden chalk tray, the slate covered by peg-board for years, stands revealed against one wall. We stand in an

We stand in an unintentional classroom archeological site.

unintentional classroom archeological site, one in whose jumbled strata are embedded obsolete educational technologies and other impedimenta of grade-school learning.

We move on. Given the presence of a life-sized plastic human skeleton with removable cranium and a terrarium empty but for some sand and a piece of desert driftwood, Jim and I guess the room we stop in next must have last been used for science classes. Perhaps the most poignant items in this classroom, however, are to be found inside five very large black plastic bags. They contain children’s clothing in a rainbow of colors and from every season of the year, but especially small socks and shoes and winter coats.

“These were the things in the Lost and Found left unclaimed when the school shut down,” Jim says, sorting through the bags. “I’ll probably end up taking them to the thrift store. Maybe other little kids will get some use out of them.”

Jim is called away a moment by other duties. I find a desk not buried under other desks and take a seat. Maybe because of the pop-top cranium and the sandy terrarium, I think about how the pineal gland fills up with brain sand and we dream less as we age. The wonder of the world sadly contracts, as this school contracted, and we forget that the true flash of genius in children’s learning lies in seeing the obvious in a wondrous (or at least new) way.

In this deserted classroom of an abandoned school, I wait for the flash to happen to me. I look about the room, seeing several of what appear to be right-handed desks, maybe two left-handed ones. The desk I sit in, though, like most of them, is an old-school square slab of wood, under-slung by a metal tray and standing on metal legs, ambidextrous in that it favors neither hand. In that desk I can’t help but wonder about right and left—of hands, of politics, of private enterprises and public spheres.

All of those factors were to some degree involved in the shutting down of Auberry Elementary School, so it’s possible that this school closure might be evidence of some larger pattern. All politics is local, say the politicians. To the extent that statement is true, it is so because politics is a complex system. According to scientists and mathematicians who specialize in complexity theory, such systems exhibit self-similarity across scales. From neighborhood to nation, it’s all “as above, so below.” What might the story of this empty school and the politics of my neighborhood say about the politics of our state, our nation, and our world?

TABLE 2 Annual USDA Forest Reserve Fund Distribution, State Controller's Office, Division of Accounting and Reporting, for Period Ending 09/30/2011

County	25% Amt	Title I Amt	Title III Amt	Total
ALPINE		\$492,881.31	\$40,590.22	\$533,471.53
AMADOR		324,200.92	26,698.90	350,899.82
BUTTE		428,887.31	37,527.64	466,414.95
CALAVERAS		173,475.46	30,613.32	204,088.78
COLUSA		128,401.68		128,401.68
DEL NORTE		1,509,172.59		1,509,172.59
EL DORADO		2,056,984.23	169,398.70	2,226,382.93
FRESNO		1,400,697.15	115,351.53	1,516,048.68
GLENN		344,092.68	30,108.11	374,200.79
HUMBOLDT		1,071,807.70	88,266.52	1,160,074.22
INYO	\$463,222.07			463,222.07
KERN		220,520.55	18,160.52	238,681.07
LAKE		505,082.12	41,595.00	546,677.12
LASSEN		1,972,963.72	162,479.37	2,135,443.09
LOS ANGELES	1,202,085.16			1,202,085.16
MADERA		566,885.43	46,684.68	613,570.11
MARIPOSA		320,577.96	26,400.54	346,978.50
MENDOCINO		352,118.96	28,998.03	381,116.99
MODOC		1,701,934.94	140,159.35	1,842,094.29
MONO	523,258.43			523,258.43
MONTEREY		21,562.21		21,562.21
NEVADA		392,344.38	32,310.71	424,655.09
ORANGE	116,872.15			116,872.15
PLACER		789,026.27	69,039.80	858,066.07
PLUMAS		3,694,611.78	304,262.15	3,998,873.93
RIVERSIDE	298,984.87			298,984.87
SAN BERNARDINO	333,495.79			333,495.79
SAN DIEGO	594,789.86			594,789.86
SAN LUIS OBISPO		13,351.01		13,351.01
SANTA BARBARA		44,252.67		44,252.67
SHASTA		2,042,705.54	168,222.81	2,210,928.35
SIERRA		940,582.25	38,729.86	979,312.11
SISKIYOU		4,718,575.21	388,588.55	5,107,163.76
TEHAMA		1,218,963.48	75,288.92	1,294,252.40
TRINITY		3,934,365.96	138,859.97	4,073,225.93
TULARE		553,192.79	45,557.05	598,749.84
TUOLUMNE		1,304,688.93	107,444.97	1,412,133.90
VENTURA		39,865.01		39,865.01
YUBA		121,635.29	21,465.05	143,100.34
TOTAL	\$3,532,708.33	\$33,400,407.49	\$2,392,802.27	\$39,325,918.09



Auberry Elementary, rear elevation. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BUD OLSON.

The political Left and political Right—that sinisterly dexterous two-handed engine of manipulation—have their own handles on the answers, but none of the answers I’ve been given seem quite to come to grips with the reality. Take the “Saving the spotted owl killed Auberry” (and by extension its school) argument. If that were true, why did it take the school seventeen years to die after the lumber mill closed? Yes, regulations and restrictions—particularly sharp reductions in National Forest logging, for the purpose of preserving habitat for salmon and spotted owls—did drive up log prices and affect the timber industry, but recurrent recessions and globalization have been at least as much to blame.

Loggers have been chasing cheap trees for centuries. In the early decades of the twentieth century, logging families from Michigan and Minnesota left their homes and lit out for the pristine ponderosa pine forests of California and Oregon. Today, American companies sell raw logs to Chinese and Japanese buyers whose mill ships turn timber into lumber on the high seas, while at the same time the United States imports well over twenty billion board feet of lumber—most of it from Canada, but also from New Zealand, Latin America, and increasingly from the northern Baltic states (particularly Lithuania) and Russia. That’s where forty per cent of the world’s standing softwood timber can be found—along with an educated workforce, good roads, railroads, and ports, hungry post-Soviet investors, and a dearth of environmental regulation.

The Lithuanians and Russians will likely discover, as others have before them, that the extraction-to-extinction model of resource exploitation (so beloved by Wall Street bankers, Objectivist economic libertarians, and human settlers recently arrived to previously uninhabited islands like

Madagascar or New Zealand) is not a good long-term business plan. Given that more than 99 per cent of mature and old-growth forests (the habitat preferred by the spotted owl) was logged out in the “lower forty eight” in the five hundred years between Columbus’s first landfall in the New World and the closing of the Auberry saw mill—and the majority of *that* in the last hundred years of that time-frame—logging in the forests of the United States can hardly be said to have been too “regulated” or “restricted” throughout most of American history.

The pattern of not knowing what we’ve got until it’s almost gone is both a very new and a very old one in human history. Two vast opposing points of view—the anthropocentric (this world as created for and/or by man) versus the ecocentric (humanity created for and/or by the Earth)—have shaped all of human history, whether that history involved nomadic hunter-gatherers pondering a shift to a more settled agrarian life-way, or political parties debating the reality of climate change. In this big-picture context, the death of the Auberry saw mill was at least as much about the checkered past of the timber industry as it was about the uncertain future of the spotted owl—and I write this as a long-time proponent of the continued existence of the Sierra Forest Products lumber mill in Terra Bella, the only commercial saw mill remaining in the southern Sierra for hundreds of miles.

But what of the other explanations for the school’s closure—the changes in welfare-to-work laws that encourage the rural poor to relocate to urban areas for better work prospects; the unintended consequences of Proposition 13; or Proposition 98’s failure to fully address those



Auberry Elementary, front elevation. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BUD OLSON.

TABLE 3 Funding per Pupil—Unified Districts Statewide compared to Sierra Unified

	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
STATE-WIDE UNIFIED DISTRICT TOTAL	\$7,272	\$7,569	\$8,032	\$8,923	\$8,984	\$9,476	\$8,717	\$9,031
SIERRA UNIFIED TOTAL	\$9,920	\$9,961	\$10,606	\$12,202	\$11,967	\$12,522	\$11,008	\$11,447
REVENUE LIMIT	\$7,374	\$7,337	\$7,890	\$8,465	\$8,347	\$8,179	\$7,087	\$7,315
FEDERAL	\$927	\$885	\$829	\$921	\$969	\$1,592	\$1,373	\$1,414
OTHER STATE	\$1,499	\$1,613	\$1,305	\$1,895	\$1,795	\$1,874	\$1,763	\$1,986
OTHER LOCAL	\$120	\$126	\$581	\$921	\$856	\$876	\$786	\$733

NOTE: Sierra Unified total is also broken down into four main funding areas: revenue limits (property tax and state aid), federal funds, other state (categorical programs), and other local sources.

consequences? Those are all about the relationship between the citizenry and the government, as is the Forest Reserve funding resulting from the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. Stemming from a 1908 compromise between the Federal government and local residents (mostly in the West), in which the Theodore Roosevelt administration recognized that lands set aside for the public good of the nation also had value to the local economy, the Act entitles local residents to a share of revenues generated by public lands—including tax revenues with which to maintain roads and public schools, tax monies which might have accrued had those lands not been barred from use in private enterprise. More than a century after the law’s initial passage, the Forest Reserve continues to pay out to local communities (Table 2), including communities in eastern Fresno County—in exchange for the preserving of the spotted owl’s habitat and other “long-term” and “public” goods.

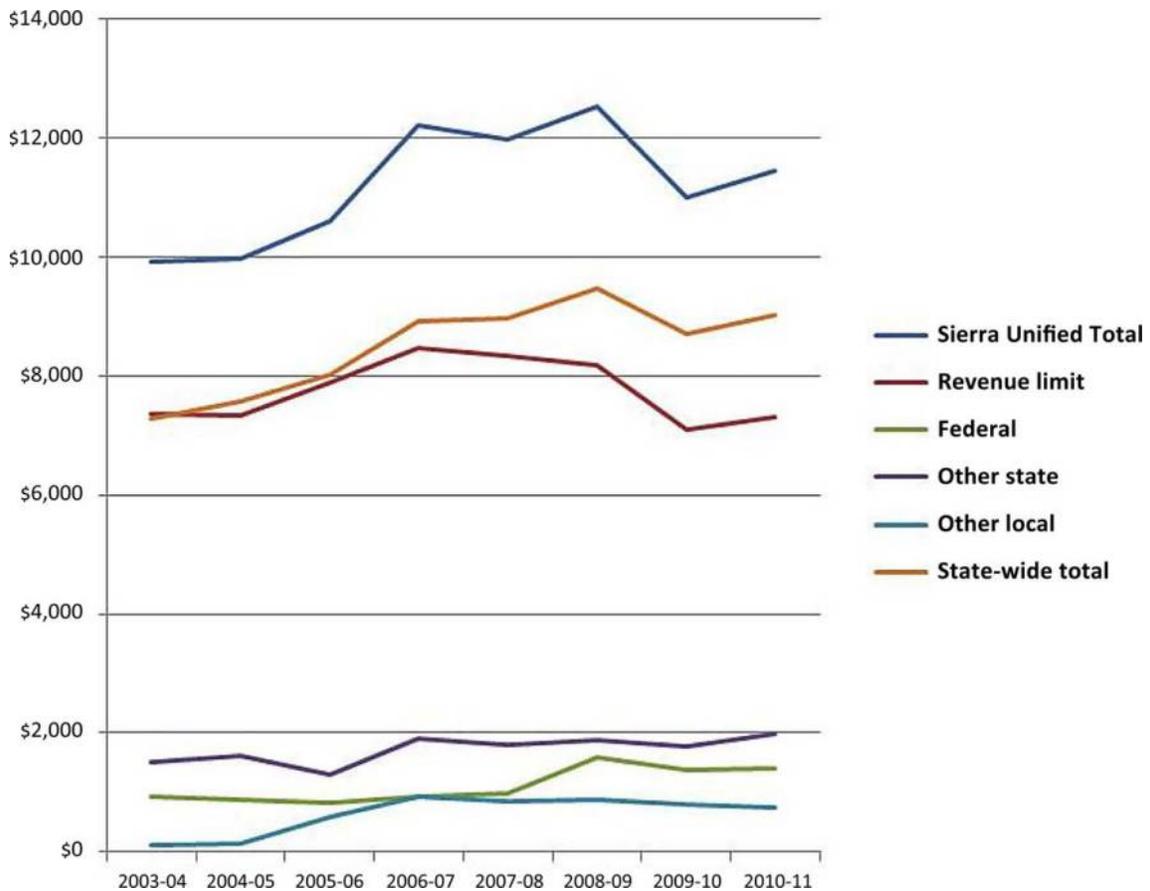
These days, such a relationship between citizens and government is openly scorned by residents of those same, government-subsidized communities—a perplexing situation perhaps best understood by examining why those school bonds were defeated no less than three times.

At first blush, the school closures seemed difficult to explain, so I turned to data extracted from the website <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us>. Although they can make for difficult and abstract reading, numbers also have a way of clarifying a situation objectively. As Table 3 and the diagram make clear, over much of the last decade Sierra Unified has been funded about thirty per cent *better* than the state-wide average. What these data fail to represent, however, is that—because of the District’s 3,000 square mile coverage area and

relatively small student population dispersed throughout that expanse—most of that thirty per cent differential is eaten up by transportation costs alone, not to mention the higher costs associated with a poverty-impacted rural school district.

The sheer physical size of Sierra Unified and the superficial rosiness of those funding numbers have shaped the recent history of the District in other ways. On July 1, 1990, Golden Hills School District was formed from Auberry Union School District and Sierra Union School District. Golden Hills School District acquired the land on which the Foothill Middle School was to be built, and obtained Certificates of Participation in the amount of \$14,555,000 during the 1991–92 school year to build Foothill Middle School. Exactly two years later, Sierra Unified School District was created as a result of a vote of the people to unify Golden Hills School District (the former Auberry Union School District and Sierra Union School District) and Sierra Joint Union High School District. Auberry Elementary was one of SJUHSD’s six feeder elementary schools.

Although often referred to as “bond measures,” Certificates of Participation (COPs, also sometimes referred to as participation certificates, or PCs) are a bit more arcane than traditional bonds. Formerly, governmental entities (say, school districts) could use long-term bonds to purchase or construct new buildings (say, a school). Long-term bonds were issued with the approval of the voters. One of the consequences of the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, however, was that the required voter approval for bond debt was raised from a simple majority to a two-thirds vote. Because the two-thirds vote provision of Proposition 13 made it extremely difficult for government entities to pass traditional bond measures, governments and agencies soon



Revenue per pupil.

switched to COPs because COPs are not legally “debt” and therefore do not require voter approval.

COPs are lease financing agreements that can be marketed to investors in the form of securities—in much the same way that tax-exempt bond debt can be marketed. Under the COP scenario, a local government agency (the Lessor) has the authority to lease currently unused facilities or other real estate to a designated non-profit corporation (Trustee) that can in turn sub-lease the facilities to other organizations (sub-lessees). The trustee can sell Certificates of Participation in those future sub-lease payments that will be received by the non-profit corporation (aka the Trustee). The monies obtained from the sale of these COPs are then apportioned by the non-profit corporation—back to the local government agency. Unlike government bonds, however, which are secured by the lease revenues of an agreement among government entities, COPs are not legally debt because they allow individual investors to buy *shares* of the lease revenues.

If this history, with its consolidations and mergers and rather arcane financial instruments, sounds less like a story of Auberry Road and more like a story of Wall Street over the same time-frame, it should—for there are parallels. Banks and financial institutions can and do share their credit assets with other banks through the use of participation certificates, which allow such financial institutions to generate short term funds and hedge against risk. The rates at which these bank participation certificates can be issued is negotiable, based on interest rate scenarios. The Sierra Unified School District COPs followed the interest rate track too: The average interest rates on that \$14,555,000 in Certificates of Participation in 1992 was 7.68 per cent and the debt service was \$1, 321,310. When those original certificates were refinanced in 1993 at an interest rate of 6.02 per cent, the District increased the amount borrowed from \$14,555,000 to \$17,110,000, to pay for off-site utilities for Foothill Middle School (including the sewer plant and the land it stands on)—all while slightly *decreasing* the

annual debt service. When the certificates were refinanced again in 2003, the term of the loan was shortened by a year (final payment March 2017 instead of March 2018) and annual debt service again decreased (by \$163,172).

The District was willing to assume an annual debt service of a bit over a million dollars for the same reason homeowners were willing to treat their houses as their banks and assume greater indebtedness; for the same reason corporations leveraged buyouts; for the same reason the finance industry was willing to push crazy mortgage instruments; for the same reason that underlies Proposition 13: the myth of the endlessly inflating bubble—ever-rising house prices, along with ever-expanding growth in both the private sector and government funding.

All of the presumptuous assumptions of that myth have now proven to be false, particularly in light of the economic collapse of '08 and the ensuing slow recovery. The District found itself unable to both simultaneously service its debt and keep all District school campuses open. In contrast to the taxpayer-assisted government bailout of the global finance industry and other economic sectors at that time, however, enough voters in Sierra Unified have said “No!” to passage of any tax measure intended to “bail out” the school system that SUSD has effectively been prevented from shedding its debt service burden in any voter-approved manner.

Let me say here that my foothill and mountain neighbors (for this is where I live, too) personally tend to be very unselfish with their time and labor, particularly when it comes to family, those living near them, and members of their churches. They are almost always willing to lend a hand, and I have many times materially benefited from their greater experience in the vicissitudes of mountain living. Some of them might hear the hissing of the very bosom serpent of ingratitude in my presuming to raise questions about any of these issues, yet I write this precisely because I *do* love my neighbors, and not just because the Bible commands it.

The fact is that quite a few of my salt-of-the-earth Sierran neighbors are also Tea Party Patriots who readily repeat the economic libertarian rhetoric that pronounces all government spending “wasteful,” “inefficient,” and “bureaucratic”—even as they themselves materially benefit from such spending. They hear nothing divisive, selfish, or mean-spirited in the two most common arguments advanced for

Government is only our “enemy” until we really need a friend.

resisting the school measures: “My kids are grown, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to pay more property tax to educate other people’s kids (particularly kids who don’t look like me)” and “Government always wants to throw the people’s money at problems, but the District got itself into this mess, so if it has to close schools and go bankrupt to get out from under, fine—no more bail outs!”

Many of my mountain and foothill friends and neighbors hear in these arguments merely a recognition of fiscal responsibility and the necessity of “protecting what’s ours” against taxes and other government intrusions. Other area residents, however, realize that their housing values are to some degree tied to the quality of local schools, and still more residents realize that, deep down, government is only our “enemy” until we really need a friend. Yet not enough voters (55 per cent) realized these things to pass any of the measures in support of Sierra Unified School District.

This is where limiting the scope of one’s social vision to family, neighborhood, and church—to those who share one’s genes, or who look more or less like one’s self, or who demonstrably share one’s religious beliefs—becomes problematic. It’s tempting to dismiss the “other people’s kids, other people’s money” arguments as just small-town Tea Partyism. It’s deeper than that, however. The children our increasingly older and whiter local voters don’t want to pay to educate are increasingly younger and browner (Hispanic and Native American). That too must be taken into consideration.

The larger myth here is of fearful future instability. It was that larger myth which surrounded Proposition 13 in 1978: fear that new arrivals to California, particularly Hispanics, would drive up the home values and property tax burdens of those Californians already here. It was this larger myth which surrounded the passage of Proposition 184 in 1994: the “Three Strikes Law” driven by fears of recidivism contributing to massive lawlessness—again, particularly involving people of color. The world envisioned by proponents of those propositions simply does not match the demographic

and cultural realities of California today. (For more on Prop 13 and Prop 184 and demographic realities, see Dowell Myers' excellent article in *Boom*, Volume 2, Number 2.)

Yet in the mountains where I live, that fear narrative is still a powerful ideological discourse: "ideological" because it expresses our imaginary relationship to the real, "discourse" because that narrative has helped to *create* that which it purports to *describe*. Through the ballot propositions, that narrative has continued to result in both increased investment in prisons and decreased investment in schools and social services—a situation in which investing based in the fear of instability has itself turned out to be an investment *in* instability. That's the thing about ideologies: they have a great deal of tensile strength, and (up to the point at which they snap) seem paradoxically to strengthen their hold on the imagination even as their grip on a divergent reality weakens.

The setbacks suffered by the Republican Party in the 2012 elections and the passage of a recent ballot initiative softening Three Strikes certainly raise questions about the future of that ideological discourse, even among believers in that discourse. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that only mountain folk might still fear an increasingly diverse California. It would be a mistake to think an atavistic brand of "I got mine—you get out of my face" economic selfishness still makes perfect sense only to those far from the cosmopolitanism of the cities. It would be a mistake to think only unsophisticated rural people might hear the following *as a good thing*: "The Sea of Faith [in Government]/ Was once, too, at the full . . . / But now I only hear/Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" (apologies to Matthew Arnold). Indeed, many of our sophisticated Silicon Valleyites are, for all their avowed irreligion, baptized, confirmed, and fully sealed in the Church of Virtuous Selfishness (Rand Rite)—and would have no fundamental disagreement with the sentiments of our small town voters on taxes and government. In fact, too many of California's silicon entrepreneurs actually seem poised to carry the dismantling of public education even further than our small-town folk dare, for—from having become experts in the operation of those universal machines called computers—these same silicontrepreneurs now apparently believe themselves to be universal experts in all human disciplines and occupations, education not least of all.

Is this what we have wrought: minds left intentionally blank?

Looking about the Auberry Elementary science classroom, I see again that slate blackboard with nothing written on it, and I think "This *tabula* left intentionally *rasa*." I think about the attacks on critical thinking—out of the political Right, from the unthinking denial of climate change to the unthinking approval of consumer capitalism (including privatized online education), and out of the political Left, from the unthinking embrace of a debased social constructionism to the unthinking rejection of academic rigor as somehow inherently either essentialist or elitist—and I wonder. Is this what we have wrought: minds left intentionally blank, or so thoroughly scribbled over with the chalky white-noise of mindless electronic chatter it amounts to the same thing? Has the American (and particularly Californian) genius for seeing in small ideas the possibility of great personal fortunes become a genius for small mindedness, of dollars trumping sense, particularly in regard to the public good?

Despite however much public education has been hurt by all the worst excesses of budget cutting, of theocratic attacks on science teaching, of misguided social promotion and the cult of "self-esteem," isn't it incredibly short-sighted to further gut the public school system? Are we such fools for big, poorly thought-out ideas ("All the world's a hologram/ and we are merely avatars") that we have become blind to the non-virtual suffering and misfortunes of others? And, if we have become so blinded, who will restore our true vision, if not ourselves?

From neighborhood to nation and beyond, it's all "as above, so below"—and much closer than they appear.

Something like the flash comes—a moment when mindless chatter is replaced by chatterless mind—and I realize that it is still better to hope for something than to fear for nothing. In an empty classroom of an abandoned school I raise my hand. Jim Harris must be wondering what I'm doing when he walks in, but he says nothing about it as we leave the room, and that's okay. We all have our work to do, learning what it is we have to lose—and what we might do to prevent that eventuality—before it's gone. **B**