

OLD TRICKS, NEW DOGS

A famous cast of characters.

Words by Tim Findley. Illustrations by John Bardwell.

Henry Paulson shouldn't object too much about being compared to a snake. With his shaved head and dour face punctuated by round wire-rim glasses he does sort of resemble an Asian python, and Paulson, by his own proclamation, loves snakes.

"I like to hold them and feel them," he told *Forbes* magazine in a piece delving into why maybe the biggest wheeler dealer on Wall Street spent his time in far-off swamps with his buddies from The Nature Conservancy.

He evidently likes Asians too. As head of Goldman Sachs, he made a reported 70 trips to China and, as head of TNC, he took personal charge of the organization's growing Asian-Pacific influence.

It's all in the gestalt of the man who as U.S. Treasury secretary wanted virtually unchecked control over \$700 billion (at least) to save the American economy from a problem he helped create.

That's just the liner note on the former Goldman Sachs chief executive, Nature Conservancy chairman, Treasury secretary and all-time bold political constrictor who President George W. Bush asked to help squeeze success out of an overfat economy. And Bush, the beleaguered Republican, knew all along that Paulson was a Democrat.

Only Bush himself seemed absent in the September portrait of Paulson, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who lined up on the edge of the Pogo swamp and blamed a dozen turtles for not going along with first passage of the great solution. They had found the enemy again, and, as usual, it was us.

They seemed to take Paulson's word for that, even understanding fundamentally that it was investment bankers like Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers on Wall Street who made it into Greed Street by buying up mortgage failures. But they seemed to miss the obvious, that on the street of greed, Goldman Sachs was the big casino. At the height of it, in 2005, Goldman Sachs' investment earnings

jumped from \$207 million in 2003 to \$453 million the year Paulson took over at Treasury. It may sound like a Manhattan department store, but GS is where the power brokers prowled. Paulson left his position as head of the firm with at least a \$30 million parachute.

And although he made it seem that the sky would start falling unless he was quickly given bailout

because it offered almost no relief to average home owners.

Pelosi and Reid insisted, of course, that oversight by them would not permit bailouts of investment banks to include big retirement payoffs. It's all in whom you trust. Goldman Sachs, flush with a \$5 billion investment from Warren Buffet, doesn't seem to have to worry about it.

Saving the bankers stole all the attention from Congress' \$25 billion loan to save the auto industry and the veto overriding passage of a \$307 billion farm bill that President Bush labeled, "mostly pork."

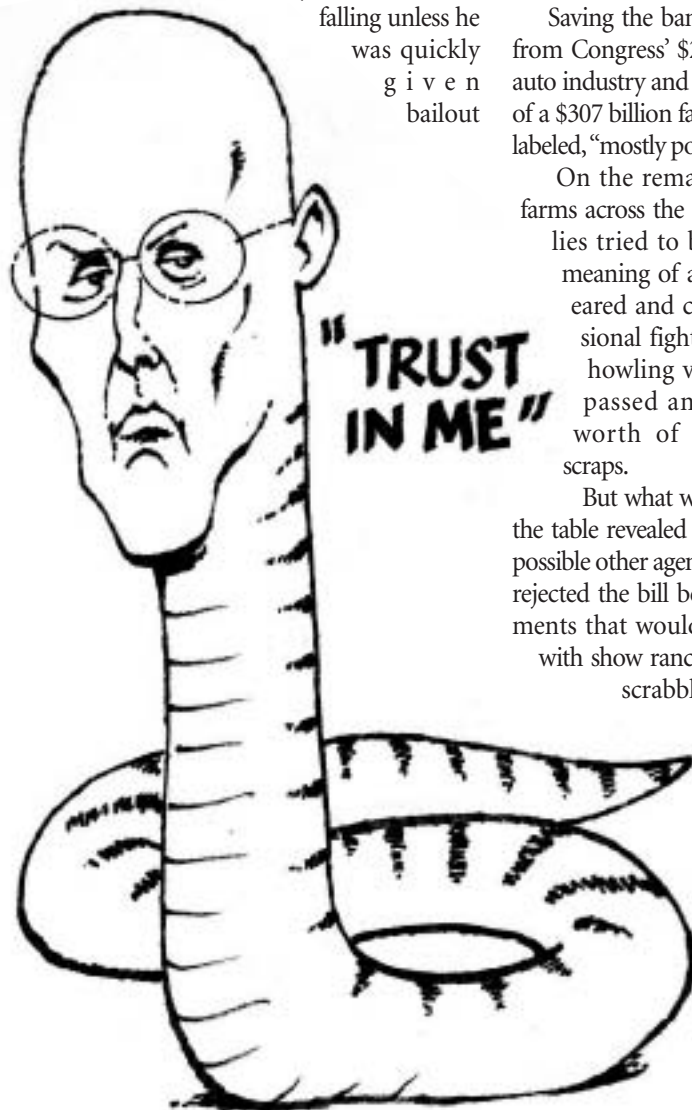
On the remaining ranches and small farms across the nation, hardworking families tried to balance out the ultimate meaning of a new farm bill, itself dog-eared and chewed up from Congressional fights and kicked back with a howling veto by the president and passed anyway with \$307 billion worth of more-than-just-supper scraps.

But what was actually slipped beneath the table revealed by its contradictions some possible other agendas. President Bush said he rejected the bill because of the pork in payments that would go more to movie stars with show ranches than it would to hard-

scrabble wheat growers and real

family farmers forced to find part-time work to make ends meet. It seemed a surprisingly un-Republican stance against big agriculture. But Democrats like Nancy Pelosi said payments to even absentee growers earning up to \$750,000 a year was just part of the compromise.

Could it be that Bush still hopes to contrive a North American Union with Mexico and other nations who resent U.S. subsidies? And could it be that Pelosi and other Democrats know damn well



authority, Paulson had known about the mortgage crisis at least by 2007 when he tried to form a consortium among bankers called "Hope Now." It failed, critics said,

that most of the farm bill appropriation, \$209 billion, doesn't go to agriculture at all, but to increasing food stamps and nutritional social programs?

It seems significant that neither Barack Obama nor John McCain, or for that matter, Hilary Clinton were present to vote on the veto override, perhaps providing themselves with wiggle room in what might be necessary to say on the side roads of their campaign highways.

The "little guys" who really feed the rest of us aren't counting on their share of subsidies to do much more than fill the tires against the relentlessly rising cost of energy nearly driving them out of business.

"Food and fuel" might even have made for a worthy campaign slogan for any politician with the grit to make the connection. But the fact is that while "mom and pop" may serve a better meal, even a "common people" office seeker needs to eat out where special interests will be sure that their pockets are stuffed as well as their bellies.

So they made the usual promises.

"We are at that critical and urgent moment," said Obama in his campaign policy position on agriculture. "If America continues policies that work against family farmers, our rural communities will fall further behind—and so will America."

John McCain's position paper seemed to express the same cracker-poor impression of rural America, which he said, "can best be served by lower taxes, strong markets, a vibrant economy, high-tech connectivity, protection from natural disasters, better choice and availability of health insurance, better quality education, and retirement security." All that for us hayseeds. Makes you wonder what's left for them city dudes.

Both sides, to come to the point, seemed to languish in worn-out platitudes about not

only the reality of rural America, but its vital place in the economic and social condition of the nation.

More than 300,000 small farms have been lost in the United States since 1980. Nearly one million former farm workers are among the nation's five million unemployed. The

marginal farmers and ranchers off the land and trading what should be sound planning and policy with newly issued food stamps. No matter how the dog days of summer evolved into an historic campaign, distrust of politicians and government itself still sours the faith in much of the rural West.

A rancher in Nevada uses it like a personal mantra: "One day," he says. "One day people are going to get hungry."

But not now. Not yet. Politicians know that Americans prefer to take their doomsday diagnoses one at a time. Right now, it's still former Vice President Al Gore riding his Nobel Prize cherry picker to global-warming catastrophe that holds the most attention. It's an easy religion to join and even better if you can afford a pew. Henry Paulson, for one, considers himself a veritable deacon in the house that blames the U.S. Even House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who rejects new oil drilling—"because I'm saving the planet"—recently bought a portion of Northwest forest to offset her own "carbon track," and The Nature Conservancy, "savior" of so much Plum Creek Timberland they can't possibly manage, has begun selling parts of it off. Paradise is for sale, so long as you promise not to use it.

That's part of the thinking behind the managed revision of rural America where financially pressed farmers and ranchers continue to make the best of it by becoming like serfs and sharecroppers on their own encumbered land. Contradictions abound like an infestation of jackrabbits bouncing across properties "saved"—from us.

Patricia Mulroy, Southern Nevada Water Authority general manager, revealed that, with the help of Harry Reid, her group has secured more than 23,000 acres of ranch land in economically strapped northern Nevada along with more than a million acres of fed-



**We love the family farmer.
Love 'em to death.**

issue is not just finding them new jobs. It's also the loss of their skills and experience as part of the slow extinction of family farms. Predator environmental radicals, looting taxation, and carrion-feeding politicians eager to establish personal legacies are still driving

eral grazing rights just in the last two years. It's not the Nevada most people imagine. The Spring Valley is lush green with rich dark soil and a water table so high that it sometimes feels like walking on sponges.

The Vegas water company is keeping that land in production with on-site ranch managers, but it doesn't really care about the cattle or the crops. What Mulroy wants is the 13 billion gallons of water rights that go with it. By 2013, with a little more help from Reid in laying the pipelines, that water will start to flow 250 miles south to Las Vegas. And Mulroy wants more. In fact, in Nevada, her representatives have filed for virtually all available water rights in the state.

"This [Clark County and Las Vegas] is where the need is for water and we pay full market value to get it," Mulroy explained. "We leave the ranches intact, still productive, and use the resource here for a growing population."

The ranches are so far "still productive" because by western water law, you either use it or lose it. So under the deals that put \$79 million into buying up northern ranches there are still cattle being produced.

Said rancher and Eureka, Nev., Assemblyman Pete Goicoechea, "Christ couldn't come down from the cross to run those ranches and break even with what they paid for them."

Even in paradise, money talks.

Reid, who paved the way for pipelines to pass the water from north to south in his state, is a Vegas planet saver from way back. For the last 20 years, he has engineered buyouts and land swaps from northern Nevada to open up federal land near Las Vegas for development.

This summer, with characteristic beady-eyed smugness, he announced his "proudest" achievement in passage of the bitterly fought Truckee River Operating Agreement, which will guarantee water for the state's second city, Reno, while putting irrigated farms to the southeast even more at risk.

"This truly is landmark legislation," he

said with some exaggeration and then added what sounded like a familiar threat to irrigators expected to take the agreement to court. "It's over," he said. "You finished the race and

all you should think about are the good things."



Both Reno and especially overgrown Las Vegas have been hard hit with foreclosures and credit collapse in the mortgage debacle, but Reid himself has become one of the rich-

est members of Congress with his real-estate investments. His sons have all become lobbyists and his pals are big-time Vegas wheeler-dealers. That's a big reason why he is in his fourth term in the Senate without needing the votes of rural constituents who hate him.

In Klamath Falls, Ore., weary but still wary central basin farmers feted their newfound friends in The Nature Conservancy and other eco-player pressure groups after ending some six years of negotiation with a deal they hope will promise a future for irrigation supplies. But the deal ignored ranchers in the upper basin still being forced into some kind of negotiated settlement with tribal leaders, and paid no attention at all to producers in the lower basin into California. It left a bad taste among neighbors while establishing still more implied authority to unaccountable NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations) like The Nature Conservancy to call the shots.

In a year too long on politics and partisan rancor, the theme in the field seemed to emerge as compromise on a stick just a little shorter for agriculture.

It was all too perfect for allowing once-raging adversaries in the environmental movement to paint themselves a new face as lovers of those who tend the soil and nurture the livestock of Mother Earth. Condemning corporate agriculture as the real enemy, green groups which once mocked small producers as "hobby ranchers" now proclaimed themselves the small farmers' ally in coalitions to "think globally, but eat locally."

It comes in a variety of slogans, but sustainable agriculture tracks back to the same left-dominated international conferences that brought "blame America" to global warming and habitat preservation to the underlying manifesto of the Endangered Species Act.

The concept is considered to have been

coined by Sierra Club maverick and Friends of the Earth founder David Brower in 1969. Dozens of new coalitions have formed out of green groups with an agenda and cash backing to create large-scale organic farming and farmers' markets to challenge chain stores and integrated agribusiness.

In line with Al Gore's global-warming position, the so-called "food movement" suggests the ultimate answer is for individuals to make their lifestyles more politically correct by not only shortening the food miles required to deliver produce, but by eating only in-season organically produced food, eliminating bottled water and junk food, including sodas, and purchasing only pasture-fed beef.

If that might sound to some about as workable as a Stalin five-year plan or Mao's directed peace gardens, it was certainly not an issue in the political campaign. Who was to argue?

Yet, Obama's position paper on agriculture suggests an affinity to the "act [or eat] locally" notion by providing support for small farmers over corporate agribusiness and encouraging "local and organic" production with a "regional system" of food distribution.

John McCain's more vague position paper stresses his opposition to the farm bill and the need to reduce trade barriers to foreign markets.

If there ever was a plan for agriculture in the Bush administration, it never in eight years won a headline. George W. Bush, in fact, seemed like an already forgotten man by the

time of the Republican National Convention. The president was waiting for the wrong hurricane in New Orleans when he became the first sitting president not to attend his party's nominating convention. He was there in a quickly forgotten satellite appearance, but he did not seem missed. In fact, it was meaningful that the current president's name was raised

female vice president.

But the matter of food and fuel was just a nuance in a campaign where the recognized national media embarrassed themselves in search of truth to slanderous junk media



Mulroy and Reid will start draining Northern Nevada by 2013. And Las Vegas wants more.

headlines or 10-second sound bites of unintended consequences were made to seem as revealing as a CAT scan.

It was not a proud performance in a free press that was itself dying in the effort as more and more prominent news agencies fired staff and cut back coverage to survive their losses in circulation and advertising.

The times have changed already, and not because of the candidates alone. When next comes spring, both new and old people will be in charge, and presumably the winter waiting will have established even more clearly the need for leadership and direction on the fundamental issues of food and fuel.

That may require an entirely new blend of science and sociology for the answers. ■

Tim Findley, chief political writer for RANGE, has written about these characters before but not as players in the same show.

far more often in the Democratic convention than it was in that of his own party.

Something definitely had come to an end. Both the Bushes and the Clintons were finished at last, and change will be inevitable, whether with a first black president or a first