

# 'THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR'

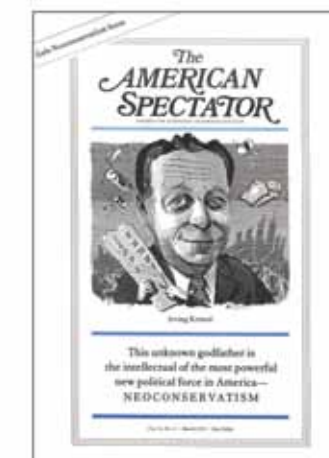
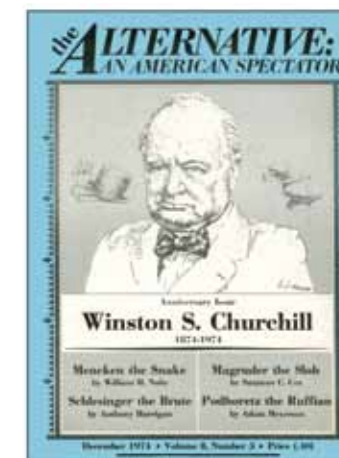
BORN AND BRED IN BLOOMINGTON



IN THIS BASTION OF LIBERALISM, A GROUNDBREAKING, IMPERTINENT CAMPUS MAGAZINE ATTRACTED THE BEST CONSERVATIVE THINKERS AND WRITERS OF THE DAY AND SPREAD ITS INFLUENCE ALL THE WAY TO THE WHITE HOUSE.

(above) Indiana University student political activity in the 1960s reflected conservative as well as liberal standpoints. In this photo from October 1967, IU students demonstrate support for American military action in Vietnam during U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk's visit to campus. Photo by IU News Bureau, IU Archives (P0052739)

(opposite) Originally titled *The Alternative* in 1967, the magazine became *The Alternative: An American Spectator* in 1974, and *The American Spectator* in 1977. Images courtesy of The American Spectator



By Elisabeth Andrews

Bloomington is generally known as Indiana's liberal epicenter, a blue island in a red state. With a 43-year succession of Democratic mayors, the town's reputation is distinctively progressive, a feature both embraced and enhanced by Indiana University (though an occasional hindrance to Statehouse relations). But there was a time, in the not-too-distant past, when the town drew a steady stream of the nation's most influential conservative thinkers, who found their champion in a magazine produced in an old farmhouse on West Indiana 46.

Throughout the 1970s, on any given Saturday, one could run across American intellectuals such as William F. Buckley Jr. and Tom Wolfe or

European luminaries such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Luigi Barzini Jr. They would gather at Le Petit Café with a collection of students, professors, and local business owners in a Heartland version of the Enlightenment salon, discussing politics, literature, philosophy, and the events of the day.

The magazine that brought them together, *The American Spectator*, is long gone from Indiana, but while it was here it not only launched the careers of a generation of conservative writers but also became a significant contributor to the rise of a new American conservatism. It's a part of Bloomington's history that, however at odds with the city's broader identity, deserves to be preserved, as it made a lasting mark on the country's political landscape.



(left) Bob Tyrrell in his room at the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity house in the mid-60s. *Courtesy photo*



(below) Tyrrell during a recent visit to Bloomington. *Photo by Shannon Zahnle*

*The American Spectator* is best known today for its 1994 story about what came to be known as “Troopergate,” in which Arkansas state troopers accused then-President Bill Clinton of using their services to facilitate his extramarital affairs while he was the governor of Arkansas. In referring to “Paula,” the article instigated Paula Corbin Jones’ lawsuit against Clinton, which in turn precipitated Clinton’s impeachment by the House of Representatives in response to statements he made during the deposition.

All that, however, came after the magazine had moved to the Washington, D.C., area in 1985. When the *Spectator* started here, it was a different sort of publication, focusing not on investigative journalism but on a breed of cultural criticism and political satire inspired by H. L. Mencken’s writing in *The American Mercury* during the 1920s and ’30s.

The magazine that initially flourished in Bloomington was more merry than muckraking and more absurdist than ideological, and it reflected a brand of conservative bohemi-

## TYRRELL STOOD AMONG THE THROG HAWKING EVERYTHING FROM AUDITORIUM TICKETS TO YEARBOOK SUBSCRIPTIONS . . . HE DID SO, HOWEVER, IN A TOGA AND A TEXACO FIRE HELMET.

anism that was entirely its own. The old farmhouse, known affectionately as “The Establishment,” might be the only historical example of a right-wing ’60s commune, in which disheveled young men perched on sawed-off logs and drank from mason jars while listening to broadcasts of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and proposing arguments for greater intervention in Vietnam.

The culture of *The American Spectator* managed to simultaneously absorb and reject not only its era and its surroundings but also, through its pervasive sarcasm and campus hijinks, the conventions of conservatism itself. Its whimsical approach inspired dozens of other campus publications as well as a new breed of right-wing wit that thrives today among writers and commentators from Ben Stein to P. J. O’Rourke.

It began, however, with a swimmer, who came to IU in 1961 to train under Coach James Edward “Doc” Counsilman, and who had no particular interest in politics.

### A CREATURE OF DOC COUNSILMAN

Bob Tyrrell had a talent for organizing his compatriots. As a 16-year-old at Fenwick High School in the Chicago suburbs, he decided his swim team needed to train during the summer, so he formed a group called the International Nautical Shark Association, outfitted it with black velour sweatsuits, and drove them all to Bloomington in a green ’51 Ford station wagon.

“I wanted to see Doc Counsilman’s workouts,” he states flatly, as though every high school sophomore made a habit of dropping in on the legendary Olympic coach.

What he saw impressed him enough that he returned as an IU freshman and adopted Counsilman as his mentor, looking to the Swimming Hall of Famer for both athletic and intellectual guidance.

“I’m a creature of Doc Counsilman,” he says today. “He had a restless mind. He’d give us long lectures on all the books we should read, and we’d swim back and forth in the Royer Pool with opera booming from the address system.”

During Tyrrell’s undergraduate years, student political groups were taking shape on campus, not only in the form of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Young People’s Socialist League but also the Conservative League, the Students for an

Orderly Society, and the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). Tyrrell’s Phi Kappa Psi fraternity brother Tom Charles Huston headed the campus YAF chapter and, by 1965, its national organization, leading pro-war rallies that, as Butler University Professor Jason Lantzer chronicled in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, were just as well attended as their anti-war counterparts.

What IU conservatives had in numbers, however, they lacked in media outlets. After the *Indiana Daily Student* endorsed local SDS chairman Guy Loftman for student body president in 1967, Tyrrell, by then a graduate student in the history department, felt the campus needed an alternative voice. He named his magazine, accordingly, *The Alternative* (a title it would relinquish in 1977 due to the term’s left-wing associations).

### ‘THE ALTERNATIVE’ — ISSUE ONE

*‘Are you tired, are you utterly exhausted by the ineffable politicalization of everything in Bloomington from sex to the delinquencies issuing from some neurotic girl’s creative gut?’*

Referring to himself by the lofty moniker of R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr. as well as writing under a series of assumed names including that of *The American Mercury* co-founder George Nathan, Tyrrell began the first issue of his magazine by expressing exasperation over ubiquitous campus demonstrations. It was September 1967, Loftman had won the election, and Tyrrell bemoaned what he perceived as an unnecessary earnestness among campus Democrats.

Referring to Loftman as “the pink-eyed man of destiny,” Tyrrell promised a publication suited to those who “long for a return to the harmless buffoonery that once reigned in the Pupil’s Senate.”

The original content in the issue came largely from Tyrrell, along with reprints of articles by presidential nominee Barry Goldwater and economist Milton Friedman and an essay on WFIU radio programming by fellow swimmer Frank Octave Brunell.

“We will have a series of essays treating the real problems of the university,” Tyrrell promised, “and we will offer a series of articles diagnosing the ailments of the ‘academy.’”

Promotion of the magazine was accomplished in the same manner as all other campus cultural offerings: by assembling outside the field house on registration day to

catch students as they filed out. Tyrrell stood among the throng hawking everything from auditorium tickets and yearbook subscriptions to membership in various social organizations.

He did so, however, in a toga and a Texaco fire helmet. In the fervent 1960s atmosphere of student protests and solemn sit-ins, it was a daring spectacle of silliness.

### CAMPUS PRANKSTERS

The stunt attracted the attention of freshman John Von Kannon, who had just arrived on campus from Lafayette, Indiana.



1964 Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater visits with supporters in IU’s Wright Quadrangle. (l-r) Students William Edward Jenner and Terry Grimm, Goldwater, Indiana State Treasurer Bob Hughes, former U.S. Sen. William Jenner, and student Tom Charles Huston. Huston led the Young Americans for Freedom student group and later drafted the Huston Plan for domestic surveillance under President Richard Nixon. *Courtesy photo*

He joined Tyrrell’s cause on the spot. “I was already a Goldwater Republican,” he says, “but what I really liked about the magazine was that it didn’t take itself too seriously. Bob had volume one, number one in hand, and I stood out there with him selling copies for 15 cents.”

Known as “Baron” for his aristocratic surname, Von Kannon came on board as publisher, adding momentum not only to the magazine’s growth in staff and contributors but also to its sardonic performance art.

When students staged a sit-in at Ballantine Hall calling for creation of an African-American studies department, Tyrrell and Von Kannon claimed control of the Rose Well House — essentially a gazebo — demanding Irish studies. When student groups accused IU’s homecoming queen contest of promoting exclusively Eurocentric beauty standards, *The Alternative* entered a male candidate to challenge the hegemony of female beauty. And after the former editor of the campus left-wing magazine slammed a pie into the face of visiting University of California, Berkeley President Clark Kerr,

*The Alternative* staged its own pieing upon a bogus Columbia University professor.

“We had a student run down the aisle with the pie yelling, ‘You goddamn Commie!’” Tyrrell recalls, erupting into hoarse giggles. “The university was horrified and tried to call Columbia to apologize, only to discover that there was no Dr. Rudolph Montag. In fact he was one of us, a 24-year-old undergraduate Vietnam vet.”



Known as “The Establishment,” this old farmhouse on West Indiana 46 was *The Alternative’s* site of production as well as the residence of several staff members and a destination for conservative leaders. *Courtesy photo*

### THE ESTABLISHMENT: A PARODY OF ITSELF

By this time the magazine had moved to the farmhouse, The Establishment, from its original production facilities in an Indiana Avenue trailer park. Its content had expanded, featuring book reviews, poetry, critiques of news coverage, and satirical essays, such as one writer’s account of his attempt to publish his dissertation: *The Influence of the Peanut on American Foreign Policy, 1783–1812*.

While the magazine went after its political opponents with merciless epithets, calling one local activist “a second-rate intellectual and a full-time sissy,” describing rival student journalists as “pompous hinds and literary dwarfs,” and consistently referring to the IU student newspaper as “The Daily Stupid,” it was also willing to respectfully engage with moderate liberals such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York Democrat whom Tyrrell came to consider a good friend.

For all his verbal venom, Tyrrell was also self-deprecating, writing in his 1969 preface to an interview with *The Public Interest* co-founder Irving Kristol, “*The Alternative*

## THE ENVIRONMENT [AT THE ESTABLISHMENT] ‘WAS SOMETHING BETWEEN THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES AND THE BATES MOTEL.’

was a parody of itself. The grand title belied a dilapidated structure populated by some 10 staff members and twice as many inbred cats. The bathroom was such an abhorrent mix of mold and falling plaster that the men relieved themselves off the front porch. With mattresses on bare floors in the bedrooms and lawn chairs arranged as seating, the environment “was something between The House of the Seven Gables and the Bates Motel,” recalls Paul Helmke, a Phi Psi contemporary who later served as mayor of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

The most prized item in the house was a piano, around which the voices of *The Alternative* could be heard belting out H. L. Mencken’s proposed new national anthem, “I am a 100 percent American, I am, goddamn I am!”

greatly admires Mr. Kristol. We assume his life has its unpleasant moments such as when, in his kindness, he grants interviews to people like our editor.”

The Establishment, meanwhile,

### SUPPORT FROM FAR AND NEAR

Despite this peculiar atmosphere — or perhaps because of it — the magazine began to attract a string of esteemed visitors. In addition to Tyrrell’s hero, William F. Buckley Jr., founder of the *National Review*, these dignitaries included *New York Times* columnist and Nixon speechwriter William Safire, *Wall Street Journal* writer and later CNN reporter Robert Novak, and French author and philosopher Jean-François Revel.

A number of IU professors also gravitated toward the publication, among them both traditional conservatives and longtime Democrats who took issue with the anti-institutional rhetoric of the left. Tyrrell’s graduate advisor, Robert Ferrell, was a frequent guest at The Establishment, as were history Professor Robert Byrnes and political science Professor Charles Hyneman.

Although Tyrrell and Von Kannon describe relations with the university as estranged at best, Kent Owen, who was then an English professor and IU administrator, says that IU Chancellor Herman B Wells approved of the magazine. He recalls a conversation with Wells in which the chancellor “expressed his cordial congratulations on what Bob Tyrrell and his co-workers were accomplishing in providing a more sensible, coherent, conservative alternative to the radical policies and intentions advocated by the leftists of that era.”

The magazine’s conservative credentials also attracted local financial support, first from pharmaceutical heiress Ruth Lilly, who advised Tyrrell to create a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) foundation to publish the magazine (a move that helped secure a sizable grant from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, philanthropist Richard Mellon Scaife).

Another longtime benefactor was Sarkes Tarzian, an Armenian immigrant who built a highly successful business in Bloomington manufacturing radio and television parts. He also founded and ran the WTTV television station, on which Tyrrell hosted a commentary and interview program. Tarzian’s son, Tom, recalls that his father viewed Tyrrell’s efforts as a bulwark in defense of American ideals.

“My father loved America, and he loved the founding principles of freedom and limited government,” he says. “He saw that era’s progressives attempting to characterize the founding as essentially bunk or, if not bunk, then no longer applicable. He felt that



(above) Legendary IU President and Chancellor Herman B Wells had a high opinion of *The Alternative* in its early days. *Photo courtesy of IU Archives (P0023858)*

(right) *Alternative* writers and Phi Kappa Psi fraternity members (l-r) Bob Tyrrell; Kent Owen; Steve Tesich; Steve Smith; and Alan Somers, who recently retired from his Bloomington neurology practice, in a photo that originally appeared in the *Phi Kappa Psi Alumni-gram* in 1978. *Courtesy photo*

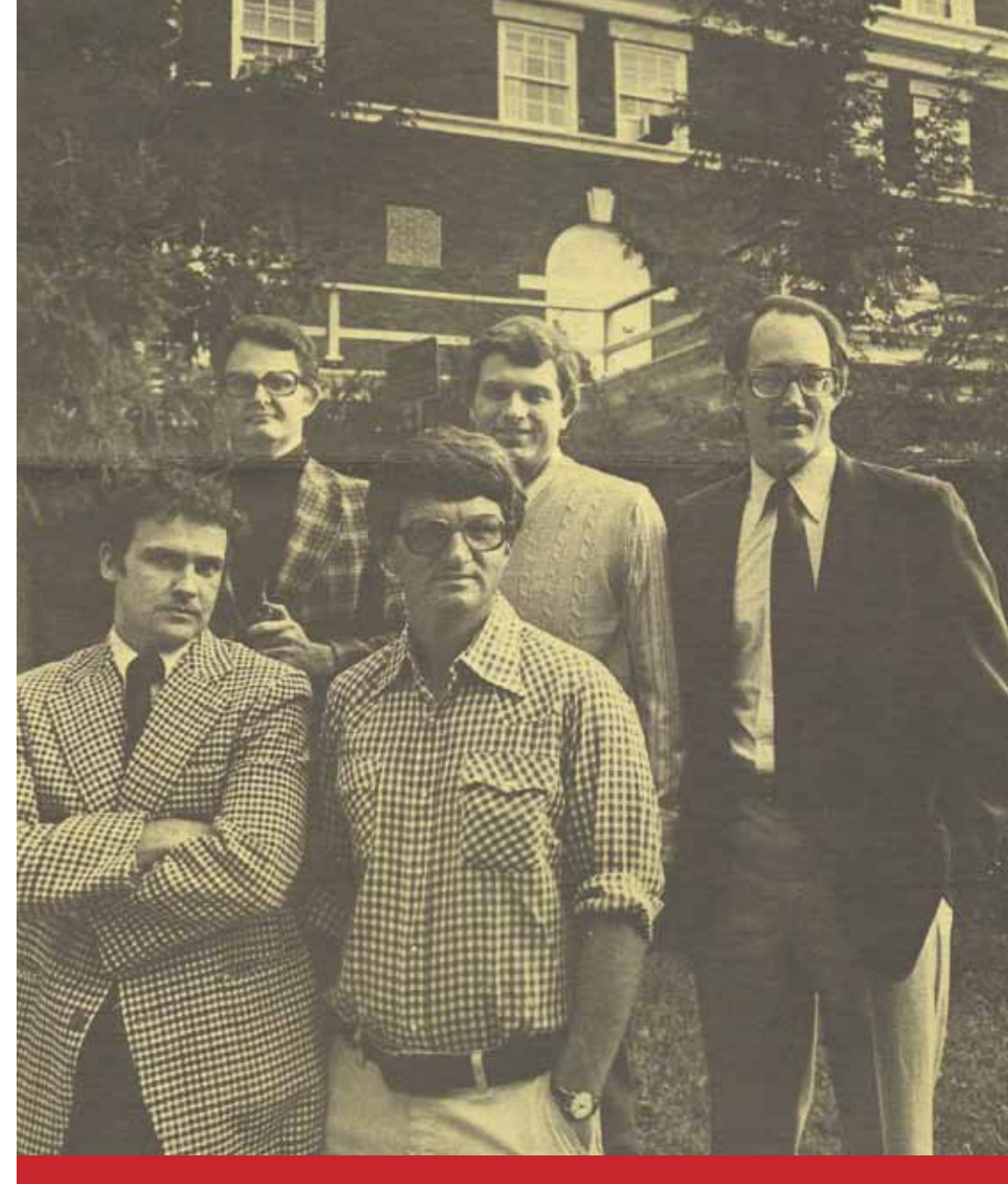
what Bob was doing was upholding those American values.”

Once a month, Tarzian and other local allies would gather with the staff of *The Alternative* and its out-of-town guests for what Tyrrell dubbed the “Saturday Evening Club.” Its purpose, in Owen’s words, was to “drink beer, listen to chamber music, talk politics, and worry about the meaning of life and the human condition and what God really looks like.”

### ATTRACTING ELITE WRITERS

The rightward drift of disenchanted Democrats was occurring in the Ivy League as well. Recognizing, again a movement without a mouthpiece, Tyrrell seized the opportunity to enlist new writers.

“There were a bunch of us who got involved as Bob was starting to branch out,” recalls Leslie Lenkowsky, who was then a Harvard University graduate student and went on to serve in the federal Corporation for National and Community Service before coming to IU as a public affairs professor. He names among his cohort of *Spectator* recruits



Harvard Professor James Q. Wilson, Paul H. Weaver (later of *Fortune* magazine), and Irving Kristol’s son, William Kristol, now editor of *The Weekly Standard*.

“It was thrilling to have a venue where we could write regularly,” Lenkowsky says. “There were a few other outlets for conservative journalism, but there weren’t a lot of them, and Bob was easy to work with.”

The list of writers Tyrrell managed to attract is staggering. Among the dozens who have gone on to notable careers are Malcolm Gladwell, best-selling author and staff writer for *The New Yorker*; Erich Eichman, now of *The Wall Street Journal*; P. J. O’Rourke, satirist, contributor to many magazines, and author of 20 books; George Will, whose commentary for *The Washington Post* won a Pulitzer Prize; Roger Rosenblatt, essayist for *PBS Newshour* and *Time*; screenwriters

Steve Tesich (*Breaking Away*) and Whit Stillman (*Metropolitan*, *The Last Days of Disco*); presidential speechwriters Pat Buchanan, John Podhoretz, and William McGurn; FOX News Channel correspondent Greg Gutfeld; and a host of writers who have re-congregated at *The Weekly Standard*, including Christopher Caldwell, Richard Starr, and Andrew Ferguson.

“It’s really hard to find somebody who’s on the right politically who didn’t have close contact with *The American Spectator* at some point,” says writer Andrew Ferguson, who came to Bloomington to attend graduate school in journalism but dropped out in 1983 to join the staff. He explains that what made the magazine so appealing, over and above its politics, was its rollicking writing style, which, for someone who aspired to win readers, “was like gold,” he says.



Bob Tyrrell (second from left) and Tom Charles Huston (third from left) recently returned to IU at the behest of Paul Helmke (left) for a 50th anniversary commemoration of Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. Helmke and Leslie Lenkowsky (right) are now faculty members in IU's School of Public and Environmental Affairs, which sponsored the event in the Indiana Memorial Union Solarium. Photo by Shannon Zahnle

"The writing in *The American Spectator* had the weirdest combination of attributes — this mix of very high diction and elegant phrasing with totally off-the-wall humor," he describes. "You were never more than half a sentence from a joke. That's a tremendous thing for a reader, to never know when there's going to be a thrown elbow. I thought, 'I want to be able to do that.'"

### MIDWEST CREDIBILITY

The other attraction, of course, was Bloomington.

The magazine moved in the mid-70s to an office on the corner of North Walnut and East 6th Street, above what was then the Betty Jean candy shop. Overlooking Bloomington's iconic courthouse, the location channeled "a Midwest sensibility and grounding," says Lou Ann Sabatier, who started at the *Spectator* as a secretary and rose to become its assistant publisher, later becoming CEO of MediaDC, the company responsible for *The Weekly Standard*, *Red Alert Politics*, and the *Washington Examiner*.

"What the Midwest represents is an honesty, a sense that you don't b.s. people," she says, explaining that the

*Spectator's* address provided both novelty and credibility for readers and backers in D.C. and New York.

Ferguson says the public-university atmosphere gave the *Spectator* "a populist feel," fostering a style of writing that was scholarly and clever without the remote and insulated tone of the Ivy League. "The most admirable parts of the magazine can be traced back to that setting," he says. "I just don't think the magazine could have taken root anywhere else."

The *Spectator's* rising profile also lifted Tyrrell, whose status as a Hoosier intellectual in East Coast circles made him "a shiny star," Sabatier says. "Let me tell you something, when he was in Bloomington, there was no one who wouldn't take his call."

She's not exaggerating. Tyrrell was in direct contact with Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan and hosted New York events for each of them. Writer Byron York argues in *The Atlantic* that by personally introducing Reagan to his cadre of neoconservatives, Tyrrell played a meaningful part in making the California governor palatable to East Coast influencers.

### NEW ADDRESS, NEW FOCUS

Ultimately, it was Tyrrell's Reagan connections that pulled him and the *Spectator* out of Bloomington. "I believed Ronald Reagan had pacified the region," he offers as explanation for the move.

Ferguson, who went with the magazine to the Capitol, says that once Tyrrell's friends were in the White House, nothing could keep him away. "In those days of high Reaganism, with all these people he'd known now in power, Bob didn't want to be left out," he says.

Ferguson takes partial responsibility for the changes that followed. "I decided we needed more investigative reporting," he says. "When I look at that now, I think that was probably a mistake."

The shift in focus led, in the early '90s, to two enormously influential articles — first "The Real Anita Hill," which attempted to discredit the attorney who had accused then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, and two years later the Clinton Troopergate exposé. The two features turbocharged the magazine's circulation, climbing from 41,000 when it left Bloomington to more than 300,000 at its peak.

The success of those articles also spurred a long, expensive, and ultimately unfruitful investigation into Clinton's gubernatorial expenditures, now known as the "Arkansas Project." Referring to that period, Sabatier says, "They went down some foxholes that were just freaking embarrassing. It went flake-ola. I'm so glad I wasn't there."

The Arkansas Project also resulted in a federal investigation, which, though it revealed no wrongdoing on the part of the *Spectator*, cost the magazine approximately half a million dollars in legal expenses and considerably more in lost financial support. The magazine struggled as a result and was sold in 2000 to investor and longtime *Spectator* contributor George Gilder, who sold it back to The American Spectator Foundation's board of directors two years later.

Today the magazine is a mostly online outlet, with approximately 16,000 print subscribers but more than 2 million monthly page views. It still boasts influential contributors, including *Washington Examiner* Commentary Editor Philip Klein, *RealClearPolitics* Editor Joseph Lawler, and *The Daily Caller* Managing Editor W. Jim Antle III, but nearly 50 years after its

founding, most of the writers that made up its first wave of neoconservative talent have moved on, retired, or passed away.

### LASTING LEGACY

The *Spectator's* legacy, however, reaches far and deep. Nearly every major conservative campus newspaper, including those at Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and Dart-

mouth, traces its roots to *The American Spectator*, says Lenkowsky, who for several years directed the nonprofit Institute for Educational Affairs that helped launch those publications. The network of student papers eventually was made up of some 60 publications, several of which had the word "spectator" in their names.

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"*The American Spectator* was the model for so many of them," Lenkowsky says. "It was the first, and all these others were the second generation."

The influence of the *Spectator* is undeniable among Washington speechwriters and advisors, on *The New York Times* best-seller list, and in the present abundance of conservative media outlets. The writers who joined the magazine in its Bloomington heyday are among the most prominent voices in modern conservatism, whether they are speaking on talk shows, running foundations, or writing nationally syndicated columns.

"I don't think 'create' is too strong a verb — the *Spectator* created a cadre of conservative writers," says Von Kannan, who is now vice president of The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. "Today it's different. Everyone has an outlet on the Internet. But back then there were very few opportunities

for people to get published, and the *Spectator* provided that forum." Ferguson theorizes that there are "two strains in conservative publications. One comes from the *National Review*, and the other line comes from *The American Spectator*. The *Spectator* strand is more raucous, more irreverent, more intent on being humorous," he says.

In other words, if a media outlet leans right, and it's at least trying for some humor, its lineage most likely traces to Bloomington. And there are many *Spectator* supporters — readers and writers alike — who say they wish the magazine had stayed put.

Says Ferguson, "While it was there, it was part of a fantastic community. It wasn't just journalists, but also academics and business people, having these really freewheeling discussions. When it got to Washington, the diversity went away, because everyone was a politico."

For Tyrrell, though, keeping the magazine in Bloomington would have cost him his proudest victory: contributing to Clinton's impeachment proceedings. "Would Clinton have had an easy time of it," he muses, "if we were out there in the Midwest?"

Even recounting the judicial inquiry that did so much damage to the magazine, he asserts, "I'd do it all over again. It was a terrific amount of fun for me."

"On the whole, looking back on 47 years, I don't think I would have done anything differently," says Tyrrell, his eyes twinkling. "It's been a ball." ✖