

Opinion Exchange

REACTIONS AND DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

MOLLY IVINS 1944-2007

Speaking truth in a twang

• If Molly Ivins didn't die "a martyr to honest journalism," it wasn't for a lack of trying.

By JOHN YEWELL

Molly Ivins didn't want to go this way. About 10 days ago the celebrated Texas columnist checked into Seton Hospital in Austin, her seven-year struggle with cancer in its final stages. She returned home a couple of days later to be with family and friends, where she died Wednesday.

But Ivins, who lived as large as Texas itself, had ideas about a grander exit.

One of her heroes was William Brann, a populist who published a Waco newspaper called *The Iconoclast*. Brann was shot in the back (on April Fool's Day, 1898) by an enraged Baptist. (Brann was probably asking for it. "The trouble with our Texas Baptists," he once wrote, "is that we don't hold them under water long enough.") Before succumbing, Brann managed to turn and gun down his attacker.

"I hope to go like Brann," Ivins once wrote, "a martyr to honest journalism."

In the end Ivins was not a martyr, but it wasn't for lack of trying. She spoke truth to power in a twang, in the very vernacular of the politicians she skewered. And for the most part they loved it.

"When I would denounce some sorry sumbitch," she wrote of Texas legislators, "I would courageously prepare myself to be horse-whipped at the least. All that ever happened was, I'd see the sumbitch in the capitol the next day, he'd beam, spread his arms, and say, 'Baby! Yew put mah name in yore paper!' Twenty years, and I've never been able to permanently piss off a single one of them. I have finally had to admit, Texas politicians are unusually civilized people."

For all her brio, so was Ivins. I had the pleasure of brunching with her and a small group of local journalists some 15 years ago in Minneapolis. She was gracious and low-key, nothing like her on-page persona. She had come to give a talk in the city where she'd launched her career, as a cops reporter at the old *Minneapolis Tribune*. She so distinguished herself, in a manner of speaking, that the police named their mascot pig after her — an "honor" she bore with considerable pride.

She moved to the *Texas Observer* in 1970, to the *New York Times* in 1976, and then to the *Dallas Morning Herald* in 1982, where she truly made her mark. But this last move was not without some trepidation. "Texas is what anthropologists call an oral culture," Molly Ivins wrote in a *Times* travel piece in 1982, just before returning to her home state. "That means Texans don't read much."

The editors at the now-defunct *Herald* had made an unrefusable offer: "Come home," they said to her, "and we will let you write about whatever you want to, and say whatever you want to."

The three-time Pulitzer-nominated columnist wasted no time lancing political boils and waging war on behalf of the powerless. She saved a special brand of acerbic ink for her old high school acquaintance, George W. Bush, first as Texas governor, then as president.

Her career prospered. When the *Dallas pa-*



CAROLYN MARY BAUMAN • Fort Worth Star-Telegram via Associated Press

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Molly Ivins, writing about Texas legislators. Ivins, pictured above in her Austin, Texas, back yard in 2001, died Tuesday following a seven-year battle with breast cancer.

per went under, she moved to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in 1992. In 2001, with her column syndicated to nearly 400 papers, she went solo.

By the time her book "Bushwhacked" came out in 2003, Ivins was more than three years into her battle with cancer, but not even the terminal disease could dull her wit. "Having breast cancer is massive amounts of no fun," she wrote. "First they mutilate you; then they poison you; then they burn you. I have been on blind dates better than that."

But perhaps the most telling moment in Ivins' life came soon after her arrival in Dallas. After she wrote of a local congressman that "if

his IQ slips any lower, we'll have to water him twice a day," advertisers boycotted the paper and subscriptions were cancelled. But the paper was true to its word to let Molly be Molly. The *Herald* responded by buying up billboard space, posting a sign that read: "Molly Ivins can't say that, can she?"

It became the title of a best-selling book — and for Ivins, an iconoclast to the end, it may also be her most fitting epitaph.

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It's time for ballpark land sale to proceed

• Where's the spirit of cooperation that the property owners and Hennepin County had just seven months ago?

By TODD KLINGEL

Say it isn't so.

It was a bit past midnight. As we had done for days, a number of us were pacing the Capitol halls, meeting privately with legislators and waiting for the Senate to reconvene. Hours earlier the House had approved the Hennepin County proposal to build a new ballpark for the Minnesota Twins on the parking lot near the Target Center.

After 10 years and thousands of hours of volunteer time, the effort to keep professional baseball in Minnesota was down to one crucial vote. The plan passed the Senate early on May 21 by a 34-32 vote. The success was made sweeter because it came as the result of the county officials, state legislators, the governor, fans, the team, the business community and the landowners uniting to ensure Minnesota would be home to professional baseball for at least the next 30 years.

Today, seven months later, that harmony seems threatened and a break between the county and the landowners may delay or scuttle the project altogether.

For the thousands of Minnesotans gazing longingly at 2010 and the return of professional baseball to the outdoors and real grass, this is astounding and completely unacceptable. How could the two sides that were working so closely together over the past several years have so misjudged the other's expectations with regard to the land's value?

Although there is much we don't know regarding this pending transaction, here are a few things we do:

• Clearly, the 100 investors in Land Partners II, owners of the Rapid Park site, should expect to profit from the sale. They have held the land for a number of years, it is a perfect location for the ballpark and, thanks to the efforts of thousands of people throughout the state (including themselves), the county has been given the authority and the means to make the purchase.

• The bill specifically limits the total that can be spent on infrastructure for the project, including the land purchase to \$90 million. This capped amount must cover not only the cost of the Rapid Park site, but purchases from three other landowners, a new pedestrian bridge to the ballpark, connections between bridge decks, environmental mediation, air rights, utilities and design and implementation of a "ballpark district." Every dollar that is required beyond the county's estimate for any one expense reduces the money available for the other needs. It is reasonable to assume the county is already determining what public amenities could be sacrificed as it attempts to close the gap on the land purchase. It is also ironic in that the landowners intend to develop property around the ballpark and would surely benefit from these amenities.

• The county has already settled with one of the other landowners and negotiations are said to be going smoothly with the other two. Apparently, there were no serious disagreements over what these properties are worth. I believe the county has already offered Land Partners II twice the assessed value for the land. How much higher should the county go and still be good stewards of the public purse?

On behalf of all of us who work to maintain Minnesota's high quality of life and our regional competitiveness, I call on the principals from Hennepin County and Land Partners II to remember that spirit of cooperation we shared only seven months ago and complete the transaction in a way that is both profitable to the owners and ensures a ballpark environment we can all be proud of.

Todd Klingel is president of the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce.

short cuts

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"It's voodoo environmentalism, combining the outdoors and humanities!"

GARRY LEAF, Sportsmen for Change, opposing a proposed constitutional amendment dedicating a portion of sales tax revenues to both natural resources and arts programs, Jan. 24.

Libby trial serving its political purpose



debra j. saunders san francisco chronicle

• Bush administration's image suffers, even though it had a right to set the record straight.

There can be no better metaphor for why Republicans lost congressional seats in the November 2006 elections than Vice President Dick Cheney's decision, after wounding a buddy in a hunting accident, to go hunting on Election Day.

Cheney is firing wildly again. Or so it seems, as defense lawyers are using the veep's notes during the perjury and obstruction-of-justice trial of Cheney's former chief of staff, Lewis (Scooter) Libby. Cheney is out of control.

Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald has failed to charge anyone for illegally leaking CIA officer Valerie Plame Wilson's identity. Instead, Fitzgerald is going after Libby for lying about leaking. This is a trial that never should have happened — about leaks that do not appear to be criminal. Fitzgerald is out of control, too.

The trial has served its political purpose. As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the political damage is done. Once,

Americans heard President Bush say he would fire any staffer found to have leaked Wilson's name. But Bush fired no one, even though Bush guru Karl Rove confirmed Wilson's identity to journalists who called him. (Be it noted, Fitzgerald is not charging Rove.)

I have no idea if Libby is guilty or not. On the one hand, Libby's story about learning Wilson's identity from a journalist is denied by the journalist. On the other hand, intelligence officials who testified against Libby have had to admit that their memories about Libby's guilt oddly have improved over time.

During an editorial board meeting, I asked former Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe what he thought of Libby. He said that while any defendant should be presumed innocent, leaking a CIA officer's identity bordered on "treasonous."

If it is treasonous, why hasn't Fitzgerald charged Deputy Sec-

retary of State Richard Armitage, who originally leaked Wilson's identity to columnist Robert Novak, thus sparking the federal probe? And why aren't more Bush critics calling for Fitzgerald to charge Armitage? The answer: Armitage was no Iraq war booster.

Besides, if Wilson's husband, Joe, didn't want his wife to be outed, he should have kept a low profile. The *Washington Post* got it right when it editorialized: "The person most responsible for the end of Ms. Plame's CIA career is Mr. Wilson. Mr. Wilson chose to go public with an explosive charge, claiming — falsely, as it turned out — that he had debunked reports of Iraqi uranium shopping in Niger, and that his report had circulated to senior administration officials."

The White House had a right to set the record straight — although you would think that the vice president would have better things to do than lead the charge. It reflects poorly on the Bushies — and Armitage — that it did not seem to occur to them that they might be divulging classified information.

If Cheney comes across as heavy-handed and drunk with

power, he can share that honor with Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald hasn't charged admitted leakers Armitage, Rove or former press secretary Ari Fleischer — but, in order to investigate their ostensibly illegal leaks, he made some 2,000 White House staffers produce records. And he put then-New York Times reporter Judith Miller behind bars for 85 days — when he already knew the source of Novak's column.

In a sense, then, Cheney and Fitzgerald have something in common: Capt. Queeg. They both are willing to trample other people's lives in order to avenge perceived threats, they are both ruthless to those who do not bow to their will, and they've both lost sight of the truly big threats. The ship is off course, and they're hunting for whoever stole the strawberries.

Personal note: Please take a moment to think fondly of Molly Ivins. In person, she was lively and gracious. On paper, she brought spark, fury and wit to the opinion pages — and I am quite relieved never to have been at the receiving end of her pen.

Debra J. Saunders' column is distributed by Creators Syndicate.