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IDEOLOGY A TOUGH SELL IN VALLEY

By **Michael Fitzgerald**

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Record Columnist

David Harmer, the GOP candidate running against Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, is seeking to ride voter discontent into Congress. But Harmer himself occasions discontent.

Oh, he's intelligent, funny, and he and McNerney have campaigned like gentlemen. He used to guide river rafting expeditions. Big points for that one.

But Harmer long advocated total abolition of America's public school system. Public schools, he wrote, were "insidious" and "socialist" and led to government mind control.

In a paper he co-authored for the Cato Institute, he calls public schools "the gravest threat to American capitalism and democracy" and advocates private sector schools.

He wrote a book on this theme, too.

In his view, it's not that Johnny can't read; it's what Uncle Sam gives Johnny to read, or withholds, transforms him into an intellectual zombie. One whose liberty can be plucked.

This is a legitimate idea. But it is certainly not a mainstream Republican idea. Nor is it a realistic idea. It is the ivory tower idea of a libertarian detached from the politically possible.

"I was so frustrated," Harmer confessed. "There was just such resistance to any kind of reform within the system. I became convinced the system itself is hopeless."

But now he's working within the system, he says.

So is his wife. She's a substitute teacher in public schools - a cog in the nefarious zombie factory.

Harmer's switch can charitably be construed as the evolution of a theoretician toward the doable. The question is, how far has he evolved?

Is he disposed toward hands-on problem-solving in gritty San Joaquin? Or enamored of re-introducing the Founding Fathers to a wayward federal government?

Some of his (perfectly valid) positions make one wonder.

- » He has sworn to bring no federal earmark dollars home.
- » Or bailout money for distressed homeowners.
- » And he opposes all agricultural subsidies.

These positions, while mainstream, don't jibe with the role of a Republican serving San Joaquin. This needy,

politically balanced region best benefits from moderate conservatism.

Take earmarks. Federal dollars often translate into desperately needed jobs.

The veteran's hospital McNerney brought home translates to 900 jobs; the Tracy power plant expansion, 400 jobs; a Tracy solar project in the works, 200 jobs.

Harmer's lofty pork pledge suggests he is detached from the dire recessionary realities in San Joaquin. And possibly from political process realities, too.

"Federal dollars should be directed to the standard appropriations process," Harmer said.

Through this process, "I'm very comfortable directing funds here. Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution says Congress shall provide funds for the general welfare."

Yes, this is the "constitutional" process; but - to remove momentarily the powdered wig - it is also the same unfair process that has shortchanged the Valley for generations.

As for opposing distressed homeowner assistance, "I know that sounds like tough love." But, "For everybody who has an underwater mortgage, there's somebody who doesn't. Somebody who rented or saved or made do. ...

"What troubles me most about proposals to stall foreclosures or renegotiate loans," Harmer said, "ultimately that represents taxing one group of people to subsidize another group of people."

Here, one recalls Harmer worked as a lawyer advising Provident and Washington Mutual, both predatory lenders punished by the government for ripping off consumers.

McNerney's camp hammers his ties to these bad actors. Harmer counters his job was advising them on their regulatory obligations.

"To accuse me of participating in abusive practices is like accusing a firefighter of being an arsonist," he riposted. "He's standing in the smoldering ruins, but what he's holding is a fire hose, but not a match."

A good comeback. McNerney, on the other hand, secured millions for the Neighborhood Stabilization Program.

As for agricultural subsidies, undoubtedly there are abuses. But the Valley's economy begins and ends with ag. Government support in the form of dams and canals, regulations and subsidies is fundamental to its success.

"Tough love" has not been a factor. Uncle Sam as sugar daddy made the desert bloom.

"I am skeptical of government that grows beyond the limited federal vision for it in the Constitution," Harmer said, waxing philosophical again. "A little government is essential to guarantee your freedom. But a lot of government suppresses your freedom."

He passes the purity test. If only the Valley were a purity test.

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