

PHIL GRAMM USES MILITARY RHETORIC, BUT NEVER SERVED.
HE WAS A DEFICIT HAWK UNTIL TAX-CUTTING WAS COOL,
A LIBERTARIAN UNTIL GAY-BAITING WAS COOL, AND A
POVERTY FIGHTER UNTIL BLAMING THE VICTIM WAS COOL.

BY WILLIAM SALETAN

slick Philly

SO THIS IS WHERE THE WAR BEGINS. ABOVE THE BOULEVARD LEADING into Texas A&M University, twin columns of American flags advance toward the horizon. At the boulevard's conclusion, before the administration building, thousands of conservative students, many in the khaki uniforms that denote A&M's renowned Corps of Cadets, await their orders. The Corps band, clad in green caps and decorations, strikes up a rendition of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home."

The local boy who is coming home today, Sen. Phil Gramm, is returning not to end a war but to launch one: the war to win the U.S. presidency in 1996.

The morning's rhetoric is flush with invocations of battlefield heroism. Sen. Bob Smith (R-N.H.), quoting Thomas Paine, distinguishes Gramm's campaign troops from "sunshine patriots and summer soldiers" who cringe from confrontation. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) testifies that he's seen a "bloodied" Gramm "fight battle after battle, conflict after conflict, as merciless and as difficult as any kind of combat there is, combating big government [and] liberals."

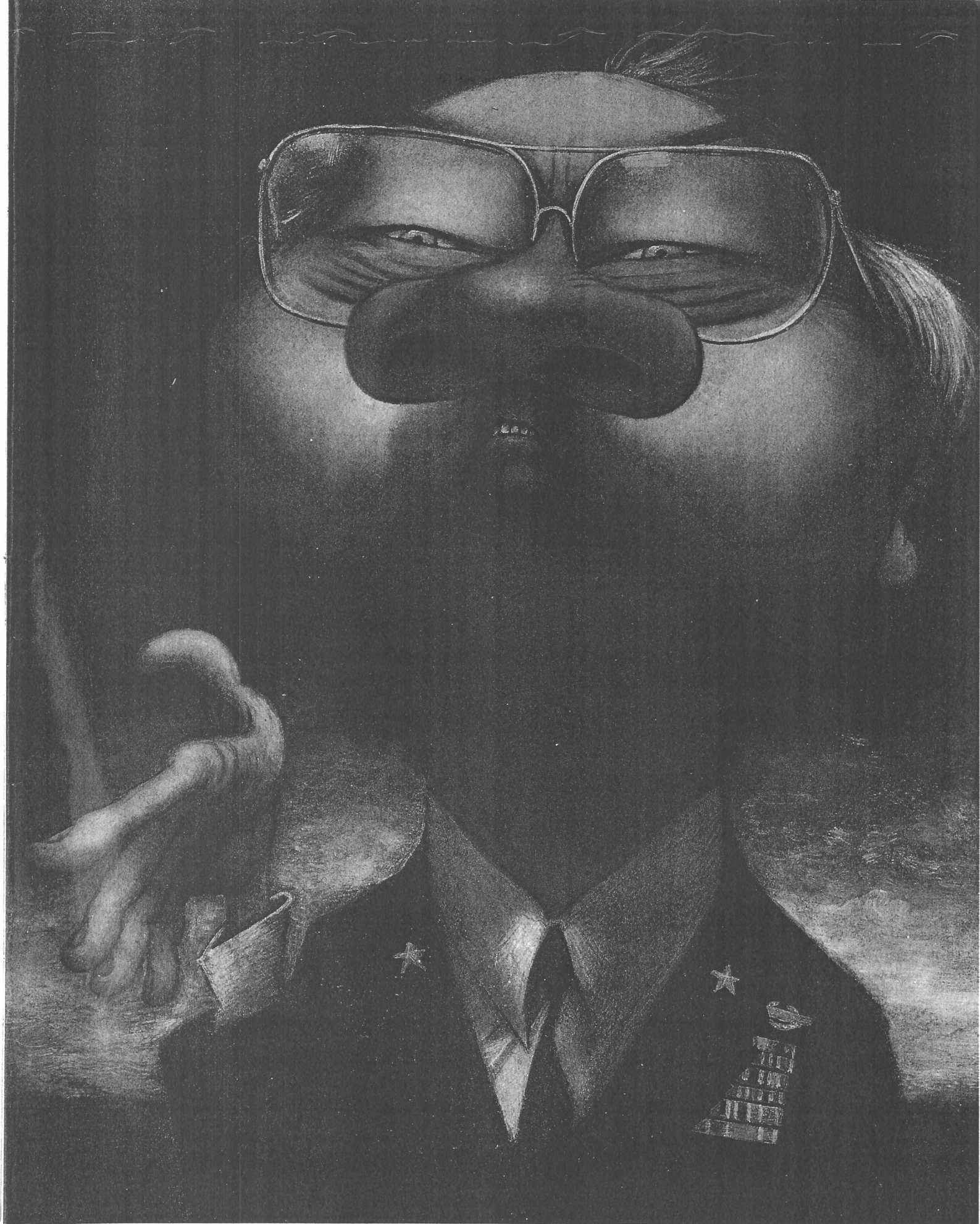
(Five days before this gathering, Gramm admitted on national TV that after graduating from a military high school in 1961, he used five consecutive student and teaching deferments to escape the Vietnam draft. He explained that he spent most of the war teaching at A&M because he "preferred it" to joining the Army.)

At last, the building's front doors part, and General Gramm emerges. Slow and padded in thick glasses, he seems an unlikely soldier. His stooping posture obscures his height; sunlight bounces off his naked scalp.

On the stairs below, two columns of elite cadets in dress whites stand at attention, crossing their swords aloft to form a canopy for their commander. The crowd whoops as he descends to the podium.

"WE NEED A LEADER THAT HAS THE COURAGE TO TELL OUR PEOPLE the truth," Gramm instructs his troops. "And we need a leader who is tough enough to get the job done." Borrowing the line with which speechwriter Peggy Noonan rescued George Bush's manhood, Gramm declares, "I am that leader." He recites his usual litany of accomplishments: authoring Reagan's budget cuts as a Democrat in 1981; switching parties to honor his conservative principles in 1983; writing the Gramm-Rudman deficit-reduction law in 1985; standing alone against Bill Clinton's health care reform bill early in 1994.

Gramm almost never smiles when he's performing, and he betrays not a glimmer of doubt. His pale, unblinking pupils scan the crowd with all the tenderness of a television camera. He occasionally lifts his hands in unobtrusive gestures but seems immobile from the elbows up. His head rotates like a tank turret. His feet might as well be nailed to the platform.



It's easy to mistake this dogged discipline for tranquillity. The giveaway, hidden behind the podium and out of camera range, lurks in Gramm's hands. Whether they're resting on the podium, fastened at his belly, or clasped behind his back, he's constantly grinding his thumbs and fingers together like hungry teeth. The grinding appears hard and abrasive, not casual, and it never stops. Even when he gestures or shakes hands with one arm, the other hangs at his side, gnawing itself, as though all of the restless craving strangely absent from the rest of his body has drained into his fingertips.

MIDWAY THROUGH GRAMM'S SPEECH, A VOICE SHOUTS FROM THE crowd, "You ain't fightin' for me!" The heckler is hard to miss. He's tall, bearded, and dressed from head to toe in black, including his skin. Although nearly 1,300 black students attend Texas A&M, only four blacks, including this protester, stand scattered among the sea of white faces. Of them, just one supports Gramm. As a volley of cannon fire salutes Gramm's exit, I move toward the protester. A pack of white Gramm partisans promptly surrounds us.

The protester turns out to be a former construction worker who spent five years in the Army. When he mentions that he campaigned against Oliver North in Virginia last year, a Gramm follower in cowboy boots and a military cap blurts out triumphantly: "You don't have a job!" Like others around the circle, this man wears a button certifying him as an "Official Wagon Puller." The button alludes to the distinction at the core of Gramm's worldview, between taxpayers who "pull" the wagon of government and welfare bums who "ride" in it.

Others in the pack join the attack. "You don't even work," a young woman barks at the black man. "You're not paying taxes," shouts another. A short, plump woman with curly brown locks, sporting a pair of "Wagon Puller" buttons, advances to within striking distance, her face a red ball of fire. "We've heard 40 years of lies and speeches and garbage and spending and putting black people into slavery!" she screams at him out of a mouth twisted with rage. "That's what the Democrats have done!"

The tall black man in the center of the ring hangs his head and stares discreetly at the ground. "All right, ma'am," he assures her in a gentle, conciliatory voice. "It's all right."

THIS WASN'T THE ENEMY PHIL GRAMM HAD IN MIND WHEN HE WAS elected to the House of Representatives in 1978. Armed with a Ph.D. in economics, he came to Washington to fight inflation by balancing the budget. No cow was sacred; every ox would be gored. But over the years, Gramm changed. Economics gave way to politics. He stopped being tough on "us" and started being tough on "them." Now, as he seeks the office that will crown his metamorphosis, the self-proclaimed candidate of toughness is betting that we can't tell the difference.

Till now, he's won the bet. He's sold the media, friend and foe alike, on his shtick of hard-nosed constancy. "Gramm has always held strong and extreme views," frowns GQ. "He makes fewer political compromises than almost anyone else in public life," gushes the *Atlantic*. "No one expects Gramm to change," sighs *Texas Monthly*. "True Believer," proclaims *Newsweek*.

Gramm doesn't care whether these reviews are kind or harsh. Either way, they play into his hands. "The people who are for me and the people who are against me are for me and against me for exactly the same reason," (Continued on page 27)

Phil's felo

AS A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, PHIL GRAMM VOWS TO PUT CRIMINALS IN JAIL "AND KEEP THEM THERE." BUT HIS RECORD WITH DRUG DEALER BILL DOYLE TELLS A DIFFERENT STORY.

SEVEN YEARS AGO, WHEN REPUBLICANS DENOUNCED DEMOCRAT presidential nominee Michael Dukakis for letting William Horton and other criminals out of jail, Phil Gramm charged that Dukakis "vetoes bills providing mandatory sentencing for drug pushers" and "lets murderers and rapists out on the street...so they can practice their trade."

Running for president this year, Gramm lambastes President Clinton for "overturning minimum mandatory sentencing" for pushers. He insists that inmates serve "85 percent of their sentence." He rails against putting criminals "back out on the street" after they're "convicted five or six times." If elected, he vows, "I'm going to put these people in jail and keep them there."

When Gramm first arrived in Washington, he had the chance to practice what he now preaches. He was petitioning for help by the family of federal inmate Bill Doyle, a white middle-class Texas drug dealer. Doyle had served a total of fewer than seven years in jail—and less than half of his longest sentence—on three adult and eight juvenile offenses, many of which involved narcotics, guns, or explosives.

What did Gramm do? He lobbied long and hard to get Doyle back on the street. Instead of pursuing information that might have exposed Doyle's ammunition sales to militias, Gramm had that information excluded from a parole hearing. He offered to help Doyle get taxpayer funds, including a student loan, to develop an electronics business.

After Doyle was released, he devoted that electronics business to helping drug dealers guard their operations against the police. Meanwhile, he opened three new drug franchises, helped his gun-running accomplice conceal firearms from the cops, and spent his leisure time crafting silencers for a machine gun. He's been in and out of jail three times since Gramm sprang him, and he's utterly unrepentant.

HERE IS THE OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS OF DOYLE'S CRIMINAL RECORD as it was presented to Gramm in February 1979 in a report by Doyle's probation officer.

- In 1966, Doyle burglarized an aeronautics company, a high school, two construction firms, a chemical company, and an airplane hangar. His booty totaled more than \$100,000.

submachine guns and silencers and “collected a lot of Nazi stuff.” In fact, he explains, “The guns that are listed on that indictment are just a small portion of the guns that he actually owned.” After his pusher was busted, Doyle reports, “I went to his house, and I filled a ’73 Ford Torino...with weapons from his house, and took them out and put them in storage for him.” Why? “I knew if the cops wanted to come out and search his house, things would go a whole lot smoother if there weren’t 40 or 50 or 60 rifles sitting around.”

DOYLE PLEADED GUILTY TO ONE COUNT OF SELLING DRUGS IN A plea bargain. He served four years and got out in 1987. Since then, he’s been sent back to prison twice for failing drug tests. He was released from his latest term—his fifth stint in jail, for his 14th offense—last September.

Sixteen years after Gramm assured parole authorities that Doyle had been rehabilitated, Doyle apologizes for nothing. He speaks of the law and its enforcers with contempt. He thinks Gramm would “make an excellent president,” in part because “he’ll rein in some of those federal agencies.”

At times, Doyle sounds like a *reductio ad absurdum* of Gramm’s war on government. He says a Texas judge who was assassinated by a drug dealer years ago “put himself in that position by being totally unfair.” As for the deaths of four ATF agents in Waco, Doyle pronounces, “It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving federal agency.” And alluding to his expertise in explosives, he volunteers, “It would be incredibly easy for me to pull any stunt on them equivalent to Oklahoma City or worse. I’m not ever going to.... [But] I built better explosive devices back when I was a teenager.”

FOR YEARS, GRAMM HAS TALKED A TOUGH LINE ON CRIME. KEEP repeat offenders off the street? Doyle had 11 prior offenses including violations of parole and probation when Gramm took up his cause. Ten years without parole for selling drugs to minors? Doyle says it’s “quite likely” that his Texas drug ring sold to kids, yet Gramm got him out in just five years. Deny student loans to convicted drug traffickers? Gramm offered to *help* Doyle get a student loan.

Gramm has plenty of questions to answer. *Mother Jones* reconstructed his work for Doyle from partial records of Gramm’s early years in Congress. Gramm hasn’t released records from more recent years. How many other inmates has he helped? All of the inmates for whom Gramm lobbied in those early years were white. Has he ever taken similar interest in a nonwhite criminal? How many crimes must a felon commit before Gramm refuses to give him another break?

Whether Bill Doyle deserved that break can be debated. One thing is certain: Had another politician given it to him, Phil Gramm would be the first to demand answers. —w.s.

(Continued from page 24) he insists, “because they believe that I mean it.” In a slap at Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, who are just now scurrying to the right, Gramm boasts, “I was conservative before conservative was cool.”

An investigation of Gramm’s career tells a different story. Gramm was a deficit hawk until tax-cutting was cool. He was a libertarian until gay-baiting was cool. He was an apostle of sacrifice until selfishness was cool. He was a poverty fighter until blaming the victim was cool. If, after all these changes, Gramm can still claim to be conservative, it’s only because conservatism itself has changed. It has achieved coolness by becoming indulgent, unserious, negligent, vindictive, and cynically divisive. This pseudoconservatism, not the rigorous tradition Gramm once represented, is what his presidency would wreak on America.

THE OUTSTANDING THING ABOUT THE PHIL GRAMM WHO STEPPED from the classroom into the political arena 15 years ago was his candor. He refused to let his constituents blame runaway government spending on the poor. In April 1980, at a chamber of commerce banquet in his district, he dissected the “stereotype image of people receiving all this government money at the end of welfare and food stamp lines.... Every one of us has somehow been seduced by the federal government’s spending.” In an interview with the local press, he reeled off examples: “The local shoe store receives a loan from the Small Business Administration, the farmer is more in debt to the Farmers Home Administration every week, and the corporate jet is 95 percent subsidized by the federal taxpayer.”

Gramm didn’t hesitate to spoon out the castor oil. “Cutting spending means cutting programs, and the cuts will affect everybody in this room,” he warned listeners at a February 1981 town meeting in Fort Worth. Two months later, he told 300 angry residents at a town meeting at Texas A&M that they, too, would feel the pain of budget cuts. When a woman employed by a federally funded research program complained that she might lose her job if the grant were cut, Gramm answered bluntly, “I’m sorry it’s going to directly affect you, but if that is a price we’re going to have to pay, we’re going to have to pay it.”

Every politician has one poignant moment that shows him at his best. Bill Clinton’s moment came in 1992 in New Hampshire, when he knelt down to hug an old woman who couldn’t afford to buy medicine she desperately needed. Phil Gramm’s moment came in 1981, at a town meeting in his district, when an elderly man rose to his feet to tell the young congressman, “I get two little ol’ checks: I get a little ol’ veterans check and a little ol’ Social Security check. But if you have to cut ’em, then do it.” When the meeting ended, Gramm came over and hugged the old man. If Clinton’s embrace was an affirmation of human needs, Gramm’s was an affirmation of the sacrifice by which a society meets those needs. The Phil Gramm who stood in that room might have made a fine president.

FOURTEEN YEARS LATER, PHIL GRAMM STANDS BEFORE AN APRIL 1995 town meeting in Nashua, N.H., and tells the crowd of 150 how easy it will be to balance the budget. Evading questions about specific cuts, he talks vaguely of “setting priorities” and “saying no.” He never alludes to cuts without suggesting that any taxpayer who loses benefits will recover that money in

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tax breaks, dollar for dollar. “[It’s] really just a transfer of spending power,” he explains.

Gramm opens the floor for questions. A gruff, balding Navy retiree in the front row rises and with sharp, angry gestures extols Rush Limbaugh for debunking Democratic allegations that Republicans are gutting welfare and school lunches. “They compared us to the Nazi Party!” he fumes, mockingly paraphrasing the Democrats’ charges. “We’re gonna castrate the blacks, and we’re gonna commit genocide on ’em!”

This ought to be an awkward moment. There isn’t a single black face in the room. A tough, courageous politician would say something to discourage this tribal distinction between “we” and “the blacks.” If Bill Clinton were here, he would say something. But Gramm, who is standing almost within reach of the questioner, just smiles. “I am grateful that Rush is responding to these things,” he begins. Far from guiding the questioner away from his tribal dichotomy, Gramm launches into a complaint about how much welfare is costing “us.”

After a few more questions, a neatly groomed engineer rises in the front row. He works as a consultant to the Air Force. “It is unreasonable and intolerable,” he tells Gramm, “that the working citizenry of this country has to finance the health, education, and welfare of illegal aliens who are for all intents and purposes invaders on our shore.”

A tough, courageous politician would say something about blaming our troubles on “invaders.” But Gramm just tells the white audience what it wants to hear. “If I become president,” he promises, “whatever we have to do...to gain control of our borders and stop illegal immigration, I’m going to do it.” The crowd loves it.

After the meeting, I ask the Navy retiree how Gramm’s tough fiscal medicine would affect him. The most important change, he says, is that he’ll get to keep a fatter Social Security check. He’s furious at Clinton for taxing his benefits just because he makes money on the side. By contrast, Gramm has promised not to cut his benefits. Quite the opposite. “He’ll stop taxing Social Security,” the retiree assures me.

The engineer is still angry, too. “Why should I work to pay for an illegal immigrant?” he demands. I ask if Gramm’s spending cuts will mean trimming the military contracts from which the engineer makes his living. “No,” he insists. “He’s a proponent of defense.”



GRAMM’S MARRIAGE to an Asian-American hasn’t stopped him from bashing the “Arabs,” the “Japanese,” or Egyptian U.N. Secretary General “Booooo-trose Booooo-trose Golly.”

WHAT TURNED THE PHIL Gramm of 1980 into the Phil Gramm of 1995? The simplest explanation is that between 1981 and 1984, he changed careers. His value system evolved from that of an economist to that of a politician.

In 1978, when he took a leave of absence from Texas A&M to serve in the House, Gramm’s plan was to serve three terms and then decide whether to make a career of politics, return to teaching, or go into business. By 1982, alienated from the House Democratic leadership because of his collusion with the Republican White House, and trapped in a yellow-dog Democratic district, his political career seemed at a dead end.

But at the turn of 1983, when House Democrats decided to strip him of his coveted seat on the House Budget Committee, Gramm fought back. “They did exactly what he wanted them to do,” recalls Jon Bond, Gramm’s former colleague at Texas A&M. “At that point, he assumed the moral high ground.”

Telling his constituents, “I had to choose between Tip O’Neill and y’all, and I decided to stand with y’all,” Gramm promptly resigned his seat, switched parties, and recaptured it as a Republican. (Though Gramm now depicts his 1983 resignation as an act of courage in defiance of political advice, he actually hired a Republican pollster to see how he would fare as a party-switcher two months before being kicked off the Budget Committee. “He wouldn’t have done this unless the polls showed him with a better-than-even chance,” the pollster admitted.)

“I speculated that this was all part of a strategy to build up his statewide name recognition for a Senate bid, and ultimately for a run for the White House,” says Bond. “And in one of my rare instances of accurate prediction, that seems to be right.”

After winning that special election in February 1983, Gramm began testing his image in private statewide polls. Six months later, when Sen. John Tower announced that he wouldn’t seek re-election, Gramm seized his chance to move up. Politics, not education, would become his life.

Carey Hobbs, Gramm’s pilot from 1976 to 1984, describes how, in the early days, Gramm would solicit speaking invitations by offering civic and interest-group audiences a form on which they could check which subjects they (Continued on page 68)

(Continued from page 29) wanted him to address in his speech: "It didn't really matter which one you checked; you got a speech on economics." By Gramm's 1984 Senate race, that had changed, Hobbs says, and Gramm's speeches would contain "whatever the audience needed, or whatever their interests were."

Until 1983, Gramm had spoken of a war against inflation in which the "casualties" were federal programs. Now his enemy changed from deficits to Democrats. After winning his 1984 Senate race, he devoted himself not to federal legislation but to sharpening the Texas GOP. "We're going to keep on building the party until we're hunting Democrats with dogs," he whooped. In 1990, rather than run for the GOP leadership, he sought and won the chairmanship of the party's senatorial campaign committee, where he could focus on elections rather than legislation.

Gramm the economist had understood that good politics was bad economics. To win his colleagues' votes for a budget package, he had to relinquish painful but necessary cuts. As he once put it, "It takes 218 votes to pass a budget. If you get 219, you didn't cut enough."

After Gramm committed himself to politics, however, he began trading off fiscal integrity for more and more votes. During the 1984 Senate race, he scoured his tracking polls every night before going to sleep. Though they showed him ahead by 10 to 15 points throughout the race, he continued to pad his lead with talk of tax cuts and promises of pork. His goal was to hand his opponent "a more resounding defeat than any [Democrat] has ever suffered in the history of Texas." And he succeeded, winning nearly 60 percent of the vote. By 1988, he reportedly mapped a \$20 million budget for his 1990 re-election race because, according to aides, he wanted 100 percent of the vote. "He gets a special glee at winning big," one aide explained to the *Dallas Morning News*.

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TO WIN BIG, GRAMM DISCOVERED THAT HE had to stop preaching sacrifice and start sacrificing scapegoats. He started by turning the 1984 Senate race into an orgy of gay-baiting that would have exhausted Jesse Helms. Not since segregation has a major party nominee for high office anywhere in America conducted a campaign of such sustained, unapologetic bigotry.

"Family" hadn't been a big concern for Gramm the economist—he didn't mention it once in his 1978 announcement speech for Congress. (In this year's presidential announcement speech, by contrast, he mentioned it 18 times.) Divorced from his first wife, Professor Gramm wore sandals and longish hair to class, supported Jerry Brown for president in 1976, and once made a spectacle of himself at an Elton John concert.

But in his 1984 run for the Senate, Gramm, according to his pollster, found a wedge issue to turn white, conservative Democrats—what Gramm proudly called the "redneck vote"—against Democratic nominee Lloyd Doggett. After consulting polls that showed broad support for "traditional family values," Gramm decided to make the election a referendum on homosexuality.

Doggett had endorsed gay rights and had received campaign money from a local gay rights group, part of which, without his knowledge, had been raised at an all-male strip show. Gramm made this contribution the centerpiece of his campaign against Doggett, hammering the subject from June to October in speeches, rallies, radio ads, and televised debates. When Doggett returned the strip show money, Gramm proceeded to demand that Doggett cough up a check from another gay group. He conjured up the image of Doggett's gay followers "gathered in the dusky places where you and I don't go," and claimed that gays were funneling money to Doggett to promulgate a "new family image through heavy television advertising."

Far from regretting this assault, Gramm has since repeated and bragged about it. In 1990, he tried to embarrass a Texas congressional candidate by advertising the candidate's attendance at a gay fundraising dinner. This year, he boasted to the *Washington Post* that his 1984 anti-gay campaign had been "a test of wills.... The Republicans were going crazy, [saying], 'Stop this radio spot, take it off,

you're alienating people'... I doubled it. You couldn't turn a radio on in Texas and not hear it."

Gramm denied that homophobia inspired his 1984 strategy, and even his enemies find that denial plausible. "He has no strong feelings about the conservative social agenda on issues such as abortion and gay rights," reports Jim Mattox, a former Democratic attorney general of Texas, who served with Gramm on the House Budget Committee. "He tunes his rhetoric to the need of the time."

Indeed, Gramm seems to have perfected the art of exploiting xenophobia without bearing any genuine prejudice himself. Being married to an Asian-American hasn't stopped him from bashing "the Arabs," "the Japanese," or whoever happens to be America's present economic rival. In past campaigns, he's always managed to conjure up an ethnic character to pummel for political profit. In 1976, it was Jacob Javits. In 1984, it was Howard Metzenbaum. For 1996, the Jews are off the hook. Gramm has settled on the Egyptian U.N. secretary general, "Booooo-trose Booooo-trose Golly."

In his presidential bid, Gramm's scapegoats may have changed, but his tactics haven't. Back in 1984, Gramm said that he didn't oppose equal rights for gays; he merely opposed a federal law that would "mandate" such rights because he claimed it would lead to "affirmative action" and thus take jobs from heterosexuals. Gramm has already revived these code words in his current campaign against racial "quotas."

After all, someone must be blamed, and Gramm has lost the courage to blame us—the small business owners, farmers, and corporate fliers who pull the wagon with one leg while riding in it with the other.

ON THE FRONT LAWN OF TEXAS A&M, where Gramm has finished speaking, the tall black man stands alone, mocking the day's message: "It's those welfare mothers! It's those immigrants! They're the ones that are stealing your money!" But no one is listening. The television cameras are gone. Gramm and his lieutenants have boarded the command plane for Georgia, then New Hampshire and beyond. The war rolls on. □

William Saletan is writing a book on the politics of abortion.

See Hot Media (page 72) for more on Phil Gramm.