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# Buttoned-Down BOHEMIANS

**Welcome to San Francisco's New Age Right**



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## Welcome to San Francisco's New Age Right

BY DAVID BEERS

**T**hey would feel more at home at Esalen than in the Pentagon. On Sundays don't look for them in stiff-backed pews listening to Falwell fire and brimstone; they're more likely to be in stiff-backed coffee house chairs discussing Zen and the art of free enterprise. Sure they're big fans of President Reagan; that's because they truly believe the "revolution" he started can one day liberate the poor as well as the rich. Anti-communist? You bet. But don't expect them to snarl at peaceniks—they're more interested in "engaging in dialogue" and "searching for common ground" with those on the liberal side.

You've heard of the New Right. This is the New Age Right, and if they have a headquarters it's 785 Market Street, the offices of a bustling little San Francisco think tank called the Institute for Contemporary Studies (ICS). ICS was launched in 1974, during the waning days of Governor Ronald Reagan's administration, by Edwin Meese III and other close Reagan associates. Along with a galaxy of other more visible conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, ICS succeeded in shifting the country's intellectual climate dramatically to the right, thereby setting the stage for Reagan's grand Washington entrance. In subsequent years, the Reagan White House has drawn heavily from this world of right-wing intellectuals for top administration personnel and policy ideas.

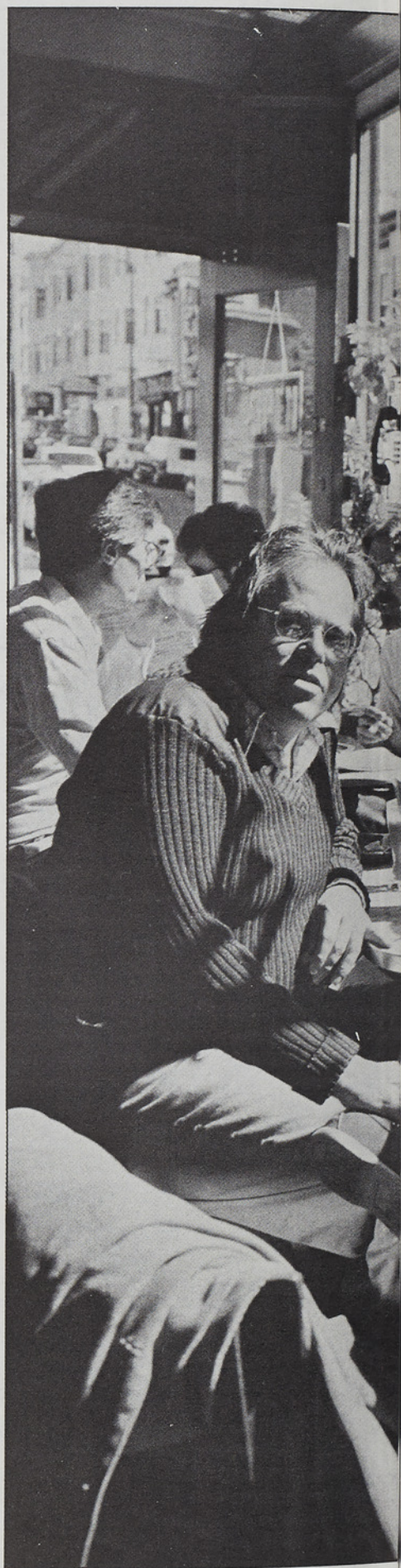
With a staff of sixteen and a relatively spartan budget of \$2.5 million, the Institute for Contemporary Studies is dwarfed by such major-league Washington think tanks as the American Enterprise Institute (annual budget: \$11 million). But the San Francisco think tank, which contracts out much of its intellec-

tual work to academics and other outside experts, prides itself on the big political bang it gets for its buck. Some ICS-produced literature has indeed made an impact on the country's political debates. ICS books edited by Stanford economist Michael Boskin began touting supply-side theory as far back as 1978. *Defending America*, a 1977 ICS title with an introduction by former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, built an early case that the Soviets had opened a "window of vulnerability" in U.S. nuclear defenses. *The Grenada Papers*, edited by Berkeley professor Paul Seabury, used captured documents to paint the island's leaders as tools of the Soviets, helping to defuse protest here over the U.S. invasion. Ironically, the latest ICS best-seller, *The Pentagon and the Art of War*, in which Georgetown University's Edward Luttwak assails Pentagon incompetence and waste, has been used by many Democrats to harpoon a former ICS director—Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.

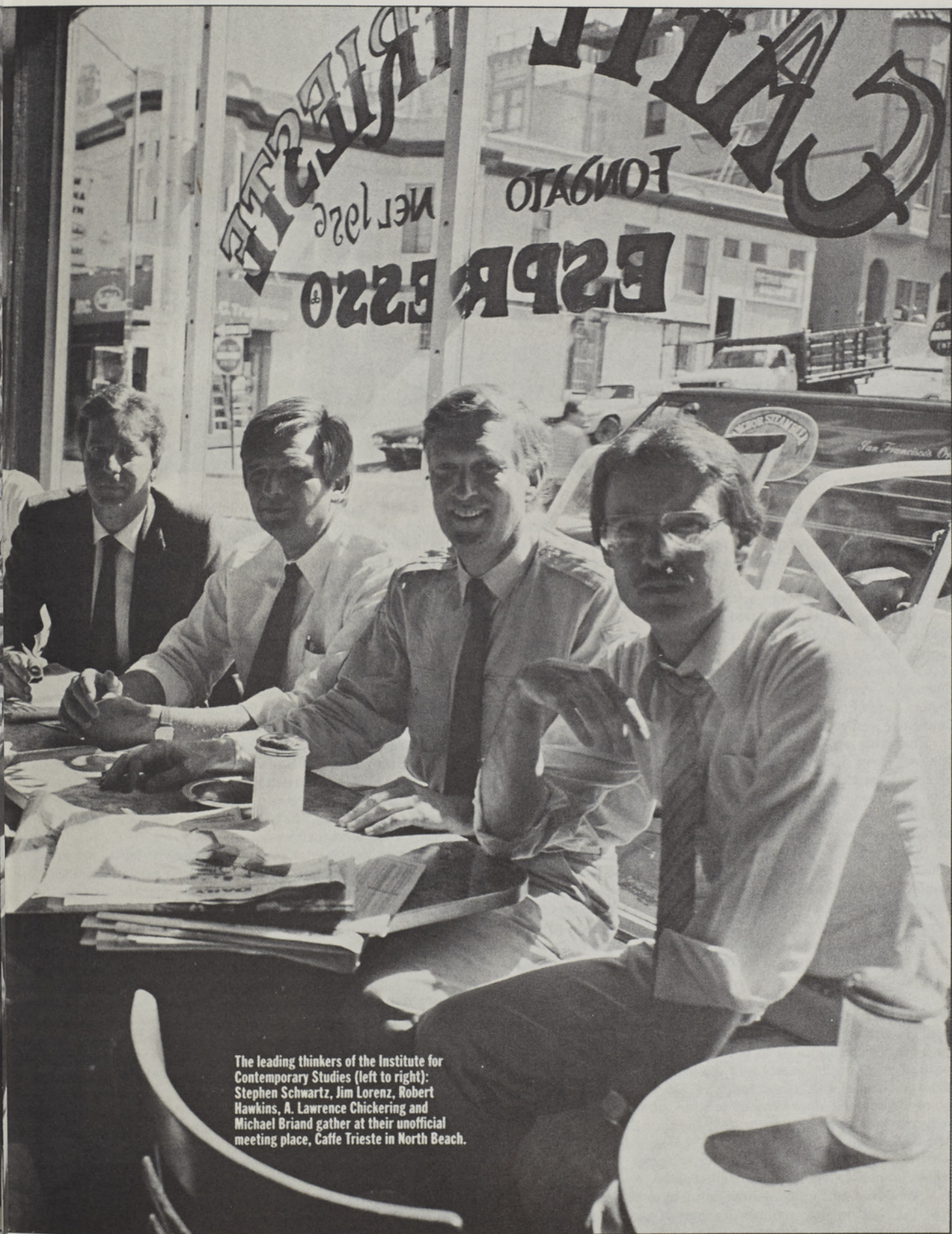
ICS, which receives the bulk of its funding from corporations such as Bechtel, Chevron, IBM and Chase Manhattan Bank and from key right-wing funders like Richard Mellon Scaife, has been called "Reagan's favorite think tank." Not bad, considering that the White House is a continent away. And if the distance means ICS can't claim the day-to-day influence of the Capitol Hill-based Heritage Foundation, that's just fine with A. Lawrence "Lawry" Chickering, co-founder and leading light of the institute.

Chickering says that out here in the remote West, a think tank can think differently. In Washington, "if you really have a chance to influence a particular bill, then you're preoccupied with that and there is no occasion to step

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The leading thinkers of the Institute for Contemporary Studies (left to right): Stephen Schwartz, Jim Lorenz, Robert Hawkins, A. Lawrence Chickering and Michael Briand gather at their unofficial meeting place, Caffe Trieste in North Beach.





Attorney General Meese (right) and Defense Secretary Weinberger (greeting troops) are the institute's most illustrious alumni. ICS literature has provided a rationale for the Reagan administration's Grenada action (far right, top) and its efforts to topple Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega (delivering speech).

back and reflect about larger issues."

Larger issues, extra-large issues even, are what Chickering relishes discussing. Five minutes into our meeting, for example, he tires of assessing ICS accomplishments and shifts to musing over the problem of human will and the individual's search for values in American society—something he's been writing a book about for several years.

Chickering is from a moneyed San Francisco family of lawyers and a graduate of Yale Law School, but in a piece written two years ago for the *San Francisco Examiner*, he thumbed his nose at the East Coast establishment: "The establishment can do little exploring, little innovating because change, which innovation implies, dis-establishes. . . . San Francisco, or northern California, really, is much more interesting intellectually."

Chickering once worked for the *National Review*, and yearly schusses down Utah ski slopes with William Buckley. He once directed research in Governor Reagan's Office of Economic Opportunity and now regularly shuttles to Washington to serve on the National Council on the Humanities. But Chickering says that much of the time he would really rather be in North Beach.

Which is why on a recent afternoon we're sitting in the back of Chickering's favorite meeting place, Caffe Trieste, a coffee house that symbolizes North Beach Bohemia perhaps more than any other. It has that Mediterranean sparseness about it, the simple tables strewn with newspapers, a perpetually snorting espresso machine, lots of patrons dressed in Bob Dylan-black, Allen Ginsberg-black, Lou Reed-black or some combination thereof. Chickering calls it a hangout of the "alienated verbal elite."

Listening to Chickering talk in this environment, his buttoned-down collar unbuttoned and paisley tie rakishly loosened, one gets a peek into the non-public, peculiarly Bay Area side of ICS. Now, for example, Chickering is on to one of his favorite topics: how the political Right might connect with the human potential movement, those preoccupied with holistic health, est, Oriental religion, humanistic psychology and other forms of personal growth. "I attribute the rediscovery of conservatism in the 1970s in part to the Esalen Institute [the Big Sur-based mecca for upscale New Age devotees], because what they are trying to do is rediscover principles of personal order within a context of freedom. The emphasis is on personal responsibility. I think the human potential movement appeals largely to people who feel alienated from traditional sources of authority and values, and it has reached out to them."

I try to talk some traditional politics, asking him whether Reaganomics can really fight poverty better than Great Society programs did. Chickering gives me another dose of New Age conservatism. "The essential problem of the underclass," he says, "is that the homeless and hungry are people who feel defeated and in shame because they are the bottom 10 percent in a society that values success defined in external terms. And if you had a society that placed no values on external success there would not be this opprobrium attached to people who end up at the bottom. That is not a problem that can be solved by objective manipulation of public policy—because you could equalize incomes, or give people more housing, and people at the bottom would still feel defeated."

A cynic might say that when Milton Friedman meets Baba Ram Dass, the problem of the underclass becomes a mixture of "The poor shall always be with us" and "It's all in their minds." But Chickering is convinced that the "realms of the subjective have to be addressed and understood before one could even imagine how homelessness and hunger could really decline." His guest column on this subject for the *Wall Street Journal* is now in the works.

At this point in our conversation, Chickering waves a fellow over to our table who is soon telling me about his "strong hunch" that the United States could develop a beam that would render nuclear weapons impotent. The ray would do this by turning neutrons into protons. Chickering's friend claims to be working on this and several other Star Wars projects, and before leaving, he hands me his business card, which reads simply enough: Jack Sarfatti, Physicist.

Chickering has made a lot of friends at "the Trieste," as he refers to it. He spends many a late afternoon here. Often fellow ICS staffers are in attendance; other times he's honing his book or conducting business with funders. "I wouldn't ever suggest we meet at a restaurant," he says. Still, as five leather-clad artistes sit down with beers at the next table, it's not easy picturing Ed Meese here.

In fact, although the faces of Meese and former director Cap Weinberger often grace ICS public relations materials, that's about the extent of their present-day roles in the organization.

Lawry Chickering has always been the think tank's main brain: As Lawry Chickering goes, pretty much so goes ICS. And over the past several years Chickering has gone on a personal search, much of it conducted over Trieste espressos and at the dinner parties (or "soirees," as some friends call them) he hosts at his book-lined home in





Alon Reininger/Contact Press Images

*"I attribute the rediscovery of conservatism in the 1970s in part to Esalen," says Chickering.*

the upper Haight. Regular guests include Milton Friedman, Esalen founder Michael Murphy, pollster Mervyn Field and writer Herbert Gold. "Joan Baez," says Chickering, "is a wonderful friend of mine."

Chickering's search is not limited to seeking ways for the New Right to enter the New Age; he also yearns to discover a way to move national political debate beyond the traditional Left-Right polarization where it has long been frozen. He and other ICS staff members talk a lot about "finding a third path" and "fostering dialogue" between political antagonists. Chickering echoes a cry sent up by many New Agers coming out of the '60s Left—that today's political language is bogged down in out-of-date jargon, that old debates have to be reformulated, that on many issues, the old labels of Left and Right get in the way more than they help. "I'm interested in a therapeutic vocabulary," he says.

If that sounds like right-wing heresy, it is because Chickering has in recent years assembled a team of unorthodox conservatives to complement his own evolving views. The process was bumped along the day in 1983 when Chickering met another Trieste regular, Stephen Schwartz. A bookseller's son who grew up in the Beat literary scene, Schwartz used to call himself a Trotskyite, once organized railroad workers in the Richmond yards, claims to have fraternized with some of Europe's fiercest terrorists, writes poetry and is enough of a North Beach institution to have been dubbed its unofficial mayor by some locals.

At 37, Schwartz is now senior editor at ICS. Anyone who spends time around him and Chickering, who is 45, can't help but note their big brother-little brother relationship. "It's like they are two halves of a complete personality," says Betsy Francia, who was an office worker at ICS for several years before quitting recently to write a novel. "Steve was a radical who's been moving toward the mainstream. Lawry's the other way, a very mainstream person who is starting to explore what he missed out on, the things that were really percolating in the '60s."

Francia happens to be a niece of Imelda Marcos, but an ardent supporter of Cory Aquino. The institute's close ties to the pro-Marcos Reagan administration bothered her, she says, until the day Schwartz bounded into the office, breathlessly acclaiming the new Filipino "people power" that would eventually bring down the Marcos regime. Francia remembers Schwartz blurting out, "Wow, it's the ultimate Woodstock! The Philippines and America are going to show the world what real democracy is!"

Schwartz has traveled afar on an ideological search of his own. Though he speaks nostalgically about sharing humble meals with Indian railroad workers, he says the friendships he's proudest of making nowadays are those with Norman Podhoretz and other reigning right-wing intellectuals. As a teenager at Marina Junior High School he organized a Young Communists club; today most articles in the journal he edits for ICS are aimed at unmasking the evils of Marxism.

He ties his political odyssey to events in Nicaragua and Poland. The Sandinista revolution, he says, "was the first experience I had gone through with the Left where there was no room for criticism. If you criticized the Sandinistas, you were immediately labeled a contra." By 1983 Schwartz had become contra leader Eden Pastora's U.S. press representative.

When the Solidarity movement took hold in Poland, says Schwartz, "I finally saw the totally fantastic socialistic conception I had waited for all my life. It was like a religious experience. Here was a country where 10 million workers suddenly joined a union, the union takes over the political leadership of the country, they begin to go in this tremendously open direction. It was totally from the ground up."

But his excitement turned to bitterness, according to Schwartz, because "when Poland became identified with Reaganism, the Left [in this country] abandoned Poland." When he took up residence in "Reagan's favorite think tank," acquaintances were mystified, says Schwartz, and "when I took Pastora's side publicly, I lost all my friends in about a week." The schism may have been cemented by an article Schwartz recently wrote for the neo-conservative arts journal, *The New Criterion*. In it he ridiculed the "conformist leftism" pervading San Francisco's literary scene, led by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti and "a tired clique of old Beats."

"In many poetry bookstores, anyone who is not a devotee of Lenin feels uneasy," wrote Schwartz. "There is almost an air of physical intimidation. One quails at the thought of what might happen should one enter one of those places and ask for a title by William F. Buckley." The city itself "has never been much more than a backwater intellectually," Schwartz told his readers; in fact "many San Francisco intellectuals are not intellectuals at all, but escapees...from the harsh realities of life on the East Coast."

Schwartz, whose short, stocky build and uninhibited barb-slitting sometimes make him seem like a pugnacious kid, admits his essay was a "deliberate attempt to bug the hell out of people." Though he still spends most evenings prowling North Beach, he's more interested in making inroads with the East Coast conservative set, the minds behind *The New Criterion* and Podhoretz's *Commentary*. For this, says Schwartz, his friendship with Chickering has been invaluable. "He's given me access."

In return Schwartz gives ICS access to the wide network of local and Latin American writers he has developed over the years. Betsy Francia remembers Schwartz describing his role at ICS this way: "Lawry and I are like an ideological Batman and Robin."

This spring the dynamic duo joined forces with two conservative crusaders who have renegade histories of their own. With the recent arrivals of Robert Hawkins, president, and Jim Lorenz, director of program planning, "The institute has finally gotten to where I really want it to be," says Chickering.

Hawkins helped found ICS after directing Governor Reagan's poverty program at the tender age of 28 and then overseeing a task



force on local government reform. What those experiences instilled in the young bureaucrat was a deep disgust for centralized bureaucracy. In 1978 he took the helm of a dormant Sacramento think tank, the Sequoia Institute, and last February merged it with ICS. Hawkins now chairs the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, but says he has shunned lots of other opportunities in the nation's capital. "I didn't want to turn into a Washington bureaucrat or lobbyist," he shudders.

Jim Lorenz, once upon a time, was a swashbuckling liberal activist. After founding California Rural Legal Assistance, key ally of Cesar Chavez's farm worker movement and nemesis of Governor Reagan's administration, he served a brief stint as director of the state Employment Development Department under Governor Jerry Brown. Then, after the governor pushed him out, he wrote a scathing book about Brown's media-manipulative politics. What those experiences instilled in Lorenz is, you guessed it, a deep disgust for centralized bureaucracy. "Much of our work for farm workers just ended up creating more government jobs," he complains. So when Hawkins invited him aboard Sequoia seven years ago, he readily accepted.

Now ensconced at ICS, Hawkins and Lorenz portray themselves as less abstract in their thinking than Chickering, but no less interested in promoting a peculiarly Bay Area brand of conservatism. "We want to extend free political and economic institutions to clientele who have always been the domain of the Left," says Hawkins. By this, he means the poor and disadvantaged, a group that in his view would be better served by school vouchers, enterprise zones and private ownership of public housing. A lot of Sequoia's energy, says Hawkins, went into promoting such free market alternatives to government assistance.

Now ICS will pursue the same kind of activism, says Lorenz. "We are missionaries of the market ideal. We also want to impart the notion of family or kinship into the market. We've largely lost the skill of cooperation. We have to relearn how to be families—that's necessary for a healthy market and social order."

If all this seems hard to grab hold of, Lorenz is eager to tell how he is turning philosophy into deed. He says he has been working with parents and members of the California Federation of Teachers, getting them to jointly demand that a certain portion of school administrative budgets be shifted to teachers' salaries. It's perfect, says Lorenz—different grassroots groups recognizing a common interest (high-quality teaching) and then working together to cut down the educational bureaucracy.

Hawkins defines himself as a "communitarian-libertarian." Lorenz prefers "private enterprise populist." In searching for a way to describe ICS's underlying character, Lorenz says, "I sometimes tell Lawry, 'We want to appeal to the Republicans who like children.'"

Out of all this rather abstract talk have come some projects that, it is safe to say, would not find a home in any other conservative think tank. Last year ICS co-sponsored with *Harper's* magazine and the Washington-based peace group Search for Common Ground a conference in which six pairs of sworn enemies (Reagan's Central America point man Elliot Abrams versus liberal former Senator Dick Clark, for example) figured out where they agreed when it came to issues like human rights or intelligence gathering. Now ICS and Common Ground are collaborating on something they call Security Without Insecurity. The goal, says

Common Ground director John Marks, "is to develop a new national security consensus in which conservatives get what they want—national security—and liberals get what they want—a world that won't blow up. You do that by developing areas of common interest with the Soviets. We have a joint interest in keeping nuclear arms out of terrorists' hands. Another area is crisis control."

In the office of Michael Briand, a recent addition to the ICS staff, one wall is covered with a gridwork of typewritten sheets on which Briand has mapped a *Harper's* debate between arch-conservative Podhoretz and arch-liberal Christopher Hitchens, Washington correspondent for *The Nation* magazine, showing where the two addressed each other's points squarely and where they trailed off into polemics.



ICS officials think chairman Donald Rumsfeld (right) could succeed Ronald Reagan.

The point? Briand, who studied philosophy at Oxford, is striving to reduce the art of dialogue to a science. He doesn't want to just wave the conservative flag, he wants to play referee in the battle of ideas. "We need a new approach. Right now we are like the blind man who gropes the elephant. We come to politics thinking we know what the whole beast is like, and we're intent on everyone else coming around to our view. In fact we need the benefit of each other's perceptions."

Briand intends to invite experts on the right and left to

exchange views in cool, dispassionate prose, with his red pen at the ready when someone tries to sneak in a cheap shot. He'll make sure the two are "talking to each other, not past each other." ICS will then publish the exchanges. When Briand originally pitched this idea to the editor of *The New Republic*, he was told, "Well, that's nice, but we operate on the assumption that there is a right view and a wrong view, and we're not going to burden our readers with the wrong view." When Lawry Chickering heard Briand's concept, he hired him.

ICS's two biggest undertakings, meanwhile, are inching their way out of the preliminary stages. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has promised Chickering and company a cool \$4 million to help set up a network of like-minded think tanks around the Third World, with Latin America a special focus. Many of the institutes, like Peru's Instituto Libertad y Democracia, already exist; a few may sprout with seed money from ICS. They will be called Growth Centers, says Chickering, and their main purpose will be to move Third World economies away from government control and toward "increasing reliance on markets."

If discussions pan out, the head of the project will be Nicolas Ardito Barletta, hailed in 1984 as Panama's first cleanly elected president since 1932, then ousted by the military a year and a half later. Lorenz is aware of the public relations problems that might crop up: "Nick Barletta was trained at the University of Chicago, so Communists will say we're doing a rerun of Chile," where conservative University of Chicago-trained economists implemented drastic free market measures under military strongman General Augusto Pinochet. But Lorenz and others at ICS are adamant that their version of free-enterprise is populist and grass-roots oriented, not, as Lorenz says, "the kind where ten families end up owning 90 percent of the land again." A bigger PR problem may now be brewing: In June the *New York Times* quoted U.S. officials saying that Barletta had not been elected fairly after all.

The second big ICS work-in-progress is a project called Transition, as in Latin America's transition from iron-fisted governments to something more democratic. ICS thinks it can help. The proposal, now in search of funding, is to establish a Spanish-language journal for

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Latin American writers who trumpet democracy. Schwartz, head of the project, detects a growing disillusionment among Left-leaning Latin intellectuals, and expects to lure heavyweights like Mexico's Octavio Paz and Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa. Then there's the large number of disaffected Cubans eager to pour out their denunciations of Castro-style communism in print, says Schwartz. He aims to make one of them, poet Heberto Padilla, editor.

Schwartz's role will be to translate some of what eventually appears in the Spanish-language journal and get it into America's establishment press. "When the next Nicaragua comes around," says Schwartz, "we have to be able to respond a little better than Carter did in 1978, when he said, 'Oh, the Sandinistas—are they Marxist?'"

There are those who say ICS has one more project cooking. The institute seems to be quietly grooming a replacement for Ronald Reagan. His name is Donald Rumsfeld, the new chairman of ICS's board of directors. You remember him. He was director of Richard Nixon's Office of Economic Opportunity, then Gerald Ford's chief of staff and finally secretary of defense. Between 1977 and 1985 he was CEO for the giant pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle, and now he has a political action committee called Citizens for American Values. In its first three months the group discreetly amassed some \$57,000.

Some in the Reagan administration are rumored to believe that as George Bush and Jack Kemp vie for Far Right support, they will be forced to "out-radicalize" each other on charged issues like abortion, souring the mainstream on both. Then there will be a need for a dark horse candidate to soar over the fray, and that will be Rumsfeld.

"I think a dark horse has a hell of a shot," ventures Bob Hawkins. "Rumsfeld is well-known in the party, certainly qualified, a non-Washington person—that has to be a plus—and on the political spectrum you'd put him right between Bush and Kemp.

"He has a great wife, too," adds Hawkins, warming to his sale. "She makes him ride the bus to work. She says, 'Any man who is running for president had better learn about what the average man is doing. You've been riding around in a limo too long.'"

**S**o what do all the goings-on at ICS really mean? Are they just packaging old conservative wine in a shiny New Age bottle? Or are they really on to something new? Some of their prescriptions—relying on free markets, deflating big government, building a massive military machine to reassert American power—sound familiar enough. Indeed, Hawkins admits, "I'm not sure that if I were in

Reagan's shoes I'd have done one damn thing different."

Then again, there are those tantalizing breaks with orthodoxy: "I find ICS innovative and open, and I would describe Lawry as a transformationalist coming from the Right—one who sees some real possibilities in shifting the way society works," says peace activist John Marks.

Talk like that is bound to make a New York neo-conservative intellectual throw up his nicotine-stained hands in despair, thoroughly exasperated with the mental softness brought on by too much West Coast hot-tubbing. Podhoretz, for one, says Chickering is "an affable guy and very intelligent—people here in the East like him." But when it comes to his New Age ponderings, the Esalenesque soirees, the grappling to find a new, more "subjective" way to approach politics, Podhoretz is mystified. "This is so much a California phenomenon," he says doubtfully. "But," he adds on a more gracious note, "it's entirely possible that Lawry knows what he's doing."

Podhoretz's nemesis, Christopher Hitchens of *The Nation*, says there is nothing inherently contradictory about a New Age-style conservatism. "I've always thought that people too readily think of New Age stuff as leftist. It's easily convertible to a new currency." Tom Wolfe may have been the first person to point out that a lot of "New Age stuff" is really "me first," says Hitchens, who conjectures with some bemusement that "there's no reason this couldn't appeal to selfish conservatives as well."

But if the institute's hybrid ideology finds appeal among "me first" conservatives, it is just as likely to resonate with the large number of baby-boomers out there who voted for Ronald Reagan and also sent off a check to Live Aid. "Either we're crazy or some new amalgam," says Jim Lorenz.

The New Age Right wouldn't be the first crazy idea or new amalgam to get its start in northern California, only to wash up on the beaches of the East Coast Establishment some years hence. □