

Tomorrow Rules

Our Guest Editor introduces the life and work of Richard D. Lamm

by John F. Rohe

In 1806, Thomas Jefferson addressed the “long run” in a letter to James Monroe: “Political interests [can] never be separated in the long run from the moral right.” The “long run” has also captured the attention of Colorado’s longest-serving Governor, Richard D. Lamm.

Guided by a conscience courting the future, Lamm has remained at the forefront of paradigm shifting social changes since the 1960s.

This edition of *The Social Contract* will examine Governor Lamm’s personal history, his impressionable years, precipitous events, writings, motivational criteria, and accomplishments.

While a high school student in algebra, Lamm first confronted the daunting prospects of “doubling times” in an exponential curve: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, then: 128, 256, 512, 1024, and watch this: 2048, 4096, 8192, 16384, 32768, 65536 etc. Students might seldom discern a relationship between exponential curves and life in general. Lamm’s political and social conscience, however, would forever bear the weight of this lesson.

Manmade laws are appealable. There is no appeal from the graphic reality of an exponential curve. The law of exponential “doubling times” defies repeal. Lamm’s world view brings the exponential curve into focus when tracking CO₂ emissions, health care expenses, resource depletion, energy consumption, and even the loss of

civility on the streets.

In practical application, the exponential curve enables Lamm to comfortably inhabit a future domain. It led him to become a population activist in the ‘60s. Fertility rates responded to the activism by gradually declining around the globe. The decline was more precipitous in some regions than others. U.S. fertility rates, for example, plummeted from 3.5 to 1.7 children per woman between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. Lamm then seamlessly migrated to the emerging mass immigration issue.

His hopes and aspirations offer a promise for human compassion. Political success

confirms that Lamm’s cautionary message resonated with the voting public. By drawing upon a masterful command of the language, he dignifies a sensitivity for our successors and a patriotism for our national heritage.

He organized the NAACP at the University of California, and served as its first Vice President. Upon graduating from law school, he was employed by the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Commission and has been the recipient of numerous brotherhood awards.

In 1967 Lamm was drawn into the national spotlight by becoming the chief sponsor of the nation’s first liberalized abortion law. Here, he encountered the risk of being reduced to “political oblivion.” This came on the heels of leading the fight against hosting the 1976 Olympics in Colorado. This was the first time that the recipient of the winning bid turned it down. As a CPA and chair of the Audit Committee, he noticed that the promoters had ignored important environmental concerns, and underestimated the costs. He was able to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot (100,000 signatures). In 1972, the voters turned down the Olympics.

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Lamm grapples with our dual, and often antagonistic, responsibility to become good neighbors and also good ancestors. His passion for the common good in crafting public policy was inspired by John F. Kennedy. Colorado offered fertile ground for Lamm's ideas to be formulated and nurtured. In a book of photographs and essays entitled *The Mountains of Colorado*, he observes: ". . . without hesitation that the peaks of the Colorado Rockies truly do have the power to change a person, to broaden one's thinking. Few who witness the majesty of these lonely, windswept heights walk away unaffected."

In challenging an unjust and financially crippled health care system, Lamm speaks with unstinting certainty. The patient on his operating table is the ailing health care system. He identifies the ills as communal rather than private. He stalks pathogens in the system with scientific rigor. His remedy calls for a prescription of both social and medical dosages. He willingly embraces the politically unpopular "R-word": Rationing.

Grim facts swirl with fury on Lamm's exponential chart of health care expenses. We have "substituted morbidity for mortality" in providing the costliest high tech care in the world to prolong misery for the final stages of life. Meanwhile, thousands of children lack dental care, and expectant mothers are deprived of prenatal services. As to the "R-word," Lamm laments that we are already rationing care, but just irrationally. Confronting the stark reality of our system, Lamm concludes that at some point we have a "duty to die." His opponents responded by labeling him "Governor Gloom."

It is deceptively simple-minded to see an agent of gloom or pessimism behind Lamm's pen. To understand his frame of reference is to appreciate the overwhelming sense of optimism needed to believe in the prospects for positive change.

When detractors point out that longer life spans have justified the expense, Lamm offers this reminder. The major extensions to longevity have coincided with advances in public health (sanitation, nutrition, working conditions, education), rather than with exponential advances in health care costs.

In 1985, he authored *Megatraumas*. In this assessment of the year 2000, Lamm accurately predicted the concentration of crime, continued population explosion in underprivileged lands, budget deficits, unlimited health care demands shouldered by

parsimonious taxpayers, degradation of soils, resource depletion, toxic waste, collapse of Argentina's economy, biodiversity losses, foreign energy dependence, resource wars, water shortages, security threats from greenhouse gases, two million legal and illegal immigrants per year, middle class erosion, debilitating Third World debt, and trade imbalances. On the other hand, he also predicted unemployment would reach 15.2% by 1990. Had he forecasted underemployment by 2004, the projection would have been an understatement.

Among his critics, Lamm's only sin was one of timing. They were not ready for his insights. He arrived too soon. His only transgression was against the prevailing conventional wisdom. As he guided the ethical framework for environmental, population, immigration, and civil rights issues, his advocacy awaits the judgment of future historians. They will become the final arbiters.

In striking the balance between today's good neighbor and tomorrow's good ancestor, Lamm regrets our compassionate short term obsessions. In 1985, he reflected on the eventual assessment of our stewardship in "The Heresy Trial of the Reverend Richard Lamm," found in the *Environmental Law Journal*: "We waited too long. We sowed the wind and we must now reap the whirlwind."

Amid Colorado's snow-capped mountains and lush valleys, Lamm's love of the wilderness conspires with his sensitivities to impart a panoramic bird's eye view of life. He continues to be poised above self-absorbed consumerism, as he draws upon the redemptive power of the place.

Over the decades, Lamm's message has matured. It incrementally assumes greater eloquence and clarity. Meanwhile, it retains the same vitality, freshness, and poignancy as when the high school algebra student experienced his first epiphany with the exponential curve.

By peering through Lamm's Galilean telescope we catch a glimpse of his conservation ethic as he fashions accountable working rules for tomorrow. •