

MY MAILBOX SAYS IT IS GOING TO BE A VERY INTERESTING YEAR

If the first two months are any indication, it is going to be a very interesting year. I haven't really hit my stride yet, and already my mailbox is overflowing. Either I have been remarkably adept at pushing hot buttons or it is just too cold to go outside and play Cowpersons and Native Americans. The Woman Who Shares My Name says I get a lot of mail because I am provocative. I'm not sure what that means, but I'll bet it is something she thinks she can cure with broccoli.

By far, the most mail I have received to date has been in response to my lament for the demise of my alma mater, BellSouth, now a part of the "new" AT&T. I have heard from retired employees who can't understand what has happened to their beloved company and from active employees so angry that they were writing me on company time and company computers, which might be a no-no, but at this point I don't think they give a damn. It is not an overstatement to say the respondents feel like they have been sold down the river — in this case, the San Antonio River, home of AT&T, formerly known as Southwestern Bell.

The litany of complaints from employees would merit a Harvard Business School case study. Several recounted an instance where the subject of loyalty was broached in a company meeting, to which an officer is said to have replied, "If you want loyalty, go buy a dog." (Give the new AT&T credit, they did.) Another is reported to have listed for employees the company's three priorities: The shareholder, the shareholder and the shareholder. I presume customers and employees were a close fourth.

If any of BellSouth's defenders or apologists are reading this, you would likely be surprised at the number of retired officers who shared my dismay that the dynamic company we all helped to build could get itself taken over by a one-time 98-pound weakling. All agree that current management was too timid and too bottom-line oriented, and had no vision of the future. If the defenders and apologists give a damn — and I don't know that they do — these are their former colleagues talking. That's embarrassing.

On another subject, the responses I received to my recent column on flaggers may signal a turning point in how much longer Southerners will allow this crowd to claim they represent our heritage. Past comments on the flaggers' political ineptitude have won me a rash of saber-rattling threats and four-letter words. This time, the large majority of readers either agreed that flaggers have boogered things up badly for the rest of us, or fell into the "Give 'em a break. Sure they are clumsy, but they mean well" category. (I suppose the same thing could have been said for Anna Nicole Smith.)

My criticism of the misguided efforts of Rep. Ron Stephens (R-Garden City) and Charles Martin (R-Alpharetta) to cut the current school calendar in Georgia from 180 days to 170 drew a variety of thoughtful comments. Most readers agreed that in today's competitive world, our children need more education, not less. One small-college English professor, however, complained how often his children's teachers "are absent [sick days, personal days, etc.] or taken away to attend silly, 'required' conferences and so-called professional improvement programs — not to mention all the wasted time spent doing little or nothing."

I respectfully suggested to him that a lot of college professors spend more time publishing and getting consulting contracts than they do in the classroom and then leave the teaching to graduate assistants, meaning colleges and universities are no better in their efficiency of instruction than are our much-maligned public schools. He wrote me back and said my reply was "tu quoque." I am consulting my libel lawyer.

One of my all-time favorite comments came from a liberal weenie who said, "This reply to your article is proof positive that I'm as stupid as you think. What makes me even stupider is that I actually read your column." As I said, it is going to be a very interesting year.