

## Outlook

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# City can't eliminate gangs by behaving like one

By J. BRIAN PHILLIPS

**C**ONSIDER the following scenario: You arrive home to find your house has been burglarized. The police investigate the scene and proceed to write you a citation for inadequate burglary deterrence.

You are told that the city has an ordinance that requires homeowners to install burglar bars and an alarm system. Violators are subject to fines of up to \$1,000 per day. When you complain that you are the victim, the officers point out that if you had not broken the law your house would not have been robbed.

This scenario may seem ridiculous, but in principle it is precisely what Kim Ogg, director of the city of Houston's anti-gang office, is proposing. The ordinance she has proposed will force private property owners to remove gang graffiti from their property or be subject to fines of up to \$1,000 per day. Ironically, Ogg is embracing the same basic premise held by the gangs that she seeks to eradicate.

Gang members believe that might makes right. They believe that they have as much right to use and dispose of property as those who earned it. They believe that their desires constitute a legitimate claim to the object of their desire.

Ogg seems to agree with this premise. She believes that she is justified in compelling property owners to dispose of their money to remove graffiti. She believes that her desire — eliminating gangs — justifies her means. She believes that city officials have as much right to decide how property owners are to use their property as those property owners. In fact, she believes that her decisions should supersede theirs, and she seeks the power of law to enforce it.

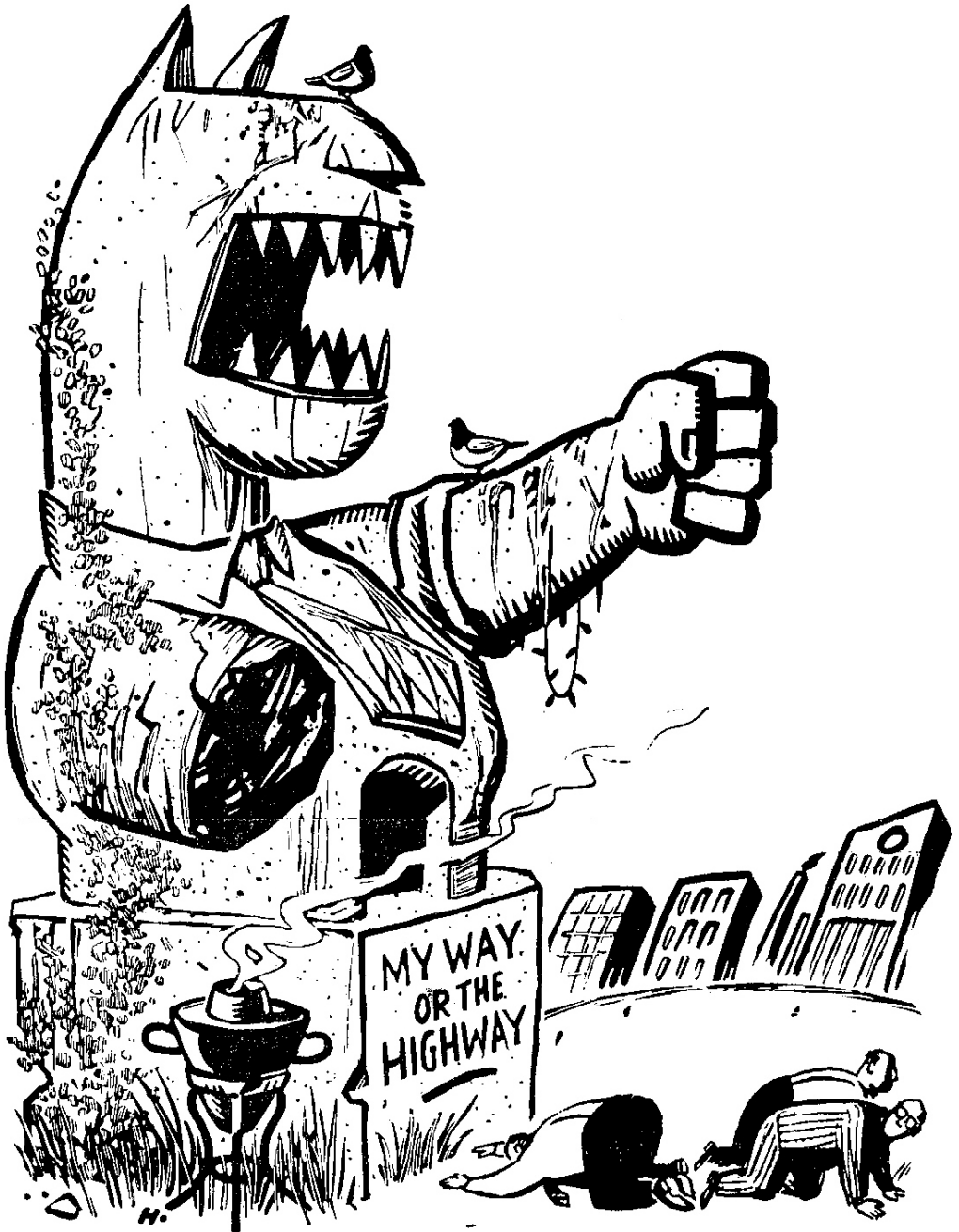
Ogg has argued that property owners will benefit from the removal of graffiti. But even if this is true, it is irrelevant. The cost of her proposed ordinance is to grant city government the power to tell every business owner (and eventually every individual) in the city how he must spend his money. It would be preferable to see the city covered with graffiti than allow Houston's City Council such dictatorial power.

In principle, Ogg seeks to replace hundreds of small gangs, scattered across the city, with one large gang — the city government.

The essence of the gang mentality is collectivism, which holds that the individual is subservient to the demands and interests of the group. Collectivism demands conformity to the values of the group. Collectivism holds that individuals do not exist as individuals, but only as members of the group. Whether that group consists of one's race, one's nation, one's nation, one's "home-boys" or one's community is simply a matter of detail.

Collectivists often claim that their proposals will benefit everyone, but each must do his "fair share" and sacrifice for the common good. And they are never hesitant to use force to compel those who resist. When force is used to institutionalize sacrifice, we must question both the methods and the motives of the advocates.

The elimination of gangs will require the use



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of force, but that force must be directed at those who are guilty of crimes — the gang members — not the innocent victims of those criminals. To force the innocent to pay for the transgressions of others is a reversal of justice. The innocent are punished for their innocence, their virtue.

The city government is clearly unable to handle the gang problem, primarily because city officials accept the same premises as gang members. City Council routinely passes ordinances that force property owners to use their property

in certain ways. That City Council is an elected body does not change the nature of such actions.

If we wish to defeat gangs, we must begin by rejecting the premise upon which they are based. We must reject the premise that individuals must sacrifice for the common good, that force is a valid means of social interaction, that the means justify the ends. We must return to the principles of Thomas Jefferson — that each individual possesses certain unalienable rights that cannot be violated by anyone, not even the government. When we refuse to be a member of that gang called "the public welfare," we can begin to effectively deal with gangs such as the Southwest Cholos.