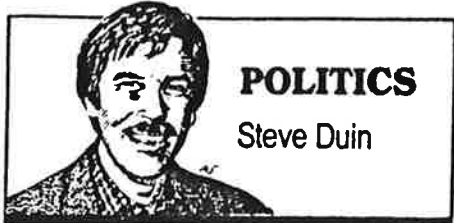


# AuCoin

## SENATE

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## We don't have time for this

**P**anic. Raw panic. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., could feel it gaining on him. When Congress voted to publish the House Ethics Committee's complete bad-check list, DeFazio had no idea if his name would be on it.

He knew he couldn't trust the pathetic records at the House Bank; he had to find out for himself. So DeFazio began to rifle his drawers and filing cabinets, scrounging for his canceled checks, examining each one for signs of rubber.

In the end, DeFazio had ransacked his Arlington apartment and was still missing checks from 10 months going back to 1988. He called his wife, Myrnie, back in Eugene and asked her to continue the search. "How about going down to the storage room?" he said. "Or maybe you can check . . ."

Myrnie DeFazio cut her husband off. "No," she said. "No. I think this is absurd. I don't have time for that. You don't have time for that. I'm busy. You're busy. No."

Finally. At long last, a rational response to the absurdly overblown House Bank scandal.

We don't have time for this.

Do you know what Congress was supposed to debate this week? The firewall in the 1990 budget agreement that prevents any savings in defense spending from being transferred to domestic programs.

Isn't that romantic? Nope. Just a small, vital step in balancing the nation's checkbook. "A defining issue," said Rep. Mike Kopetski, D-Ore. But that debate has been suspended so that the heavy abusers and the innocent victims of a slipshod operation can scurry home and beg for mercy.

AuCoin falls into the latter camp. He and his wife, Sue, were careless and they

admit it, but there is no evidence — none — that AuCoin was kiting checks to get interest-free loans.

**W**hen AuCoin's accountant, Bill Cundiff, looked into the record-keeping of the House Bank, what he saw reminded him of "Last House on the Left." He saw a bloody horror show.

Checks were processed by hand, not computer. Deposits — the very deposits that would have covered many of the errant checks — sometimes went uncredited for as many as five days.

Why? The better question is why not? The accounts didn't draw interest. And checks couldn't bounce.

Because bad checks were covered until payment arrived, some enterprising members of Congress used the bank as a line of credit. But AuCoin isn't on *that* list. Every month his statement showed a positive balance. Like Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, AuCoin might have discovered his overdrafts if he balanced his checkbook every night before going to bed, but he didn't. Who does?

The facts in AuCoin's case are neither particularly damning nor complex. When the House Bank couldn't figure out how many overdrafts AuCoin had, he hired an accountant who could. Ten of those tell-tale checks were made out to the Safeway at 10th and Jefferson, for goodness sake.

So why wasn't I surprised to hear Harry Lonsdale, AuCoin's opponent in the Senate Democratic primary, tell KATU (2), "He lied to us. . . . And now he's caught in a cover-up."

**W**hat fitting analysis from the shallowest candidate in the field. The perfect response to Harry? John McEnroe served it up to a tennis fan on Monday: "Do you have any problems, other than that you're unemployed and a moron and a dork?"

It is hard to feel sorry for politicians who fall prey to perception, their stock in trade. But Lonsdale is flogging perceptions, not facts. He knows the only way he can get into Congress is first to convince us that we must burn it down.

Lonsdale is taking his lead from Rep. Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., whom DeFazio calls "an evil genius." Gingrich knows that the only way the Republicans will ever rule the House is first to demean and destroy it. He is fanning our frustration about Congress — not to reconstitute the institution, but as a means to control it.

Such antics are part of the "sport" of politics, I know. The feigned outrage of Lonsdale and Bob Packwood as they dance around AuCoin's checkbook plays well in an election year.

But we don't have time for these games anymore. Rome is burning. The House Bank has been shut down, the check-kitters have been exposed.

Let's get on with it. If Congress wants credibility, it must do far more than shed its perks. "We must act," Kopetski said, "act to get an energy bill out, to address the firewall in the budget."

And that's a tough act to pull off while some opportunistic candidates and a bored press are dribbling rubber checks.

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