

St. Petersburg Times

OCTOBER 27, 1993

Hue and cry over Scientology amounts to hate campaign



■ Alice Levine

Upon my return to Clearwater after a month's absence, I was greeted with the news that the Scientologists had been granted tax-free status by the IRS. I hurriedly resumed deliv-

ing the *St. Petersburg Times* to discover facts and the community reactions to news.

To my relief, Associate Editor Martin Garcia's column the following day was a model of intelligent reporting and analysis. He asked, "Should any religion enjoy tax exemption?" Later in his column he asked Justice William O. Douglas, who said, "A tax exemption is a subsidy."

Where in his column did Dyckman use the kind of vituperative language toward the Scientologists that I have heard since I moved to Clearwater in 1980.

Dyckman's is a voice of reason and I congratulate him for expressing such an unpopular point of view. My husband and I nearly have given up trying to persuade our acquaintances that the hue and cry over the Scientologists amounts to a hate campaign. It is even more unfortunate that so many people perpetuate this expression of unthinking malevolence without knowing some significant facts.

Some of these facts were stated in the same issue in an article by reporter Wayne Garcia, which devoted much of its space to emphasizing the numerous properties held by the Scientologists. But below a map of the various properties and an analysis of their value, the following paragraph appeared, without explanation or comment:

"In Pinellas County, more than 3,000 parcels already qualify for a similar exemption, taking more than \$1.2-billion in land and buildings off the tax rolls."

And in the following paragraph:

"In Clearwater, Scientology owns 20

parcels of land that are grouped in 11 properties."

This is a remarkable statement. Our public leaders are making dire predictions about the future of our city because of the IRS decision, though it is a matter of public record that the Scientology holdings represent but a small fraction of the properties exempted from taxes in our community.

Garcia states that \$7.9-million in back taxes and penalties are at stake because of the IRS ruling. But the 3,000 parcels already exempted are not Scientology property. They belong to the other churches and non-profit organizations in Clearwater. Three-thousand parcels! How much tax money would they generate? Would Pinellas County Property Appraiser Jim Smith, quoted in Garcia's article, please tell us?

Elsewhere in the same issue of the *Times* were quotes from other citizens, including this one from a Clearwater city commissioner:

"It could have a negative impact on Clearwater. The citizens of Clearwater are going to pay through the nose for this."

Why isn't he complaining that we are all paying through the nose for the 3,000 non-Scientology parcels currently enjoying tax-free status in Pinellas County?

I am not an advocate for Scientology; many aspects of this organization disturb me deeply. But I am an advocate for fairness. I believe that the atmosphere of hate that pervades public discussions of this issue is bad for our city and bad for us as individuals. We may not subscribe to a certain belief or religion, but if it enjoys the protection of our Constitution and our laws, it should not have to endure the unpleasantness we have given the Scientologists.

Hate-mongering is not good for our community. It is dangerous. The individuals who come to Clearwater for Scientology training must be very confused, possibly frightened, when they learn of the bitter

animosity Clearwater has demonstrated toward an organization they undoubtedly respect. What does this tell them about Clearwater? But most important, what does it say about us as individuals?

It is clear that we must find a way to resolve the problems that face us. But it is time that our newspapers and our public officials resist the impulse to churn up public anger over the Scientologists. It is time, too, that we face our problems rationally and without rancor toward others.

We like to regard ourselves as a Christian society. But we don't have the right to accept that label unless we behave accordingly.

■ Alice Levine is a writer living in Clearwater. Guest columnists write on topics of their own choosing, and their opinions are not necessarily those of the newspaper. ■