

# OTHER VIEWS

## The winter of America's discontent

By TIMOTHY RUTTEN

IT HAS BEEN more than four decades since the Congress of the United States has been able to summon the will to pass a major piece of social legislation. Not since 1965, when Medicare and the Voting Rights Act both overcame decades of opposition to become law, has Congress proved itself up to the task.

Significant health-care reform is all but dead for this session, and the chances of substantively addressing the regulatory breakdown that allowed Wall Street's irresponsible speculation to precipitate the worst global financial crisis since the Depression seem to recede with each passing day. So too the prospects for passage of further stimulus measures to remedy the crisis of unemployment and underemployment that continues to ravage so many lives.

In the face of these daunting issues, what was it that preoccupied the Senate on the eve of its long weekend recess? The legislative drama du jour is the standoff between the White House and Sen. Richard C. Shelby, R-Ala., who has put a personal hold on more than 70 executive branch appointments until the Obama administration agrees to fund a couple of pork-barrel projects he has earmarked for his state. One involves tens of millions of dollars for an FBI

laboratory focusing on improvised explosives – something the bureau doesn't think it needs. The other involves contract specifications for an aerial tanker that Northrop Grumman and Airbus would manufacture in Alabama, if they win the deal. (Boeing also is competing for the plane, which it would build in Topeka, Kan., and Seattle.)

Unless the administration agrees to give Shelby what he wants, he intends to invoke an archaic senatorial privilege that allows him to prevent the chamber from considering any of the administration's nominees to executive branch vacancies, no matter how crucial. Without the 60 votes to force cloture there's nothing the White House can do.

### Extortion

Outside the Senate, Shelby's conduct would be called extortion; inside the chamber, it's a "parliamentary tactic."

It's also the sort of shabby situation that brings into sharp focus both the sources of congressional dysfunction and the popular discontent on both the left and right with the congressional parties.

Earmarks and pork are anathema to a majority of conservatives and independents; the Senate's outdated, made-for-obstruction rules and susceptibility to special interests are a source of increasing

frustration to liberals and some independents.

Yet, here we have one senator from one Southern state obstructing with impunity an entire nation's business – purely for his narrow constituency's financial interests.

You don't have to attend a "tea party" convention to see the corrosive effect this sort of otherworldly political navel-gazing has on American attitudes toward the institutions of national government and the parties vying to control them. Evidence of the damage is scattered throughout the recent polls:

A Wall Street Journal/NBC News survey, for example, found that although 52 percent of the nation's voters retain a favorable view of President Obama, only 38 percent have a similar appraisal of the Democratic Party. The Republicans fare even worse; just 30 percent, fewer than one in three voters, view the GOP favorably.

A recent CBS News poll found that nearly half of all Republicans, 45 percent, disapprove of their party's congressional delegation.

A national Washington Post/ABC News poll found that just 24 percent of Americans, fewer than one in four, trust congressional Republicans, like Shelby, "to make the right decisions for the country's future." (Wonder why?) The House and Senate Democrats didn't fare all that better, and are

trusted by just 32 percent. Forty-seven percent of those polled – still less than half – have confidence in Obama's ability to make the right decisions.

When people's mistrust of their elected officials and the parties reaches these levels, there is little for political leaders to do but take counsel from their own anger and anxieties – and, these days, the popular mood fairly seethes with both those things.

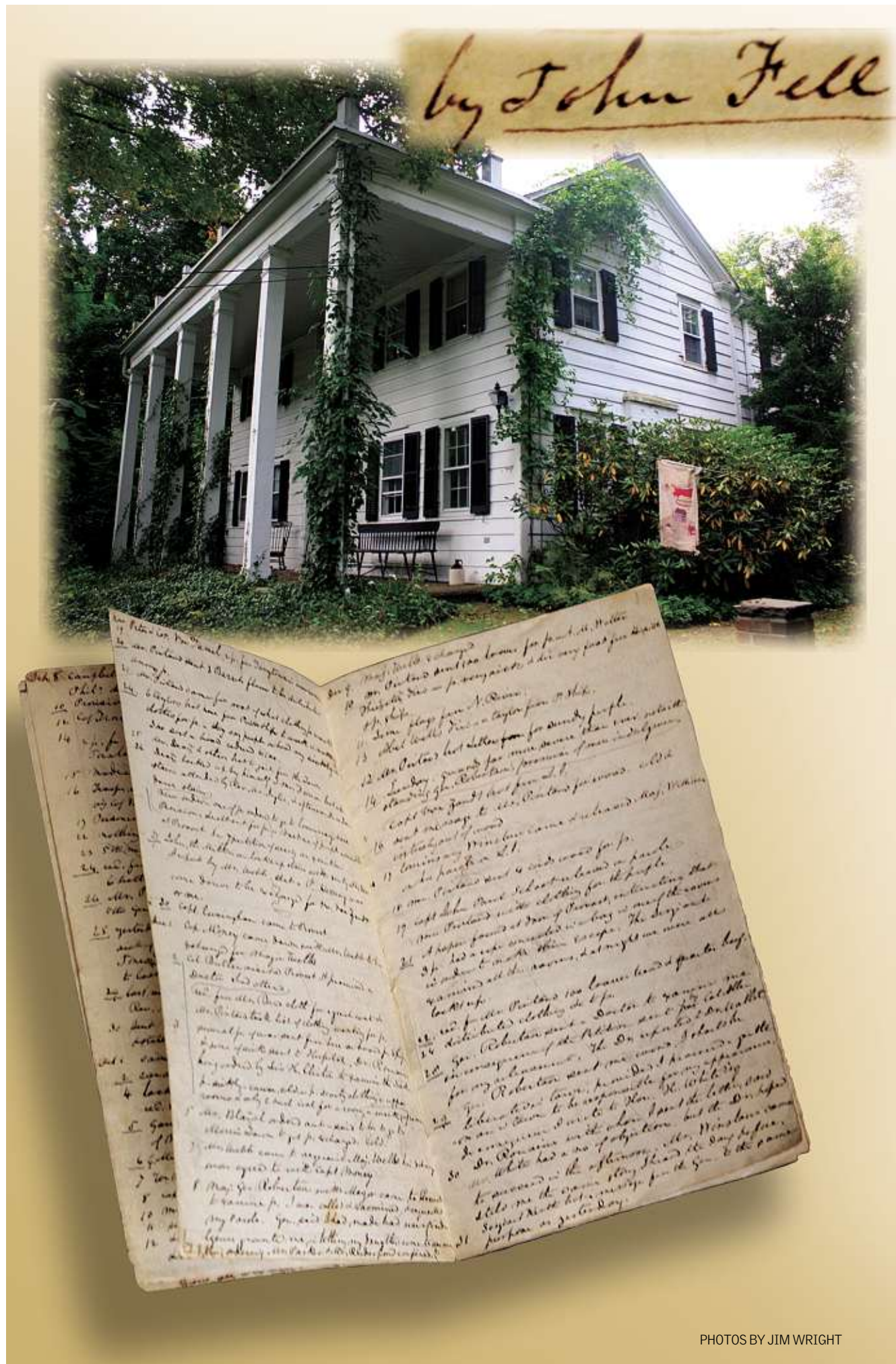
### The background noise

Discontent with the present and apprehension about the future have become the background noise of our politics, yet both sides of the congressional aisle seem deaf to the din.

In one of his magisterial explorations of German politics between the wars, the historian Ian Ker-shaw mused that "there are times – they mark the danger point for a political system – when politicians can no longer communicate, when they stop understanding the language of the people they are supposed to be representing."

It would be reckless not to insist that this country and its politics remain, in crucial ways, far distant from Weimar. It would be rash, though, to pretend that the distance remains as great as it once was.

Timothy Rutten writes for the Los Angeles Times.



PHOTOS BY JIM WRIGHT

## Bergen's unsung Founding Father

By JIM WRIGHT

*"Last night I was taken prisoner from my house by 25 armed men..."*

THIS BEGINS the Revolutionary War prison diary of John Fell of Allendale, the leader of the Bergen County insurgency against the king of England and his local sympathizers.

Fell's 16-page diary, written in secret in the Provost Jail in Lower Manhattan from April 1777 to January 1778, is one of the most significant documents chronicling the horrific treatment of American prisoners of war in British-held New York City during the Revolutionary War.

The journal, written in black ink on now-sepia-tinted thick paper, can be seen at the Brooklyn Historical Society by appointment.

With George Washington's birthday just around the corner and our Founding Fathers on our minds, my wife Patty and I recently made the trip to Brooklyn to view and photograph the document, which John Fell titled "Memorandum in the Provost Jail."

The diary is a reminder of what the founders of our nation endured in the name of liberty.

Although few Americans know of John Fell, he was feared by northern New Jersey's loyalists during the Revolution. As head of the Bergen County Committee of Safety, Fell was known as "the great Tory hunter."

### Faced demolition

My wife and I live across the street from Fell's house, which still stands atop a low hill on the Franklin Turnpike. My wife has been involved in the efforts to prevent this historic house from being demolished and replaced by 11 townhouses, and now that it looks likely that the house and property just might be saved, we thought we should see the historic diary first hand.

We felt a small adrenaline rush as we approached the Brooklyn Historical Society, an 1881 red-brick and terra cotta building in Brooklyn Heights.

When we got to the library on the second floor, the journal was waiting for us. The diary, stored in an archival box, was much smaller and thinner than we had envisioned. When I carefully placed the diary in a special cradle to be photographed, I felt as though I were reaching back 232 years

to actually hold history in my hands.

The diary, weighing no more than a few ounces, contains all sorts of priceless historical data, all handwritten in tiny letters – cramming so much material onto each page that no space is wasted.

The last two pages are nearly blank – an indication that Fell did not know how much longer he might be imprisoned. As Fell later scrawled on the first page, he was held for "8 months, 15 days."

### Fellow prisoners

On the cramped pages, each measuring four inches by six inches, are lists of Americans imprisoned with him and the horrid conditions they endured – from whippings and dungeons to starvation and fatal illnesses.

I got to see, with my own eyes, John Fell's actual signature on the first page of the slender diary – a document that would have meant torture and perhaps even death if his British jailers had ever found it.

In his preface to "Forgotten Patriots," Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Edwin Burrows writes that the number of Americans imprisoned by the British in New York City during the Revolutionary War may actually have "exceeded 30,000 and that 18,000 (60 percent) or more of them did not survive – well over twice the number of American soldiers and seamen who fell in battle, now believed to have been around 6,800."

Of Fell's diary, Burrows writes: "His terse notations, squeezed onto each page in a minuscule script, log the emotional ups and downs of the prisoners there as they struggled with overcrowding, hunger, sickness, appalling squalor and petty, capricious cruelties."

When I returned to Allendale and saw the Fell House once more, I viewed it with new eyes.

Northern New Jersey was caught in the crossfire between the British and George Washington's patriots in the Revolutionary War. John Fell's house is but one of the many testaments to our nation's early history that stand in our midst – so long as we remember and protect them.

Jim Wright, a former staff writer for The Record, wrote an essay on John Fell's prison diary for the recently published book "Revolutionary Bergen County: The Road to Independence" (The History Press.)

## Clinging to falsehoods, misinformation

YOU MIGHT be surprised to learn that of the more than 100 columns I have written, it wasn't those on religion, crime, or even the Mideast that have garnered the most passionate reaction. It was the topic of vaccines and autism.



AHMED SOLIMAN

Following a study released 12 years ago by a British medical journal, people have debated the cause of New Jersey's high rate of autism among our children, which is 1 out of 94 compared to the 1 out of 100 in the rest of the country.

Many have come to believe the study's findings, which suggested that vaccines were the cause of autism. Doctors, meanwhile, have maintained that the study was not credible, and that vaccinations pose no danger. To the contrary, they implored parents to continue having their children immunized, because the alternative would be risk of deadly disease.

The same medical journal that prompted the con-

troversial linkage between vaccinations and autism has now retracted that finding, after the General Medical Council of England determined that the author of the study, Andrew Wakefield, engaged in "dishonest and irresponsible" study that used a "biased selection of patients" as the premise.

"I have been reassuring patients for years that there is no likely link between the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and autism," said Dr. Mohamed Tantawi, a physician at Hackensack Pediatrics. "Of the 17 doctors who signed their name to the Wakefield study, 16 of them did not know until years later that the study was funded by lawyers who were suing the vaccine industry in England, at which point they retracted their signatures. Now it is coming to light that Wakefield unfoundedly created a lot of angst."

### Maintaining old beliefs

Some people still argue that there is a linkage between vaccinations and autism. It's astonishing to see the extent to which people will cling to entrenched positions, even when the original basis for

that position has been debunked by the very journal that originally published it.

"I still think that it's better to be safe than sorry," said Hesham Mahmoud, a resident of Rutherford who vehemently believes that parents should not be forced to vaccinate their children. "No doubt the pharmaceutical company is behind fighting the link between vaccination and autism. I'm not a doctor, but my gut feeling tells me that mercury does cause autism."

Not only are people like Mahmoud arguing that the mercury that was used in vaccines causes autism, there are also those who are arguing that it's the schedule of vaccinations that requires babies to receive more than 20 vaccinations in their first 18 months that causes autism. Both arguments are also not based on solid facts.

"The entire 50 states follow the same schedule of vaccinations. So if the schedule was the reason, why would New Jersey have a rate of autism that is higher than the rest of country?" said Tantawi. "There are clearly other factors that contribute, like genetics and environment. As for the link to mer-

cury or thimerosal, these ingredients were removed from most vaccines in 2001. Yet the incidence of autism continues to rise."

### Holding on

So why do people cling so hard to the false link? "My sister's son is autistic; I truly understand how it can be an emotional upheaval at first," said Tantawi. "It's not easy to accept that your child may not have a conventional development. Parents therefore are looking for an explanation. They wonder if they could have done something different. It is understandable. Wakefield gave them something that might explain the cause, and it created a lot of hype. But it was not substantiated with any good, unbiased research."

Indeed, We need to continue doing solid studies to determine what the cause of autism is. In the meantime, we can't just jump to assumptions because we're frustrated with not having a reason.

Ahmed Soliman's column appears Thursdays. Send comments to letterstotheeditor@northjersey.com.