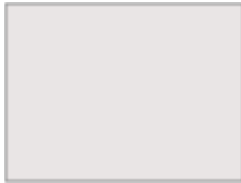
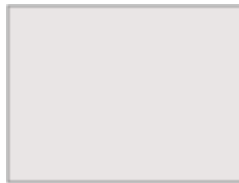




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&  
SOME THINGS DON'T



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## "Safe as in their mother's arms": Confessions of a redistricting junkie

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in print

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One semester in 1978, I was in college and my bank account was getting low.

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Unfortunately, at the time, so was my dad's. So, I went to one of my professors to inquire about on-campus employment. He steered me to the organization he ran on the campus, formerly the Claremont Mens College, called the Rose Institute of State and Local Government. They were embarking on a new computer application: associating political data (election results) with geography (a map). They hired me to draw voting precincts on U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) maps and to find their geographic centers so that those points could be associated with the corresponding election data. When lines were drawn around a series of these points, a computer quickly could add them up.

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What I was witnessing was the transformation of the decennial process of drawing legislative and congressional districts, which has gone from Magic Markers and adding machines to computer mouse clicks and Pentium processors.

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I was hooked.

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Trust me, I wasn't hooked on computers; I still can't figure them out. What intrigued me was the numbers behind the lines on the map, and how every two years people would go to the polls and make decisions based on where those lines were located. This was the ultimate political-hack high: deciding where those lines were drawn.

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Three years later was the 1981 round of redistricting, and I worked on the Assembly Republican Caucus redistricting staff. That year, we witnessed the still memorable press conference where former Rep. Phil Burton revealed his plan and insisted that many Republican congressmen were "in their mother's arms." It also featured an educational moment when a reporter asked him how he had drawn his plan. Allow me to paraphrase from my memory: "I learned how to count in the Boy Scouts. Let's start with Boy Scout 1. You start up here in Del Norte County and you add up 1, 2, 3, 4 [he was pointing to Humboldt, Mendocino and Sonoma counties on the map] Don's in his mother's

arms."

He was referring to Republican Rep. Don Clausen, who lost the 1982 election to Democratic Assemblyman Doug Bosco by 5,700 votes.

As I remember this, I still get goose bumps. It was awesome then, as it is now, to be in the presence of a master. Phil Burton knew how to draw districts that generated a desired outcome. And he did it without using a computer.

Redistricting is the same now as it was then: You add up people until they equal the ideal size of a district. The difference is that the tools change as the technologies change. Redistricters in 2001 used desktop computers that quietly hummed under our desks. In 1981, the computer fit in a room the size of my daughter's bedroom and you could not hear yourself talk because of the noise. It broke down quite often.

In 1991, the computers were a little better, but the operating systems still were not capable of handling the massive amounts of political data. I had to save each change I made in a district I drew, again for Assembly Republicans, before the computer crashed every five or six minutes. That year, Assembly Speaker Willie Brown and former Governor Pete Wilson gamed each other into a court-drawn plan that everyone now agrees was faithful to the principle of keeping cities and counties together, and resulted in a consistent level of competition throughout the decade.

Through the years the bottom line of redistricting has not changed. It is still an exercise in simple addition or subtraction. From the perspective of an incumbent, it is the addition of desirable areas and subtraction of undesirable ones. From the perspective of good-government purists, it is the act of counting up neighborhoods and keeping them together on a clean-looking map that produces competitive districts.

The beauty of the redistricting process cannot be seen through the glare of a computer screen. It is still lines on a map, and those lines have consequences, especially for legislators, and that's why they take the process so seriously. To them, it's a matter of life and death for themselves, their friends, or their enemies.

But, more importantly, redistricting is the way that our system of government decides how each one of us is represented in what our founders decided would be a representative democracy. The people of Iowa have decided that it should be done by a commission, staffed by an office that has somehow institutionally remained a nonpartisan body. Since its founding, California has drawn lines in the legislative arena, with the historically partisan implications inherent in that decision.

Commentators prior to the 2001 redistricting hoped the Legislature would not engage in a bitter partisan process as they had since the 1950's. After the Legislature agreed on a bipartisan plan, they correctly noted that it was a bipartisan gerrymander, and complain to this day.

Until someone comes up with rational redistricting reform that no partisan entity attacks, this process will remain as it is. This is because in the present political climate, the governed do not trust the governors, for any number of reasons.

Since that first day at the Rose Institute, my mentors taught me that this is not the best way to draw districts in a representative democracy. But, until a reform movement was successful in California, this is the way it had to be done. And somebody has to do it.

