

PLUS: HANGING OUT WITH SAN FRANCISCO'S YOUNG SCANDINAVIANS CLUB

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VIKING

MAGAZINE FOR THE

WAY

**THE
FAIRHAIRS
AND THE
FOUNDERS**

Government in Norway
and the U.S.

Going Globalskolen

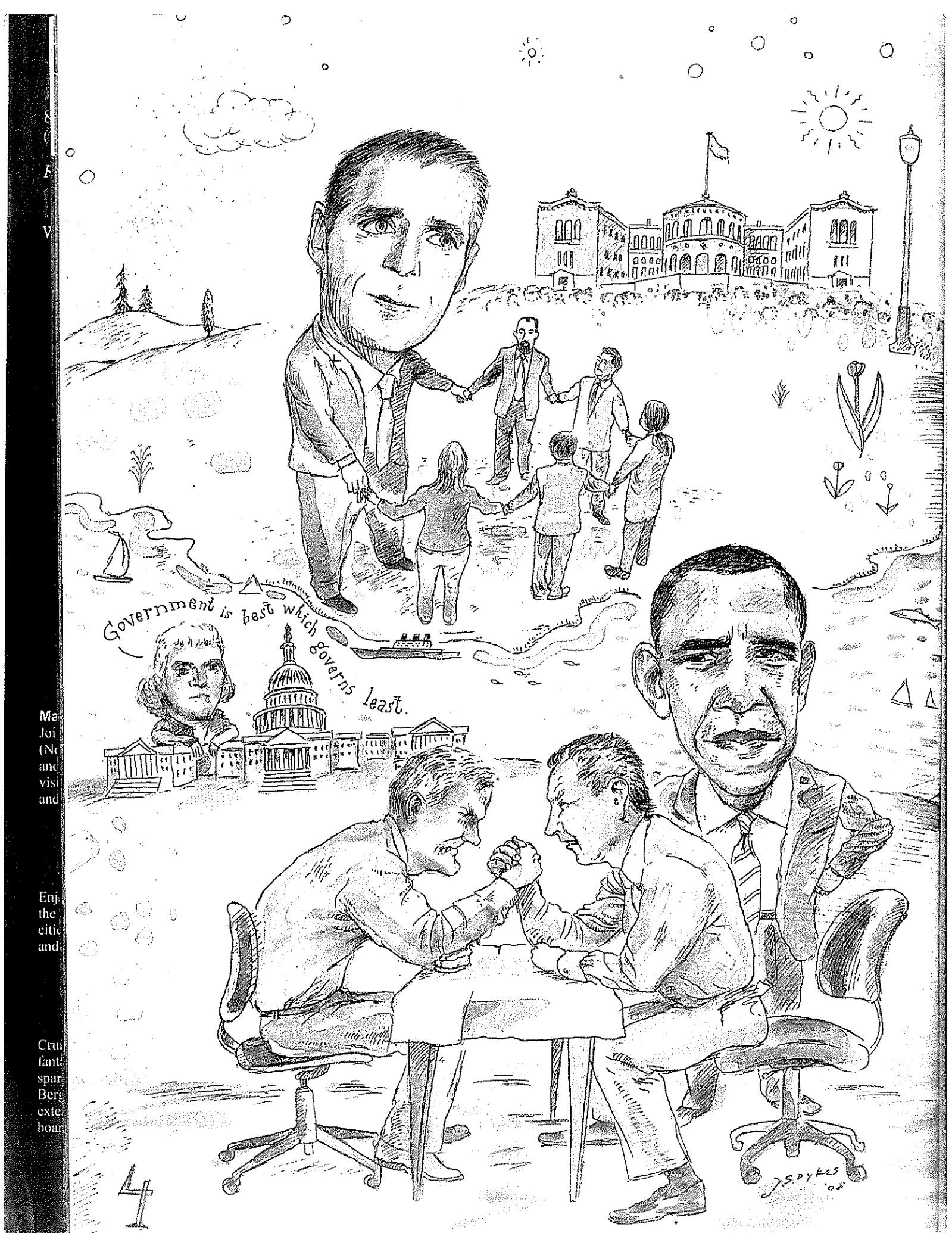
Norway thinks big
about small citizens

Oda Nørsterud, fifth-grader

The Fairhairs and the Founders

Amid significant elections for the United States (past) and Norway (future), *Viking* compares the countries' political systems, from **leaders** and **lawmaking** to hot-button **issues**.

BY ADAM WAHLBERG • ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN S. DYKES



Government is best which governs least.

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Imagine

Barack Obama as the prime minister of Norway. Hard to picture? Not for Norwegians.

"They are so enthusiastic about Obama—all the parties are fighting over him," says Margaret Hayford O'Leary, professor of Norwegian at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn. Everyone wants to claim him as their own.

It's not about the issues really. On paper, Obama and Norwegian politics are a mismatch. He's too conservative. "On a lot of things, like taxes, he would be to the right of even the most-right parties," O'Leary says.

It's about his approach. "Norwegians are very consensus-driven," O'Leary says. "They like the way he reaches out to his opponents."

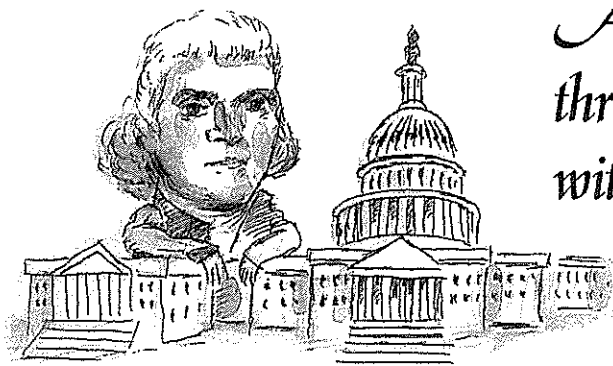
Look at Norway's history and you'll see a proud record of finding agreement

with opponents, particularly the Swedes and the Danes. It was with Denmark, in fact, on May 17, 1814, that Norway brokered a peaceful arrangement for its independence, after which Norway formed a parliamentary representative democratic constitutional monarchy.

Wait a second. Parliamentary representative democratic constitutional monarchy? That sounds insane!

Actually, it works quite well. The shorthand: Norwegians have free elections, coalition governments, multiple parties (seven inside Parliament, more outside), a unitary structure, and a king, who pretty much just stands there.

Citizens seem to chomp at the bit to participate in the system. Seventy-seven



America's founders designed three branches of government with a system of checks and balances to prevent the centralization of power.

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percent voted in the last national elections (77 percent!), and that number horrified many in the country; they pledge to do much better in September during the next national parliamentary elections.

"Norwegians just don't look upon [government] as a big, bad thing as many Americans do," O'Leary says. "They look to it to solve problems."

Norway's unicameral parliamentary system relies on its seven parties to form coalitions to create and pass legislation.

They certainly pay for it. They have high taxes. Really high. About 30 to 50 percent. "It's not that Norwegians love paying taxes," says Odd-Inge Kvalheim, minister counselor of political affairs in the Norwegian embassy in Washington, D.C. "We just tend to focus on what we get for them." And they do get a lot: cradle-to-grave health care; generous welfare benefits (a year off with pay if you have a baby); and a public pension.

That's all fine and good, but didn't some American founding fathers and Henry David Thoreau warn that government is best which governs least? Isn't

that why, after shrugging off the Brits, the founders designed a system of separation of powers and checks and balances among three branches of government? To protect citizens from too much federal power?

Academics Tom Christensen and B. Guy Peters analyzed the two governments in their book, "Structure, Culture, and Governance: A Comparison of

Norway and the United States." While giving proper acknowledgement to the significant differences between the two countries—Norway is relatively homogenous, the U.S. is not—they did draw a few candid conclusions:

Norway's system is well designed to produce strong and effective government.

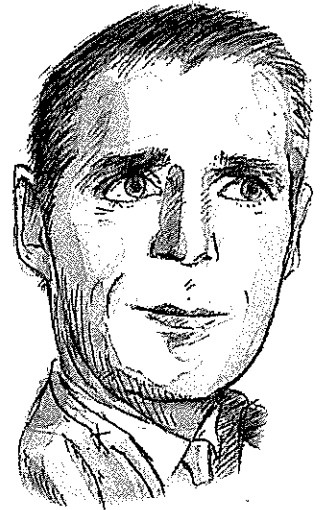
The paradox is that the Norwegian government appears better designed to deal with the somewhat fragmented and disorganized character of American society than with the more orderly Norwegian society. The various mechanisms or consultation available for government

Leaders

NORWAY

**Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg,
Labour Party**

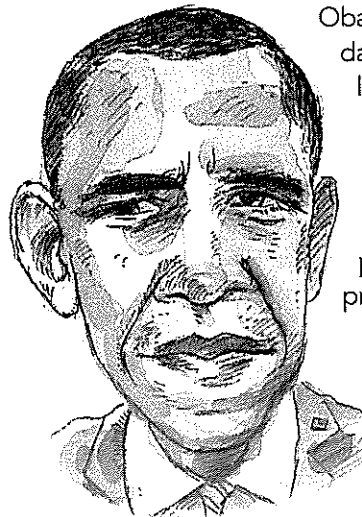
In 2005, Stoltenberg became head of the "red-green coalition," a majority government of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. Together they set and make policy, with input from the other parties. Stoltenberg remains the most popular candidate for prime minister. But since prime ministers aren't voted for directly, if Labour has a rough night in September, when Parliament is next up for general election, he could lose power.



UNITED STATES

**President Barack Obama,
Democratic Party**

Unlike Norway's prime minister, who is part of the legislative apparatus, an American president is in a separate branch of government, the executive branch. This means President Obama sets his own agenda and tries to persuade lawmakers to follow it. In Norway, the process is more integrated. Another key difference: veto power. The president has it. The prime minister doesn't. Actually, in Norway, the king—currently King Harald V—has it, although he never uses it. —A.W.



agencies in Norway provide a way of gauging organized public opinion and averting conflicts later in the policy process. Additionally, the parliamentary system enables government to act more de-

cisively than the slow and fragmented American political process.

To an American, the Norwegian environment appears—if anything—too easy for government to govern.

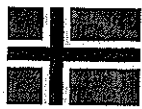
To be sure, Barack Obama isn't going to be prime minister anytime soon. He has a job.

But with his consensus-oriented approach to politics, he may be bringing some Norway to America.

And who knows? Americans might find that a little bit of Norway goes a long way. V

Adam Wahlberg is the executive editor of Minnesota Law & Politics and one-eighth Norwegian.

Lawmaking BODIES



NORWAY: Legislating Fairness

The Storting makes the laws. There are 169 members elected to four-year terms. There are seven parties, which are represented at the following levels:

LABOUR

- Social democrats
- 61 seats
- Part of ruling coalition

PROGRESS

- Libertarian conservatives
- 38 seats

CONSERVATIVE

- Conservatives
- 23 seats

SOCIALIST LEFT

- Socialists
- 15 seats
- Part of ruling coalition

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC

- Christian democrats
- 11 seats

CENTRE

- Agrarian centrists
- 11 seats
- Part of ruling coalition

LIBERAL

- Liberals
- 10 seats

Norway insists the Storting be proportionally fair. Explains Margaret Hayford O'Leary, professor of Norwegian at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.: "If there's a party that doesn't get as many seats

in Parliament as they should based on the overall percentage—if the percentage of each individual county works out so they don't get a seat, but overall, if you added them all together they should have had a seat—it has a mechanism called 'leveling,' which mandates the awarding of a seat." Leave it to Norway to legislate fairness.



UNITED STATES: Power to the Party

Congress makes the laws, but it's a bicameral world. There are two bodies: the Senate, which has 100 members, two from each state; and the House, with 435 members elected proportionally according to population. Two dominant parties: the Democrats, the big-government types, currently in power, and the Republicans, who perpetually want to cut taxes and are the minority party. And two options: my way or the highway.

Consensus isn't king on Capitol Hill. The party in power controls the levers of power—committee chairmanships, bill hearings, floor votes—and doesn't apologize for it.

Since the two parties often act like the Hatfields and McCoys, and because the government is so bureaucratic—there are 68 subcommittees in the Senate alone; uffda!—legislation moves slowly, especially compared with the Storting, where the systems are more streamlined.

Hot-Button ISSUES

IMMIGRATION

NORWAY — The Progress Party has been making inroads by saying that Norway is taking in too many foreigners. Keep an eye on this issue come fall.

UNITED STATES — still trying to decide whether to allow guest workers or build a fence. An issue that isn't going away.

ECONOMY

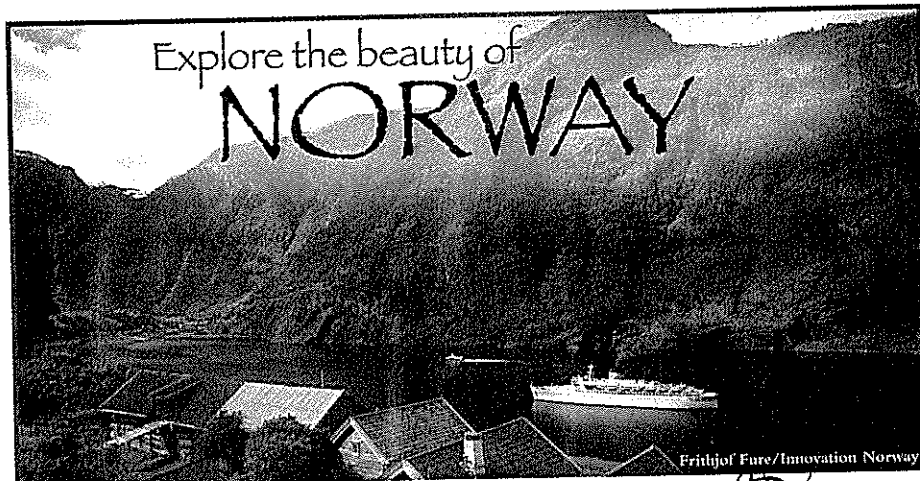
NORWAY — has seen rising unemployment and its economy severely contract due to a decline in oil and gas production, which it relies on heavily. The government gave a \$7 billion loan to Norway's leading credit agency last November to keep things afloat.

UNITED STATES — digging out from a Jenga-style collapse in its market economy. Look for the Obama Administration to set an activist course for the government to get the country working again.

ENVIRONMENT

NORWAY — an early leader on climate-control issues. It has laid out an ambitious plan to improve its responsibilities under the Kyoto Protocol by 10 percent; reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by the equivalent of 30 percent of its 1990 emissions by 2020; and be totally carbon neutral by 2050.

UNITED STATES — is playing catch-up. President Obama has signaled that energy reform will be a top priority, but habits can be tough to change.



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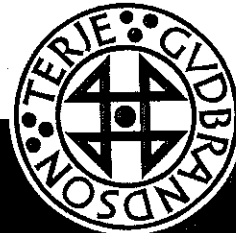
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