

## **BERKSHIRE HATHAWAY INC.**

### **To the Shareholders of Berkshire Hathaway Inc.:**

Our gain in net worth during 1984 was \$152.6 million, or \$133 per share. This sounds pretty good but actually it's mediocre. Economic gains must be evaluated by comparison with the capital that produces them. Our twenty-year compounded annual gain in book value has been 22.1% (from \$19.46 in 1964 to \$1108.77 in 1984), but our gain in 1984 was only 13.6%.

As we discussed last year, the gain in per-share intrinsic business value is the economic measurement that really counts. But calculations of intrinsic business value are subjective. In our case, book value serves as a useful, although somewhat understated, proxy. In my judgment, intrinsic business value and book value increased during 1984 at about the same rate.

Using my academic voice, I have told you in the past of the drag that a mushrooming capital base exerts upon rates of return. Unfortunately, my academic voice is now giving way to a reportorial voice. Our historical 22% rate is just that - history. To earn even 15% annually over the next decade (assuming we continue to follow our present dividend policy, about which more will be said later in this letter) we would need profits aggregating about \$3.9 billion. Accomplishing this will require a few big ideas - small ones just won't do. Charlie Munger, my partner in general management, and I do not have any such ideas at present, but our experience has been that they pop up occasionally. (How's that for a strategic plan?)

### **Sources of Reported Earnings**

The table on the following page shows the sources of Berkshire's reported earnings. Berkshire's net ownership interest in many of the constituent businesses changed at midyear 1983 when the Blue Chip merger took place. Because of these changes, the first two columns of the table provide the best measure of underlying business performance.

All of the significant gains and losses attributable to unusual sales of assets by any of the business entities are aggregated with securities transactions on the line near the bottom of the table, and are not included in operating earnings. (We regard any annual figure for realized capital gains or losses as meaningless, but we regard the aggregate realized and unrealized capital gains over a period of years as very important.)

Furthermore, amortization of Goodwill is not charged against the specific businesses but, for reasons outlined in the Appendix to my letter in the 1983 annual report, is set forth as a separate item.

(000s omitted)

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	<i>Earnings Before Income Taxes</i>				<i>Net Earnings After Tax</i>	
	<i>Total</i>		<i>Berkshire Share</i>		<i>Berkshire Share</i>	
	<i>1984</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>1983</i>
	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Operating Earnings:						
Insurance Group:						
Underwriting .....	\$(48,060)	\$(33,872)	\$(48,060)	\$(33,872)	\$(25,955)	
\$(18,400)						
Net Investment Income ...	68,903	43,810	68,903	43,810	62,059	
39,114						
Buffalo News .....	27,328	19,352	27,328	16,547	13,317	
8,832						
Nebraska Furniture Mart(1)	14,511	3,812	11,609	3,049	5,917	
1,521						
See's Candies .....	26,644	27,411	26,644	24,526	13,380	
12,212						
Associated Retail Stores ..	(1,072)	697	(1,072)	697	(579)	
355						
Blue Chip Stamps(2)	(1,843)	(1,422)	(1,843)	(1,876)	(899)	
(353)						
Mutual Savings and Loan ...	1,456	(798)	1,166	(467)	3,151	
1,917						
Precision Steel .....	4,092	3,241	3,278	2,102	1,696	
1,136						
Textiles .....	418	(100)	418	(100)	226	
(63)						
Wesco Financial .....	9,777	7,493	7,831	4,844	4,828	
3,448						
Amortization of Goodwill ..	(1,434)	(532)	(1,434)	(563)	(1,434)	
(563)						
Interest on Debt .....	(14,734)	(15,104)	(14,097)	(13,844)	(7,452)	
(7,346)						
Shareholder-Designated						
Contributions .....	(3,179)	(3,066)	(3,179)	(3,066)	(1,716)	
(1,656)						
Other .....	4,932	10,121	4,529	9,623	3,476	
8,490						
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Operating Earnings .....	87,739	61,043	82,021	51,410	70,015	
48,644						
Special GEICO Distribution ..	--	19,575	--	19,575	--	
18,224						
Special Gen. Foods Distribution	8,111	--	7,896	--	7,294	--
Sales of securities and						
unusual sales of assets ..	104,699	67,260	101,376	65,089	71,587	
45,298						
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Total Earnings - all entities	\$200,549	\$147,878	\$191,293	\$136,074	\$148,896	
\$112,166						
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- (1) 1983 figures are those for October through December.
- (2) 1984 and 1983 are not comparable; major assets were transferred in the mid-year 1983 merger of Blue Chip Stamps.

Sharp-eyed shareholders will notice that the amount of the special GEICO distribution and its location in the table have been changed from the presentation of last year. Though they reclassify and reduce "accounting" earnings, the changes are entirely of form, not of substance. The story behind the changes, however, is interesting.

As reported last year: (1) in mid-1983 GEICO made a tender offer to buy its own shares; (2) at the same time, we agreed by written contract to sell GEICO an amount of its shares that would be proportionately related to the aggregate number of shares GEICO repurchased via the tender from all other shareholders; (3) at completion of the tender, we delivered 350,000 shares to GEICO, received \$21 million cash, and were left owning exactly the same percentage of GEICO that we owned before the tender; (4) GEICO's transaction with us amounted to a proportionate redemption, an opinion rendered us, without qualification, by a leading law firm; (5) the Tax Code logically regards such proportionate redemptions as substantially equivalent to dividends and, therefore, the \$21 million we received was taxed at only the 6.9% inter-corporate dividend rate; (6) importantly, that \$21 million was far less than the previously-undistributed earnings that had inured to our ownership in GEICO and, thus, from the standpoint of economic substance, was in our view equivalent to a dividend.

Because it was material and unusual, we highlighted the GEICO distribution last year to you, both in the applicable quarterly report and in this section of the annual report. Additionally, we emphasized the transaction to our auditors, Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co. Both the Omaha office of Peat Marwick and the reviewing Chicago partner, without objection, concurred with our dividend presentation.

In 1984, we had a virtually identical transaction with General Foods. The only difference was that General Foods repurchased its stock over a period of time in the open market, whereas GEICO had made a "one-shot" tender offer. In the General Foods case we sold to the company, on each day that it repurchased shares, a quantity of shares that left our ownership percentage precisely unchanged. Again our transaction was pursuant to a written contract executed before repurchases began. And again the money we received was far less than the retained earnings that had inured to our ownership interest since our purchase. Overall we received \$21,843,601 in cash from General Foods, and our ownership remained at exactly 8.75%.

At this point the New York office of Peat Marwick came into the picture. Late in 1984 it indicated that it disagreed with the conclusions of the firm's Omaha office and Chicago reviewing partner. The New York view was that the GEICO and General Foods transactions should be treated as sales of stock by Berkshire rather than as the receipt of dividends. Under this accounting

approach, a portion of the cost of our investment in the stock of each company would be charged against the redemption payment and any gain would be shown as a capital gain, not as dividend income. This is an accounting approach only, having no bearing on taxes: Peat Marwick agrees that the transactions were dividends for IRS purposes.

We disagree with the New York position from both the viewpoint of economic substance and proper accounting. But, to avoid a qualified auditor's opinion, we have adopted herein Peat Marwick's 1984 view and restated 1983 accordingly. None of this, however, has any effect on intrinsic business value: our ownership interests in GEICO and General Foods, our cash, our taxes, and the market value and tax basis of our holdings all remain the same.

This year we have again entered into a contract with General Foods whereby we will sell them shares concurrently with open market purchases that they make. The arrangement provides that our ownership interest will remain unchanged at all times. By keeping it so, we will insure ourselves dividend treatment for tax purposes. In our view also, the economic substance of this transaction again is the creation of dividend income. However, we will account for the redemptions as sales of stock rather than dividend income unless accounting rules are adopted that speak directly to this point. We will continue to prominently identify any such special transactions in our reports to you.

While we enjoy a low tax charge on these proportionate redemptions, and have participated in several of them, we view such repurchases as at least equally favorable for shareholders who do not sell. When companies with outstanding businesses and comfortable financial positions find their shares selling far below intrinsic value in the marketplace, no alternative action can benefit shareholders as surely as repurchases.

(Our endorsement of repurchases is limited to those dictated by price/value relationships and does not extend to the "greenmail" repurchase - a practice we find odious and repugnant. In these transactions, two parties achieve their personal ends by exploitation of an innocent and unconsulted third party. The players are: (1) the "shareholder" extortionist who, even before the ink on his stock certificate dries, delivers his "your-money-or-your-life" message to managers; (2) the corporate insiders who quickly seek peace at any price - as long as the price is paid by someone else; and (3) the shareholders whose money is used by (2) to make (1) go away. As the dust settles, the mugging, transient shareholder gives his speech on "free enterprise", the muggie management gives its speech on "the best interests of the company", and the innocent shareholder standing by mutely funds the payoff.)

The companies in which we have our largest investments have all engaged in significant stock repurchases at times when wide discrepancies existed between price and value. As shareholders, we find this encouraging and rewarding for two important reasons - one that is obvious, and one that is subtle and not always

understood. The obvious point involves basic arithmetic: major repurchases at prices well below per-share intrinsic business value immediately increase, in a highly significant way, that value. When companies purchase their own stock, they often find it easy to get \$2 of present value for \$1. Corporate acquisition programs almost never do as well and, in a discouragingly large number of cases, fail to get anything close to \$1 of value for each \$1 expended.

The other benefit of repurchases is less subject to precise measurement but can be fully as important over time. By making repurchases when a company's market value is well below its business value, management clearly demonstrates that it is given to actions that enhance the wealth of shareholders, rather than to actions that expand management's domain but that do nothing for (or even harm) shareholders. Seeing this, shareholders and potential shareholders increase their estimates of future returns from the business. This upward revision, in turn, produces market prices more in line with intrinsic business value. These prices are entirely rational. Investors should pay more for a business that is lodged in the hands of a manager with demonstrated pro-shareholder leanings than for one in the hands of a self-interested manager marching to a different drummer. (To make the point extreme, how much would you pay to be a minority shareholder of a company controlled by Robert Wesco?)

The key word is "demonstrated". A manager who consistently turns his back on repurchases, when these clearly are in the interests of owners, reveals more than he knows of his motivations. No matter how often or how eloquently he mouths some public relations-inspired phrase such as "maximizing shareholder wealth" (this season's favorite), the market correctly discounts assets lodged with him. His heart is not listening to his mouth - and, after a while, neither will the market.

We have prospered in a very major way - as have other shareholders - by the large share repurchases of GEICO, Washington Post, and General Foods, our three largest holdings. (Exxon, in which we have our fourth largest holding, has also wisely and aggressively repurchased shares but, in this case, we have only recently established our position.) In each of these companies, shareholders have had their interests in outstanding businesses materially enhanced by repurchases made at bargain prices. We feel very comfortable owning interests in businesses such as these that offer excellent economics combined with shareholder-conscious managements.

The following table shows our 1984 yearend net holdings in marketable equities. All numbers exclude the interests attributable to minority shareholders of Wesco and Nebraska Furniture Mart.

<i>No. of Shares</i>		<i>Cost</i>	<i>Market</i>
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		<i>(000s omitted)</i>	
690,975	Affiliated Publications, Inc. ....	\$ 3,516	\$ 32,908
740,400	American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.	44,416	46,738
3,895,710	Exxon Corporation .....	173,401	175,307
4,047,191	General Foods Corporation .....	149,870	226,137
6,850,000	GEICO Corporation .....	45,713	397,300
2,379,200	Handy & Harman .....	27,318	38,662
818,872	Interpublic Group of Companies, Inc.	2,570	28,149
555,949	Northwest Industries	26,581	27,242
2,553,488	Time, Inc. ....	89,327	109,162
1,868,600	The Washington Post Company .....	10,628	149,955
		-----	-----
		\$573,340	\$1,231,560
	All Other Common Stockholdings	11,634	37,326
		-----	-----
	Total Common Stocks	\$584,974	\$1,268,886
		=====	=====

It's been over ten years since it has been as difficult as now to find equity investments that meet both our qualitative standards and our quantitative standards of value versus price. We try to avoid compromise of these standards, although we find doing nothing the most difficult task of all. (One English statesman attributed his country's greatness in the nineteenth century to a policy of "masterly inactivity". This is a strategy that is far easier for historians to commend than for participants to follow.)

In addition to the figures supplied at the beginning of this section, information regarding the businesses we own appears in Management's Discussion on pages 42-47. An amplified discussion of Wesco's businesses appears in Charlie Munger's report on pages 50-59. You will find particularly interesting his comments about conditions in the thrift industry. Our other major controlled businesses are Nebraska Furniture Mart, See's, Buffalo Evening News, and the Insurance Group, to which we will give some special attention here.

**Nebraska Furniture Mart**

Last year I introduced you to Mrs. B (Rose Blumkin) and her family. I told you they were terrific, and I understated the case. After another year of observing their remarkable talents and character, I can honestly say that I never have seen a managerial group that either functions or behaves better than the Blumkin family.

Mrs. B, Chairman of the Board, is now 91, and recently was quoted in the local newspaper as saying, "I come home to eat and

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sleep, and that's about it. I can't wait until it gets daylight so I can get back to the business". Mrs. B is at the store seven days a week, from opening to close, and probably makes more decisions in a day than most CEOs do in a year (better ones, too).

In May Mrs. B was granted an Honorary Doctorate in Commercial Science by New York University. (She's a "fast track" student: not one day in her life was spent in a school room prior to her receipt of the doctorate.) Previous recipients of honorary degrees in business from NYU include Clifton Garvin, Jr., CEO of Exxon Corp.; Walter Wriston, then CEO of Citicorp; Frank Cary, then CEO of IBM; Tom Murphy, then CEO of General Motors; and, most recently, Paul Volcker. (They are in good company.)

The Blumkin blood did not run thin. Louie, Mrs. B's son, and his three boys, Ron, Irv, and Steve, all contribute in full measure to NFM's amazing success. The younger generation has attended the best business school of them all - that conducted by Mrs. B and Louie - and their training is evident in their performance.

Last year NFM's net sales increased by \$14.3 million, bringing the total to \$115 million, all from the one store in Omaha. That is by far the largest volume produced by a single home furnishings store in the United States. In fact, the gain in sales last year was itself greater than the annual volume of many good-sized successful stores. The business achieves this success because it deserves this success. A few figures will tell you why.

In its fiscal 1984 10-K, the largest independent specialty retailer of home furnishings in the country, Levitz Furniture, described its prices as "generally lower than the prices charged by conventional furniture stores in its trading area". Levitz, in that year, operated at a gross margin of 44.4% (that is, on average, customers paid it \$100 for merchandise that had cost it \$55.60 to buy). The gross margin at NFM is not much more than half of that. NFM's low mark-ups are possible because of its exceptional efficiency: operating expenses (payroll, occupancy, advertising, etc.) are about 16.5% of sales versus 35.6% at Levitz.

None of this is in criticism of Levitz, which has a well-managed operation. But the NFM operation is simply extraordinary (and, remember, it all comes from a \$500 investment by Mrs. B in 1937). By unparalleled efficiency and astute volume purchasing, NFM is able to earn excellent returns on capital while saving its customers at least \$30 million annually from what, on average, it would cost them to buy the same merchandise at stores maintaining typical mark-ups. Such savings enable NFM to constantly widen its geographical reach and thus to enjoy growth well beyond the natural growth of the Omaha market.

I have been asked by a number of people just what secrets the Blumkins bring to their business. These are not very esoteric. All members of the family: (1) apply themselves with

an enthusiasm and energy that would make Ben Franklin and Horatio Alger look like dropouts; (2) define with extraordinary realism their area of special competence and act decisively on all matters within it; (3) ignore even the most enticing propositions failing outside of that area of special competence; and, (4) unflinchingly behave in a high-grade manner with everyone they deal with. (Mrs. B boils it down to "sell cheap and tell the truth".)

Our evaluation of the integrity of Mrs. B and her family was demonstrated when we purchased 90% of the business: NFM had never had an audit and we did not request one; we did not take an inventory nor verify the receivables; we did not check property titles. We gave Mrs. B a check for \$55 million and she gave us her word. That made for an even exchange.

You and I are fortunate to be in partnership with the Blumkin family.

**See's Candy Shops, Inc.**

Below is our usual recap of See's performance since the time of purchase by Blue Chip Stamps:

<i>52-53 Week Year Ended About December 31</i>	<i>Sales Revenues</i>	<i>Operating Profits After Taxes</i>	<i>Number of Pounds of Candy Sold</i>	<i>Number of Stores Open at Year End</i>
1984 .....	\$135,946,000	\$13,380,000	24,759,000	214
1983 (53 weeks) ...	133,531,000	13,699,000	24,651,000	207
1982 .....	123,662,000	11,875,000	24,216,000	202
1981 .....	112,578,000	10,779,000	24,052,000	199
1980 .....	97,715,000	7,547,000	24,065,000	191
1979 .....	87,314,000	6,330,000	23,985,000	188
1978 .....	73,653,000	6,178,000	22,407,000	182
1977 .....	62,886,000	6,154,000	20,921,000	179
1976 (53 weeks) ...	56,333,000	5,569,000	20,553,000	173
1975 .....	50,492,000	5,132,000	19,134,000	172
1974 .....	41,248,000	3,021,000	17,883,000	170
1973 .....	35,050,000	1,940,000	17,813,000	169
1972 .....	31,337,000	2,083,000	16,954,000	167

This performance has not been produced by a generally rising tide. To the contrary, many well-known participants in the boxed-chocolate industry either have lost money in this same period or have been marginally profitable. To our knowledge, only one good-sized competitor has achieved high profitability. The success of See's reflects the combination of an exceptional product and an exceptional manager, Chuck Huggins.

During 1984 we increased prices considerably less than has been our practice in recent years: per-pound realization was \$5.49, up only 1.4% from 1983. Fortunately, we made good progress on cost control, an area that has caused us problems in recent years. Per-pound costs - other than those for raw materials, a segment of expense largely outside of our control - increased by only 2.2% last year.



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Our cost-control problem has been exacerbated by the problem of modestly declining volume (measured by pounds, not dollars) on a same-store basis. Total pounds sold through shops in recent years has been maintained at a roughly constant level only by the net addition of a few shops annually. This more-shops-to-get-the-same-volume situation naturally puts heavy pressure on per-pound selling costs.

In 1984, same-store volume declined 1.1%. Total shop volume, however, grew 0.6% because of an increase in stores. (Both percentages are adjusted to compensate for a 53-week fiscal year in 1983.)

See's business tends to get a bit more seasonal each year. In the four weeks prior to Christmas, we do 40% of the year's volume and earn about 75% of the year's profits. We also earn significant sums in the Easter and Valentine's Day periods, but pretty much tread water the rest of the year. In recent years, shop volume at Christmas has grown in relative importance, and so have quantity orders and mail orders. The increased concentration of business in the Christmas period produces a multitude of managerial problems, all of which have been handled by Chuck and his associates with exceptional skill and grace.

Their solutions have in no way involved compromises in either quality of service or quality of product. Most of our larger competitors could not say the same. Though faced with somewhat less extreme peaks and valleys in demand than we, they add preservatives or freeze the finished product in order to smooth the production cycle and thereby lower unit costs. We reject such techniques, opting, in effect, for production headaches rather than product modification.

Our mall stores face a host of new food and snack vendors that provide particularly strong competition at non-holiday periods. We need new products to fight back and during 1984 we introduced six candy bars that, overall, met with a good reception. Further product introductions are planned.

In 1985 we will intensify our efforts to keep per-pound cost increases below the rate of inflation. Continued success in these efforts, however, will require gains in same-store poundage. Prices in 1985 should average 6% - 7% above those of 1984. Assuming no change in same-store volume, profits should show a moderate gain.

#### **Buffalo Evening News**

Profits at the News in 1984 were considerably greater than we expected. As at See's, excellent progress was made in controlling costs. Excluding hours worked in the newsroom, total hours worked decreased by about 2.8%. With this productivity improvement, overall costs increased only 4.9%. This performance by Stan Lipsey and his management team was one of the best in the industry.

However, we now face an acceleration in costs. In mid-1984

we entered into new multi-year union contracts that provided for a large "catch-up" wage increase. This catch-up is entirely appropriate: the cooperative spirit of our unions during the unprofitable 1977-1982 period was an important factor in our success in remaining cost competitive with The Courier-Express. Had we not kept costs down, the outcome of that struggle might well have been different.

Because our new union contracts took effect at varying dates, little of the catch-up increase was reflected in our 1984 costs. But the increase will be almost totally effective in 1985 and, therefore, our unit labor costs will rise this year at a rate considerably greater than that of the industry. We expect to mitigate this increase by continued small gains in productivity, but we cannot avoid significantly higher wage costs this year. Newsprint price trends also are less favorable now than they were in 1984. Primarily because of these two factors, we expect at least a minor contraction in margins at the News.

Working in our favor at the News are two factors of major economic importance:

- (1) Our circulation is concentrated to an unusual degree in the area of maximum utility to our advertisers. "Regional" newspapers with wide-ranging circulation, on the other hand, have a significant portion of their circulation in areas that are of negligible utility to most advertisers. A subscriber several hundred miles away is not much of a prospect for the puppy you are offering to sell via a classified ad - nor for the grocer with stores only in the metropolitan area. "Wasted" circulation - as the advertisers call it - hurts profitability: expenses of a newspaper are determined largely by gross circulation while advertising revenues (usually 70% - 80% of total revenues) are responsive only to useful circulation;
- (2) Our penetration of the Buffalo retail market is exceptional; advertisers can reach almost all of their potential customers using only the News.

Last year I told you about this unusual reader acceptance: among the 100 largest newspapers in the country, we were then number one, daily, and number three, Sunday, in penetration. The most recent figures show us number one in penetration on weekdays and number two on Sunday. (Even so, the number of households in Buffalo has declined, so our current weekday circulation is down slightly; on Sundays it is unchanged.)

I told you also that one of the major reasons for this unusual acceptance by readers was the unusual quantity of news that we delivered to them: a greater percentage of our paper is devoted to news than is the case at any other dominant paper in our size range. In 1984 our "news hole" ratio was 50.9%, (versus 50.4% in 1983), a level far above the typical 35% - 40%. We will continue to maintain this ratio in the 50% area. Also, though we last year reduced total hours worked in other departments, we

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maintained the level of employment in the newsroom and, again, will continue to do so. Newsroom costs advanced 9.1% in 1984, a rise far exceeding our overall cost increase of 4.9%.

Our news hole policy costs us significant extra money for newsprint. As a result, our news costs (newsprint for the news hole plus payroll and expenses of the newsroom) as a percentage of revenue run higher than those of most dominant papers of our size. There is adequate room, however, for our paper or any other dominant paper to sustain these costs: the difference between "high" and "low" news costs at papers of comparable size runs perhaps three percentage points while pre-tax profit margins are often ten times that amount.

The economics of a dominant newspaper are excellent, among the very best in the business world. Owners, naturally, would like to believe that their wonderful profitability is achieved only because they unfailingly turn out a wonderful product. That comfortable theory wilts before an uncomfortable fact. While first-class newspapers make excellent profits, the profits of third-rate papers are as good or better - as long as either class of paper is dominant within its community. Of course, product quality may have been crucial to the paper in achieving dominance. We believe this was the case at the News, in very large part because of people such as Alfred Kirchhofer who preceded us.

Once dominant, the newspaper itself, not the marketplace, determines just how good or how bad the paper will be. Good or bad, it will prosper. That is not true of most businesses: inferior quality generally produces inferior economics. But even a poor newspaper is a bargain to most citizens simply because of its "bulletin board" value. Other things being equal, a poor product will not achieve quite the level of readership achieved by a first-class product. A poor product, however, will still remain essential to most citizens, and what commands their attention will command the attention of advertisers.

Since high standards are not imposed by the marketplace, management must impose its own. Our commitment to an above-average expenditure for news represents an important quantitative standard. We have confidence that Stan Lipsey and Murray Light will continue to apply the far-more important qualitative standards. Charlie and I believe that newspapers are very special institutions in society. We are proud of the News, and intend an even greater pride to be justified in the years ahead.

## Insurance Operations

Shown below is an updated version of our usual table listing two key figures for the insurance industry:

	<i>Yearly Change in Premiums Written (%)</i>	<i>Combined Ratio after Policy-holder Dividends</i>
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1972 .....	10.2	96.2
1973 .....	8.0	99.2
1974 .....	6.2	105.4
1975 .....	11.0	107.9
1976 .....	21.9	102.4
1977 .....	19.8	97.2
1978 .....	12.8	97.5
1979 .....	10.3	100.6
1980 .....	6.0	103.1
1981 .....	3.9	106.0
1982 .....	4.4	109.7
1983 (Revised) .....	4.5	111.9
1984 (Estimated) .....	8.1	117.7

Source: Best's Aggregates and Averages

Best's data reflect the experience of practically the entire industry, including stock, mutual, and reciprocal companies. The combined ratio represents total insurance costs (losses incurred plus expenses) compared to revenue from premiums; a ratio below 100 indicates an underwriting profit, and one above 100 indicates a loss.

For a number of years, we have told you that an annual increase by the industry of about 10% per year in premiums written is necessary for the combined ratio to remain roughly unchanged. We assumed in making that assertion that expenses as a percentage of premium volume would stay relatively stable and that losses would grow at about 10% annually because of the combined influence of unit volume increases, inflation, and judicial rulings that expand what is covered by the insurance policy.

Our opinion is proving dismayingly accurate: a premium increase of 10% per year since 1979 would have produced an aggregate increase through 1984 of 61% and a combined ratio in 1984 almost identical to the 100.6 of 1979. Instead, the industry had only a 30% increase in premiums and a 1984 combined ratio of 117.7. Today, we continue to believe that the key index to the trend of underwriting profitability is the year-to-year percentage change in industry premium volume.

It now appears that premium volume in 1985 will grow well over 10%. Therefore, assuming that catastrophes are at a "normal" level, we would expect the combined ratio to begin easing downward toward the end of the year. However, under our industrywide loss assumptions (i.e., increases of 10% annually), five years of 15%-per-year increases in premiums would be required to get the combined ratio back to 100. This would mean

a doubling of industry volume by 1989, an outcome that seems highly unlikely to us. Instead, we expect several years of premium gains somewhat above the 10% level, followed by highly-competitive pricing that generally will produce combined ratios in the 108-113 range.

Our own combined ratio in 1984 was a humbling 134. (Here, as throughout this report, we exclude structured settlements and the assumption of loss reserves in reporting this ratio. Much additional detail, including the effect of discontinued operations on the ratio, appears on pages 42-43). This is the third year in a row that our underwriting performance has been far poorer than that of the industry. We expect an improvement in the combined ratio in 1985, and also expect our improvement to be substantially greater than that of the industry. Mike Goldberg has corrected many of the mistakes I made before he took over insurance operations. Moreover, our business is concentrated in lines that have experienced poorer-than-average results during the past several years, and that circumstance has begun to subdue many of our competitors and even eliminate some. With the competition shaken, we were able during the last half of 1984 to raise prices significantly in certain important lines with little loss of business.

For some years I have told you that there could be a day coming when our premier financial strength would make a real difference in the competitive position of our insurance operation. That day may have arrived. We are almost without question the strongest property/casualty insurance operation in the country, with a capital position far superior to that of well-known companies of much greater size.

Equally important, our corporate policy is to retain that superiority. The buyer of insurance receives only a promise in exchange for his cash. The value of that promise should be appraised against the possibility of adversity, not prosperity. At a minimum, the promise should appear able to withstand a prolonged combination of depressed financial markets and exceptionally unfavorable underwriting results. Our insurance subsidiaries are both willing and able to keep their promises in any such environment - and not too many other companies clearly are.

Our financial strength is a particular asset in the business of structured settlements and loss reserve assumptions that we reported on last year. The claimant in a structured settlement and the insurance company that has reinsured loss reserves need to be completely confident that payments will be forthcoming for decades to come. Very few companies in the property/casualty field can meet this test of unquestioned long-term strength. (In fact, only a handful of companies exists with which we will reinsure our own liabilities.)

We have grown in these new lines of business: funds that we hold to offset assumed liabilities grew from \$16.2 million to \$30.6 million during the year. We expect growth to continue and perhaps to greatly accelerate. To support this projected growth

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we have added substantially to the capital of Columbia Insurance Company, our reinsurance unit specializing in structured settlements and loss reserve assumptions. While these businesses are very competitive, returns should be satisfactory.

At GEICO the news, as usual, is mostly good. That company achieved excellent unit growth in its primary insurance business during 1984, and the performance of its investment portfolio continued to be extraordinary. Though underwriting results deteriorated late in the year, they still remain far better than those of the industry. Our ownership in GEICO at yearend amounted to 36% and thus our interest in their direct property/casualty volume of \$885 million amounted to \$320 million, or well over double our own premium volume.

I have reported to you in the past few years that the performance of GEICO's stock has considerably exceeded that company's business performance, brilliant as the latter has been. In those years, the carrying value of our GEICO investment on our balance sheet grew at a rate greater than the growth in GEICO's intrinsic business value. I warned you that over performance by the stock relative to the performance of the business obviously could not occur every year, and that in some years the stock must under perform the business. In 1984 that occurred and the carrying value of our interest in GEICO changed hardly at all, while the intrinsic business value of that interest increased substantially. Since 27% of Berkshire's net worth at the beginning of 1984 was represented by GEICO, its static market value had a significant impact upon our rate of gain for the year. We are not at all unhappy with such a result: we would far rather have the business value of GEICO increase by X during the year, while market value decreases, than have the intrinsic value increase by only 1/2 X with market value soaring. In GEICO's case, as in all of our investments, we look to business performance, not market performance. If we are correct in expectations regarding the business, the market eventually will follow along.

You, as shareholders of Berkshire, have benefited in enormous measure from the talents of GEICO's Jack Byrne, Bill Snyder, and Lou Simpson. In its core business - low-cost auto and homeowners insurance - GEICO has a major, sustainable competitive advantage. That is a rare asset in business generally, and it's almost non-existent in the field of financial services. (GEICO, itself, illustrates this point: despite the company's excellent management, superior profitability has eluded GEICO in all endeavors other than its core business.) In a large industry, a competitive advantage such as GEICO's provides the potential for unusual economic rewards, and Jack and Bill continue to exhibit great skill in realizing that potential.

Most of the funds generated by GEICO's core insurance operation are made available to Lou for investment. Lou has the rare combination of temperamental and intellectual characteristics that produce outstanding long-term investment performance. Operating with below-average risk, he has generated returns that have been by far the best in the insurance industry.

I applaud and appreciate the efforts and talents of these three outstanding managers.

### **Errors in Loss Reserving**

Any shareholder in a company with important interests in the property/casualty insurance business should have some understanding of the weaknesses inherent in the reporting of current earnings in that industry. Phil Graham, when publisher of the Washington Post, described the daily newspaper as "a first rough draft of history". Unfortunately, the financial statements of a property/casualty insurer provide, at best, only a first rough draft of earnings and financial condition.

The determination of costs is the main problem. Most of an insurer's costs result from losses on claims, and many of the losses that should be charged against the current year's revenue are exceptionally difficult to estimate. Sometimes the extent of these losses, or even their existence, is not known for decades.

The loss expense charged in a property/casualty company's current income statement represents: (1) losses that occurred and were paid during the year; (2) estimates for losses that occurred and were reported to the insurer during the year, but which have yet to be settled; (3) estimates of ultimate dollar costs for losses that occurred during the year but of which the insurer is unaware (termed "IBNR": incurred but not reported); and (4) the net effect of revisions this year of similar estimates for (2) and (3) made in past years.

Such revisions may be long delayed, but eventually any estimate of losses that causes the income for year X to be misstated must be corrected, whether it is in year X + 1, or X + 10. This, perforce, means that earnings in the year of correction also are misstated. For example, assume a claimant was injured by one of our insureds in 1979 and we thought a settlement was likely to be made for \$10,000. That year we would have charged \$10,000 to our earnings statement for the estimated cost of the loss and, correspondingly, set up a liability reserve on the balance sheet for that amount. If we settled the claim in 1984 for \$100,000, we would charge earnings with a loss cost of \$90,000 in 1984, although that cost was truly an expense of 1979. And if that piece of business was our only activity in 1979, we would have badly misled ourselves as to costs, and you as to earnings.

The necessarily-extensive use of estimates in assembling the figures that appear in such deceptively precise form in the income statement of property/casualty companies means that some error must seep in, no matter how proper the intentions of management. In an attempt to minimize error, most insurers use various statistical techniques to adjust the thousands of individual loss evaluations (called case reserves) that comprise the raw data for estimation of aggregate liabilities. The extra reserves created by these adjustments are variously labeled "bulk", "development", or "supplemental" reserves. The goal of the adjustments should be a loss-reserve total that has a 50-50

chance of being proved either slightly too high or slightly too low when all losses that occurred prior to the date of the financial statement are ultimately paid.

At Berkshire, we have added what we thought were appropriate supplemental reserves but in recent years they have not been adequate. It is important that you understand the magnitude of the errors that have been involved in our reserving. You can thus see for yourselves just how imprecise the process is, and also judge whether we may have some systemic bias that should make you wary of our current and future figures.

The following table shows the results from insurance underwriting as we have reported them to you in recent years, and also gives you calculations a year later on an "if-we-knew-then-what-we think-we-know-now" basis. I say "what we think we know now" because the adjusted figures still include a great many estimates for losses that occurred in the earlier years. However, many claims from the earlier years have been settled so that our one-year-later estimate contains less guess work than our earlier estimate:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Underwriting Results as Reported to You</i>	<i>Corrected Figures After One Year's Experience</i>
----	-----	-----
1980	\$ 6,738,000	\$ 14,887,000
1981	1,478,000	(1,118,000)
1982	(21,462,000)	(25,066,000)
1983	(33,192,000)	(50,974,000)
1984	(45,413,000)	?

*Our structured settlement and loss-reserve assumption businesses are not included in this table. Important additional information on loss reserve experience appears on pages 43-45.*

To help you understand this table, here is an explanation of the most recent figures: 1984's reported pre-tax underwriting loss of \$45.4 million consists of \$27.6 million we estimate that we lost on 1984's business, plus the increased loss of \$17.8 million reflected in the corrected figure for 1983.

As you can see from reviewing the table, my errors in reporting to you have been substantial and recently have always presented a better underwriting picture than was truly the case. This is a source of particular chagrin to me because: (1) I like for you to be able to count on what I say; (2) our insurance managers and I undoubtedly acted with less urgency than we would have had we understood the full extent of our losses; and (3) we paid income taxes calculated on overstated earnings and thereby gave the government money that we didn't need to. (These overpayments eventually correct themselves, but the delay is long and we don't receive interest on the amounts we overpaid.)

Because our business is weighted toward casualty and reinsurance lines, we have more problems in estimating loss costs



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than companies that specialize in property insurance. (When a building that you have insured burns down, you get a much faster fix on your costs than you do when an employer you have insured finds out that one of his retirees has contracted a disease attributable to work he did decades earlier.) But I still find our errors embarrassing. In our direct business, we have far underestimated the mushrooming tendency of juries and courts to make the "deep pocket" pay, regardless of the factual situation and the past precedents for establishment of liability. We also have underestimated the contagious effect that publicity regarding giant awards has on juries. In the reinsurance area, where we have had our worst experience in under reserving, our customer insurance companies have made the same mistakes. Since we set reserves based on information they supply us, their mistakes have become our mistakes.

I heard a story recently that is applicable to our insurance accounting problems: a man was traveling abroad when he received a call from his sister informing him that their father had died unexpectedly. It was physically impossible for the brother to get back home for the funeral, but he told his sister to take care of the funeral arrangements and to send the bill to him. After returning home he received a bill for several thousand dollars, which he promptly paid. The following month another bill came along for \$15, and he paid that too. Another month followed, with a similar bill. When, in the next month, a third bill for \$15 was presented, he called his sister to ask what was going on. "Oh", she said. "I forgot to tell you. We buried Dad in a rented suit."

If you've been in the insurance business in recent years - particularly the reinsurance business - this story hurts. We have tried to include all of our "rented suit" liabilities in our current financial statement, but our record of past error should make us humble, and you suspicious. I will continue to report to you the errors, plus or minus, that surface each year.

Not all reserving errors in the industry have been of the innocent-but-dumb variety. With underwriting results as bad as they have been in recent years - and with managements having as much discretion as they do in the presentation of financial statements - some unattractive aspects of human nature have manifested themselves. Companies that would be out of business if they realistically appraised their loss costs have, in some cases, simply preferred to take an extraordinarily optimistic view about these yet-to-be-paid sums. Others have engaged in various transactions to hide true current loss costs.

Both of these approaches can "work" for a considerable time: external auditors cannot effectively police the financial statements of property/casualty insurers. If liabilities of an insurer, correctly stated, would exceed assets, it falls to the insurer to volunteer this morbid information. In other words, the corpse is supposed to file the death certificate. Under this "honor system" of mortality, the corpse sometimes gives itself the benefit of the doubt.

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In most businesses, of course, insolvent companies run out of cash. Insurance is different: you can be broke but flush. Since cash comes in at the inception of an insurance policy and losses are paid much later, insolvent insurers don't run out of cash until long after they have run out of net worth. In fact, these "walking dead" often redouble their efforts to write business, accepting almost any price or risk, simply to keep the cash flowing in. With an attitude like that of an embezzler who has gambled away his purloined funds, these companies hope that somehow they can get lucky on the next batch of business and thereby cover up earlier shortfalls. Even if they don't get lucky, the penalty to managers is usually no greater for a \$100 million shortfall than one of \$10 million; in the meantime, while the losses mount, the managers keep their jobs and perquisites.

The loss-reserving errors of other property/casualty companies are of more than academic interest to Berkshire. Not only does Berkshire suffer from sell-at-any-price competition by the "walking dead", but we also suffer when their insolvency is finally acknowledged. Through various state guarantee funds that levy assessments, Berkshire ends up paying a portion of the insolvent insurers' asset deficiencies, swollen as they usually are by the delayed detection that results from wrong reporting. There is even some potential for cascading trouble. The insolvency of a few large insurers and the assessments by state guarantee funds that would follow could imperil weak-but-previously-solvent insurers. Such dangers can be mitigated if state regulators become better at prompt identification and termination of insolvent insurers, but progress on that front has been slow.

#### **Washington Public Power Supply System**

From October, 1983 through June, 1984 Berkshire's insurance subsidiaries continuously purchased large quantities of bonds of Projects 1, 2, and 3 of Washington Public Power Supply System ("WPPSS"). This is the same entity that, on July 1, 1983, defaulted on \$2.2 billion of bonds issued to finance partial construction of the now-abandoned Projects 4 and 5. While there are material differences in the obligors, promises, and properties underlying the two categories of bonds, the problems of Projects 4 and 5 have cast a major cloud over Projects 1, 2, and 3, and might possibly cause serious problems for the latter issues. In addition, there have been a multitude of problems related directly to Projects 1, 2, and 3 that could weaken or destroy an otherwise strong credit position arising from guarantees by Bonneville Power Administration.

Despite these important negatives, Charlie and I judged the risks *at the time we purchased the bonds and at the prices Berkshire paid* (much lower than present prices) to be considerably more than compensated for by prospects of profit.

As you know, we buy marketable stocks for our insurance companies based upon the criteria we would apply in the purchase of an entire business. This business-valuation approach is not widespread among professional money managers and is scorned by

many academics. Nevertheless, it has served its followers well (to which the academics seem to say, "Well, it may be all right in practice, but it will never work in theory.") Simply put, we feel that if we can buy small pieces of businesses with satisfactory underlying economics at a fraction of the per-share value of the entire business, something good is likely to happen to us - particularly if we own a group of such securities.

We extend this business-valuation approach even to bond purchases such as WPPSS. We compare the \$139 million cost of our yearend investment in WPPSS to a similar \$139 million investment in an operating business. In the case of WPPSS, the "business" contractually earns \$22.7 million after tax (via the interest paid on the bonds), and those earnings are available to us currently in cash. We are unable to buy operating businesses with economics close to these. Only a relatively few businesses earn the 16.3% after tax on unleveraged capital that our WPPSS investment does and those businesses, when available for purchase, sell at large premiums to that capital. In the average negotiated business transaction, unleveraged corporate earnings of \$22.7 million after-tax (equivalent to about \$45 million pre-tax) might command a price of \$250 - \$300 million (or sometimes far more). For a business we understand well and strongly like, we will gladly pay that much. But it is double the price we paid to realize the same earnings from WPPSS bonds.

However, in the case of WPPSS, there is what we view to be a very slight risk that the "business" could be worth nothing within a year or two. There also is the risk that interest payments might be interrupted for a considerable period of time. Furthermore, the most that the "business" could be worth is about the \$205 million face value of the bonds that we own, an amount only 48% higher than the price we paid.

This ceiling on upside potential is an important minus. It should be realized, however, that the great majority of operating businesses have a limited upside potential also unless more capital is continuously invested in them. That is so because most businesses are unable to significantly improve their average returns on equity - even under inflationary conditions, though these were once thought to automatically raise returns.

(Let's push our bond-as-a-business example one notch further: if you elect to "retain" the annual earnings of a 12% bond by using the proceeds from coupons to buy more bonds, earnings of that bond "business" will grow at a rate comparable to that of most operating businesses that similarly reinvest all earnings. In the first instance, a 30-year, zero-coupon, 12% bond purchased today for \$10 million will be worth \$300 million in 2015. In the second, a \$10 million business that regularly earns 12% on equity and retains all earnings to grow, will also end up with \$300 million of capital in 2015. Both the business and the bond will earn over \$32 million in the final year.)

Our approach to bond investment - treating it as an unusual sort of "business" with special advantages and disadvantages - may strike you as a bit quirky. However, we believe that many

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staggering errors by investors could have been avoided if they had viewed bond investment with a businessman's perspective. For example, in 1946, 20-year AAA tax-exempt bonds traded at slightly below a 1% yield. In effect, the buyer of those bonds at that time bought a "business" that earned about 1% on "book value" (and that, moreover, could never earn a dime more than 1% on book), and paid 100 cents on the dollar for that abominable business.

If an investor had been business-minded enough to think in those terms - and that was the precise reality of the bargain struck - he would have laughed at the proposition and walked away. For, at the same time, businesses with excellent future prospects could have been bought at, or close to, book value while earning 10%, 12%, or 15% after tax on book. Probably no business in America changed hands in 1946 at book value that the buyer believed lacked the ability to earn more than 1% on book. But investors with bond-buying habits eagerly made economic commitments throughout the year on just that basis. Similar, although less extreme, conditions prevailed for the next two decades as bond investors happily signed up for twenty or thirty years on terms outrageously inadequate by business standards. (In what I think is by far the best book on investing ever written - "The Intelligent Investor", by Ben Graham - the last section of the last chapter begins with, "Investment is most intelligent when it is most businesslike." This section is called "A Final Word", and it is appropriately titled.)

We will emphasize again that there is unquestionably some risk in the WPPSS commitment. It is also the sort of risk that is difficult to evaluate. Were Charlie and I to deal with 50 similar evaluations over a lifetime, we would expect our judgment to prove reasonably satisfactory. But we do not get the chance to make 50 or even 5 such decisions in a single year. Even though our long-term results may turn out fine, in any given year we run a risk that we will look extraordinarily foolish. (That's why all of these sentences say "Charlie and I", or "we".)

Most managers have very little incentive to make the intelligent-but-with-some-chance-of-looking-like-an-idiot decision. Their personal gain/loss ratio is all too obvious: if an unconventional decision works out well, they get a pat on the back and, if it works out poorly, they get a pink slip. (Failing conventionally is the route to go; as a group, lemmings may have a rotten image, but no individual lemming has ever received bad press.)

Our equation is different. With 47% of Berkshire's stock, Charlie and I don't worry about being fired, and we receive our rewards as owners, not managers. Thus we behave with Berkshire's money as we would with our own. That frequently leads us to unconventional behavior both in investments and general business management.

We remain unconventional in the degree to which we concentrate the investments of our insurance companies, including those in WPPSS bonds. This concentration makes sense only

because our insurance business is conducted from a position of exceptional financial strength. For almost all other insurers, a comparable degree of concentration (or anything close to it) would be totally inappropriate. Their capital positions are not strong enough to withstand a big error, no matter how attractive an investment opportunity might appear when analyzed on the basis of probabilities.

With our financial strength we can own large blocks of a few securities that we have thought hard about and bought at attractive prices. (Billy Rose described the problem of over-diversification: "If you have a harem of forty women, you never get to know any of them very well.") Over time our policy of concentration should produce superior results, though these will be tempered by our large size. When this policy produces a really bad year, as it must, at least you will know that our money was committed on the same basis as yours.

We made the major part of our WPPSS investment at different prices and under somewhat different factual circumstances than exist at present. If we decide to change our position, we will not inform shareholders until long after the change has been completed. (We may be buying or selling as you read this.) The buying and selling of securities is a competitive business, and even a modest amount of added competition on either side can cost us a great deal of money. Our WPPSS purchases illustrate this principle. From October, 1983 through June, 1984, we attempted to buy almost all the bonds that we could of Projects 1, 2, and 3. Yet we purchased less than 3% of the bonds outstanding. Had we faced even a few additional well-heeled investors, stimulated to buy because they knew we were, we could have ended up with a materially smaller amount of bonds, purchased at a materially higher price. (A couple of coat-tail riders easily could have cost us \$5 million.) For this reason, we will not comment about our activities in securities - neither to the press, nor shareholders, nor to anyone else - unless legally required to do so.

One final observation regarding our WPPSS purchases: we dislike the purchase of most long-term bonds under most circumstances and have bought very few in recent years. That's because bonds are as sound as a dollar - and we view the long-term outlook for dollars as dismal. We believe substantial inflation lies ahead, although we have no idea what the average rate will turn out to be. Furthermore, we think there is a small, but not insignificant, chance of runaway inflation.

Such a possibility may seem absurd, considering the rate to which inflation has dropped. But we believe that present fiscal policy - featuring a huge deficit - is both extremely dangerous and difficult to reverse. (So far, most politicians in both parties have followed Charlie Brown's advice: "No problem is so big that it can't be run away from.") Without a reversal, high rates of inflation may be delayed (perhaps for a long time), but will not be avoided. If high rates materialize, they bring with them the potential for a runaway upward spiral.

While there is not much to choose between bonds and stocks (as a class) when annual inflation is in the 5%-10% range, runaway inflation is a different story. In that circumstance, a diversified stock portfolio would almost surely suffer an enormous loss in real value. But bonds already outstanding would suffer far more. Thus, we think an all-bond portfolio carries a small but unacceptable "wipe out" risk, and we require any purchase of long-term bonds to clear a special hurdle. Only when bond purchases appear decidedly superior to other business opportunities will we engage in them. Those occasions are likely to be few and far between.

### **Dividend Policy**

Dividend policy is often reported to shareholders, but seldom explained. A company will say something like, "Our goal is to pay out 40% to 50% of earnings and to increase dividends at a rate at least equal to the rise in the CPI". And that's it - no analysis will be supplied as to why that particular policy is best for the owners of the business. Yet, allocation of capital is crucial to business and investment management. Because it is, we believe managers and owners should think hard about the circumstances under which earnings should be retained and under which they should be distributed.

The first point to understand is that all earnings are not created equal. In many businesses particularly those that have high asset/profit ratios - inflation causes some or all of the reported earnings to become ersatz. The ersatz portion - let's call these earnings "restricted" - cannot, if the business is to retain its economic position, be distributed as dividends. Were these earnings to be paid out, the business would lose ground in one or more of the following areas: its ability to maintain its unit volume of sales, its long-term competitive position, its financial strength. No matter how conservative its payout ratio, a company that consistently distributes restricted earnings is destined for oblivion unless equity capital is otherwise infused.

Restricted earnings are seldom valueless to owners, but they often must be discounted heavily. In effect, they are conscripted by the business, no matter how poor its economic potential. (This retention-no-matter-how-unattractive-the-return situation was communicated unwittingly in a marvelously ironic way by Consolidated Edison a decade ago. At the time, a punitive regulatory policy was a major factor causing the company's stock to sell as low as one-fourth of book value; i.e., every time a dollar of earnings was retained for reinvestment in the business, that dollar was transformed into only 25 cents of market value. But, despite this gold-into-lead process, most earnings were reinvested in the business rather than paid to owners. Meanwhile, at construction and maintenance sites throughout New York, signs proudly proclaimed the corporate slogan, "Dig We Must".)

Restricted earnings need not concern us further in this dividend discussion. Let's turn to the much-more-valued unrestricted variety. These earnings may, with equal

feasibility, be retained or distributed. In our opinion, management should choose whichever course makes greater sense for the owners of the business.

This principle is not universally accepted. For a number of reasons managers like to withhold unrestricted, readily distributable earnings from shareholders - to expand the corporate empire over which the managers rule, to operate from a position of exceptional financial comfort, etc. But we believe there is only one valid reason for retention. Unrestricted earnings should be retained only when there is a reasonable prospect - backed preferably by historical evidence or, when appropriate, by a thoughtful analysis of the future - that *for every dollar retained by the corporation, at least one dollar of market value will be created for owners*. This will happen only if the capital retained produces incremental earnings equal to, or above, those generally available to investors.

To illustrate, let's assume that an investor owns a risk-free 10% perpetual bond with one very unusual feature. Each year the investor can elect either to take his 10% coupon in cash, or to reinvest the coupon in more 10% bonds with identical terms; i.e., a perpetual life and coupons offering the same cash-or-reinvest option. If, in any given year, the prevailing interest rate on long-term, risk-free bonds is 5%, it would be foolish for the investor to take his coupon in cash since the 10% bonds he could instead choose would be worth considerably more than 100 cents on the dollar. Under these circumstances, the investor wanting to get his hands on cash should take his coupon in additional bonds and then immediately sell them. By doing that, he would realize more cash than if he had taken his coupon directly in cash. Assuming all bonds were held by rational investors, no one would opt for cash in an era of 5% interest rates, not even those bondholders needing cash for living purposes.

If, however, interest rates were 15%, no rational investor would want his money invested for him at 10%. Instead, the investor would choose to take his coupon in cash, even if his personal cash needs were nil. The opposite course - reinvestment of the coupon - would give an investor additional bonds with market value far less than the cash he could have elected. If he should want 10% bonds, he can simply take the cash received and buy them in the market, where they will be available at a large discount.

An analysis similar to that made by our hypothetical bondholder is appropriate for owners in thinking about whether a company's unrestricted earnings should be retained or paid out. Of course, the analysis is much more difficult and subject to error because the rate earned on reinvested earnings is not a contractual figure, as in our bond case, but rather a fluctuating figure. Owners must guess as to what the rate will average over the intermediate future. However, once an informed guess is made, the rest of the analysis is simple: you should wish your earnings to be reinvested if they can be expected to earn high returns, and you should wish them paid to you if low returns are

the likely outcome of reinvestment.

Many corporate managers reason very much along these lines in determining whether subsidiaries should distribute earnings to their parent company. At that level, the managers have no trouble thinking like intelligent owners. But payout decisions at the parent company level often are a different story. Here managers frequently have trouble putting themselves in the shoes of their shareholder-owners.

With this schizoid approach, the CEO of a multi-divisional company will instruct Subsidiary A, whose earnings on incremental capital may be expected to average 5%, to distribute all available earnings in order that they may be invested in Subsidiary B, whose earnings on incremental capital are expected to be 15%. The CEO's business school oath will allow no lesser behavior. But if his own long-term record with incremental capital is 5% - and market rates are 10% - he is likely to impose a dividend policy on shareholders of the parent company that merely follows some historical or industry-wide payout pattern. Furthermore, he will expect managers of subsidiaries to give him a full account as to why it makes sense for earnings to be retained in their operations rather than distributed to the parent-owner. But seldom will he supply his owners with a similar analysis pertaining to the whole company.

In judging whether managers should retain earnings, shareholders should not simply compare total incremental earnings in recent years to total incremental capital because that relationship may be distorted by what is going on in a core business. During an inflationary period, companies with a core business characterized by extraordinary economics can use small amounts of incremental capital in that business at very high rates of return (as was discussed in last year's section on Goodwill). But, unless they are experiencing tremendous unit growth, outstanding businesses by definition generate large amounts of excess cash. If a company sinks most of this money in other businesses that earn low returns, the company's overall return on retained capital may nevertheless appear excellent because of the extraordinary returns being earned by the portion of earnings incrementally invested in the core business. The situation is analogous to a Pro-Am golf event: even if all of the amateurs are hopeless duffers, the team's best-ball score will be respectable because of the dominating skills of the professional.

Many corporations that consistently show good returns both on equity and on overall incremental capital have, indeed, employed a large portion of their retained earnings on an economically unattractive, even disastrous, basis. Their marvelous core businesses, however, whose earnings grow year after year, camouflage repeated failures in capital allocation elsewhere (usually involving high-priced acquisitions of businesses that have inherently mediocre economics). The managers at fault periodically report on the lessons they have learned from the latest disappointment. They then usually seek out future lessons. (Failure seems to go to their heads.)



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In such cases, shareholders would be far better off if earnings were retained only to expand the high-return business, with the balance paid in dividends or used to repurchase stock (an action that increases the owners' interest in the exceptional business while sparing them participation in subpar businesses). Managers of high-return businesses who consistently employ much of the cash thrown off by those businesses in other ventures with low returns should be held to account for those allocation decisions, regardless of how profitable the overall enterprise is.

Nothing in this discussion is intended to argue for dividends that bounce around from quarter to quarter with each wiggle in earnings or in investment opportunities. Shareholders of public corporations understandably prefer that dividends be consistent and predictable. Payments, therefore, should reflect long-term expectations for both earnings and returns on incremental capital. Since the long-term corporate outlook changes only infrequently, dividend patterns should change no more often. But over time distributable earnings that have been withheld by managers should earn their keep. If earnings have been unwisely retained, it is likely that managers, too, have been unwisely retained.

Let's now turn to Berkshire Hathaway and examine how these dividend principles apply to it. Historically, Berkshire has earned well over market rates on retained earnings, thereby creating over one dollar of market value for every dollar retained. Under such circumstances, any distribution would have been contrary to the financial interest of shareholders, large or small.

In fact, significant distributions in the early years might have been disastrous, as a review of our starting position will show you. Charlie and I then controlled and managed three companies, Berkshire Hathaway Inc., Diversified Retailing Company, Inc., and Blue Chip Stamps (all now merged into our present operation). Blue Chip paid only a small dividend, Berkshire and DRC paid nothing. If, instead, the companies had paid out their entire earnings, we almost certainly would have no earnings at all now - and perhaps no capital as well. The three companies each originally made their money from a single business: (1) textiles at Berkshire; (2) department stores at Diversified; and (3) trading stamps at Blue Chip. These cornerstone businesses (carefully chosen, it should be noted, by your Chairman and Vice Chairman) have, respectively, (1) survived but earned almost nothing, (2) shriveled in size while incurring large losses, and (3) shrunk in sales volume to about 5% its size at the time of our entry. (Who says "you can't lose 'em all"?) Only by committing available funds to much better businesses were we able to overcome these origins. (It's been like overcoming a misspent youth.) Clearly, diversification has served us well.

We expect to continue to diversify while also supporting the growth of current operations though, as we've pointed out, our returns from these efforts will surely be below our historical returns. But as long as prospective returns are above the rate

required to produce a dollar of market value per dollar retained, we will continue to retain all earnings. Should our estimate of future returns fall below that point, we will distribute all unrestricted earnings that we believe can not be effectively used. In making that judgment, we will look at both our historical record and our prospects. Because our year-to-year results are inherently volatile, we believe a five-year rolling average to be appropriate for judging the historical record.

Our present plan is to use our retained earnings to further build the capital of our insurance companies. Most of our competitors are in weakened financial condition and reluctant to expand substantially. Yet large premium-volume gains for the industry are imminent, amounting probably to well over \$15 billion in 1985 versus less than \$5 billion in 1983. These circumstances could produce major amounts of profitable business for us. Of course, this result is no sure thing, but prospects for it are far better than they have been for many years.

### **Miscellaneous**

This is the spot where each year I run my small "business wanted" ad. In 1984 John Loomis, one of our particularly knowledgeable and alert shareholders, came up with a company that met all of our tests. We immediately pursued this idea, and only a chance complication prevented a deal. Since our ad is pulling, we will repeat it in precisely last year's form:

We prefer:

- (1) large purchases (at least \$5 million of after-tax earnings),
- (2) demonstrated consistent earning power (future projections are of little interest to us, nor are "turn-around" situations),
- (3) businesses earning good returns on equity while employing little or no debt,
- (4) management in place (we can't supply it),
- (5) simple businesses (if there's lots of technology, we won't understand it),
- (6) an offering price (we don't want to waste our time or that of the seller by talking, even preliminarily, about a transaction when price is unknown).

We will not engage in unfriendly takeovers. We can promise complete confidentiality and a very fast answer - customarily within five minutes - as to whether we're interested. We prefer to buy for cash, but will consider issuance of stock when we receive as much in intrinsic business value as we give. We invite potential sellers to check us out by contacting people with whom we have done business in the past. For the right business - and the right people - we can provide a good home.

\* \* \*

A record 97.2% of all eligible shares participated in Berkshire's 1984 shareholder-designated contributions program. Total contributions made through this program were \$3,179,000,

and 1,519 charities were recipients. Our proxy material for the annual meeting will allow you to cast an advisory vote expressing your views about this program - whether you think we should continue it and, if so, at what per-share level. (You may be interested to learn that we were unable to find a precedent for an advisory vote in which management seeks the opinions of shareholders about owner-related corporate policies. Managers who put their trust in capitalism seem in no hurry to put their trust in capitalists.)

We urge new shareholders to read the description of our shareholder-designated contributions program that appears on pages 60 and 61. If you wish to participate in future programs, we strongly urge that you immediately make sure that your shares are registered in the name of the actual owner, not in "street" name or nominee name. Shares not so registered on September 30, 1985 will be ineligible for the 1985 program.

\* \* \*

Our annual meeting will be on May 21, 1985 in Omaha, and I hope that you attend. Many annual meetings are a waste of time, both for shareholders and for management. Sometimes that is true because management is reluctant to open up on matters of business substance. More often a nonproductive session is the fault of shareholder participants who are more concerned about their own moment on stage than they are about the affairs of the corporation. What should be a forum for business discussion becomes a forum for theatrics, spleen-venting and advocacy of issues. (The deal is irresistible: for the price of one share you get to tell a captive audience your ideas as to how the world should be run.) Under such circumstances, the quality of the meeting often deteriorates from year to year as the antics of those interested in themselves discourage attendance by those interested in the business.

Berkshire's meetings are a different story. The number of shareholders attending grows a bit each year and we have yet to experience a silly question or an ego-inspired commentary. Instead, we get a wide variety of thoughtful questions about the business. Because the annual meeting is the time and place for these, Charlie and I are happy to answer them all, no matter how long it takes. (We cannot, however, respond to written or phoned questions at other times of the year; one-person-at-a time reporting is a poor use of management time in a company with 3000 shareholders.) The only business matters that are off limits at the annual meeting are those about which candor might cost our company real money. Our activities in securities would be the main example.

We always have bragged a bit on these pages about the quality of our shareholder-partners. Come to the annual meeting and you will see why. Out-of-towners should schedule a stop at Nebraska Furniture Mart. If you make some purchases, you'll save far more than enough to pay for your trip, and you'll enjoy the experience.

February 25, 1985

Warren E. Buffett  
Chairman of the Board

Subsequent Event: On March 18, a week after copy for this report went to the typographer but shortly before production, we agreed to purchase three million shares of Capital Cities Communications, Inc. at \$172.50 per share. Our purchase is contingent upon the acquisition of American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. by Capital Cities, and will close when that transaction closes. At the earliest, that will be very late in 1985. Our admiration for the management of Capital Cities, led by Tom Murphy and Dan Burke, has been expressed several times in previous annual reports. Quite simply, they are tops in both ability and integrity. We will have more to say about this investment in next year's report.