

# Liberty

Obama: The  
Hollow Man

May 2009

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## Iraq: Now and In the Future

by Jon Harrison

## What Your Doctor Isn't Telling You

by Bill Merritt

## The Woman Who Fought the Government

by Bruce Ramsey

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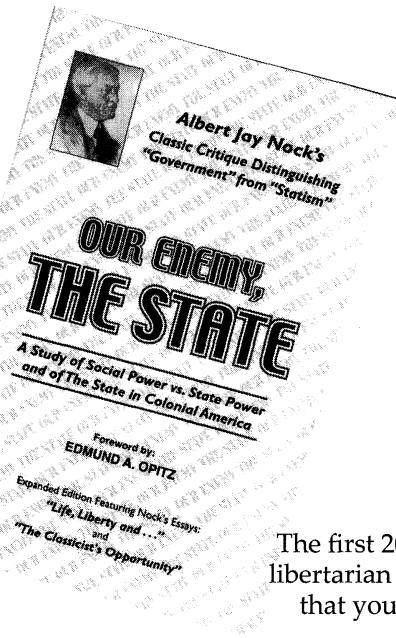
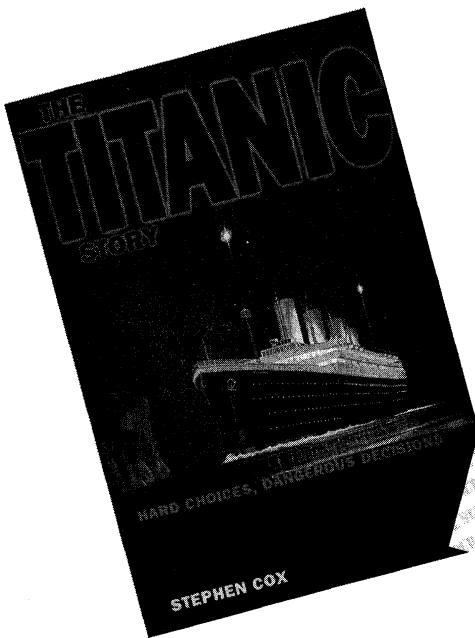
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# Letters

## Not Entirely Fornicated

Gary Jason complains about "Californication" (Reflections, April). He lists a lot of problems with California. He attributes them to unions and Greens and criticizes Jerry Brown for not building freeways.

Jerry Brown left office in January 1983, 26 years ago. In those 26 years we have had Republican governors for 21 years and three months. We have had not one tax increase passed by the legislature except ones backed by Republican governors. Our taxes are lower than they were in 1998. When we were a "tax and spend" Democratic state spending on roads and colleges, we were doing great. Twenty-six years of tax reduction and lower spending is ruining us and driving people out of the state, not Greens and unions. Mr. Jason is also off base on our taxes. Considering all the taxes, we are in the middle of the pack.

Jay C. Smith  
Bakersfield, CA

**Jason responds:** Mr. Smith's assertion that California is in the middle of the pack when it comes to taxes is silly, and the claim that people are fleeing low taxes (to go to the high-tax states of Nevada and Texas?) is — to put it bluntly — delusional. Let's go over the figures, and we'll let those of you in other states compare where you stand.

Start with the state income tax — a tax which many other states don't even have. At a mere \$47,000 in yearly income, a Californian must pay 9.8% in state income tax. (For those few earn-

ing a million bucks a year, it rises to 10.55%). This rate is way above the national median for state income tax rates (6.0%). And please note, Mr. Smith, that under California's putative tax regime, "income" here includes capital gains!

Next, turn to the sales tax. The state has a base rate of 8.25%, onto which cities add an additional rate. So in L.A., our biggest and most proudly dysfunctional city, the total sales tax is a whopping 9.75%. In world-famous South Gate, the sales tax is 10.75%. This is nearly double the national median of state sales tax rates (5.5%).

Now we turn to property taxes. True, our rate is 1% of assessed value, a lower percentage rate than some other states. But note several important things. First, precisely because of environmental and other anti-growth and anti-business regulations, the price of housing is inordinately high. For example, as of 2006, a four-bedroom, 2,200-square-foot home in a middle-class neighborhood cost over a million dollars in the major California cities, but about \$150,000 to \$250,000 in the major Texas cities. So a resident here will pay about \$12,000 yearly in property taxes, despite what appears to be a moderate rate.

Second, many areas of California are "Mello-Roos" districts, wherein homeowners have to pay extra property taxes, almost as much as the regular property taxes, so the homeowners wind up paying nearly double.

Third, property taxes would be even higher, but for the property tax initiative passed decades ago ("Proposition

## Letters to the editor

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13") which limits how much property tax appraisals can increase yearly for existing homeowners (though when they move, the property is then reassessed).

Fourth, please note that while many (if not most) states have only two of the three types of aforementioned taxes (income, property, and sales). California has all three.

Finally, there are the taxes-we-don't-call-taxes, for which California is infamous. The most obvious is the car license "fee" of 1.15%. So a car worth \$35,000 will cost you over \$400 to license every year. A luxury car will cost upwards of a grand a year just to license. That, Mr. Smith, is a tax.

As to blaming the Republican governors, Smith talks out of both sides of his mouth — saying that they are responsible for lowering taxing and spending (thus driving the state to ruin!), but then saying all recent tax increases were approved by them. Please spare me. The legislature is now and has been for decades controlled by the Democrats,

with at best tepid opposition by the Republican governors, who tend (like the current one) to be Republican In Name Only. While Schwarzenegger ran on lower taxes, he just signed a huge increase, before heading off to a global warming conference. I blame both him and the Democrat legislators for not controlling spending. In 2003 the state budget was about \$65 billion; by 2008 it had grown to \$105 billion. That is apparently not enough spending for Smith or the public employee unions. But for the rest of us it is more than enough already.

## Two Takes

In response to Jacques Delacroix's comment that it was "wussy" to pull out of Vietnam, I have to disagree. The Tet Offensive was a tactical victory for the United States but it was a disaster strategically because it showed that victory was not as simple as the official story laid out. However, I was born in this country, a land where we don't pride ourselves on killing

## From the Editor

What did you pay for today, as a result of President Obama's economic initiatives?

Did you subsidize the mortgage of that guy down the block, the guy who's lived for years in a house that's better than yours, despite the fact that he couldn't afford it then, and he can't afford it now?

Did you finance a college education for the kid next door, the kid whose only apparent qualification is an eagerness to party?

Did you fix the bridge on Fourth Street, the bridge that's been falling apart for years, so that the city, which "is desperately short of funds for essential infrastructure," can devote your taxes to higher salaries for the mayor's staff?

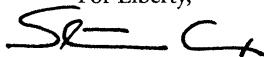
But perhaps you are of an artistic nature. Perhaps you bought another Composer in Residence for the local symphony. Perhaps you funded a grant to keep the symphony from shutting down, once the patrons get to hear what the composer has composed.

Maybe science is your interest — Big Science, the kind that can only be done when an economic crisis disables the country, and the government can therefore spend billions of dollars on projects that no one was willing to fund before. Or maybe —

But why continue? It's obvious that none of us knows how our money is actually being spent. And we're in good company. Neither Congress nor the president knows, either.

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For Liberty,



Stephen Cox

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millions of our soldiers and still losing. Furthermore, the whole Vietnam War would never have happened if France had shown the same wisdom that Britain did and given independence to its empire. But France, always self-important and trying to expunge yet another defeat by Germany, decided to hold on to every last bit of territory it could. Unfortunately, the United States supported this thinking so the torch of anti-imperialism was passed to the Communists, who created the idea that only they believed in a country's right of self-determination. So, in the end, a large swath of Indochina went red, the United States spent two decades cleaning up the mess, and France showed how much it had learned by trying to hold on to Algeria.

Also, Jon Harrison's comparison of George W. Bush and Winston Churchill is flawed and ignorant. Bush has a great many sins and stupidities to live down but he left this country in better shape than Churchill left his. He did lead his country to victory over Nazi Germany, but at what cost? Half of liberated Europe went to Stalin, the economy was in shambles, the empire became an over-costly extravagance, and Great Britain became little more than a vassal of the United States. (For example, consider how only a cold stare from Eisenhower made England [and France and Israel] abandon its invasion of Egypt and go home with its tail between its legs.) On some level, Churchill probably realized all this, but, with his family's characteristic opportunism, he spent the rest of his life building his myth — that of a man who saw further than anyone else, first about the threat of Nazi Germany, then about Soviet Communism. His army of slobbering admirers (e.g., John Lukacs) have elevated this nonsense to holy writ. What is most galling is that American conservatives who bristle at any admiration at anything foreign are the most fervent worshippers at his altar.

Jordan Simmons  
Laurinburg, NC

**Delacroix responds:** Obviously the word "wussy" is shorthand for something I thought many people already knew. It refers mostly to the fact that the U.S. political class lost its nerve after we pulled our forces from Vietnam: Congress then declined to give the

South Vietnamese the resources they had been promised to defend themselves against Communist aggression.

What I wrote, I wrote as a conservative and as an American patriot. I must congratulate you on having had the good sense to be born in the right country, unlike me. That's the same country I had to choose, repeatedly, because a return to Europe always was and still is feasible. My original choice was made more than 40 years ago when I emigrated for good (in every sense of the word).

Your ability to detect my remaining French accent in printed expression is also impressive.

By the way, I agree with most of what you wrote about the lamentable 20th-century history of France, and also about the national vainglory that is still widespread there, though perhaps not as widespread as you seem to think.

I am surprised it did not occur to you also to blame me for Napoleon III's wanton and failed expedition to Mexico.

**Harrison responds:** I wish Jordan Simmons had called me stupid rather than ignorant. My bookshelves positively groan under the weight of the Churchill books I own. I am the only person I know who has read every word of Martin Gilbert's six volumes of official biography, covering Churchill's life from 1914 on. While I have not read quite as much about George W. Bush, I did have the sorry experience of living through eight years of his rule. Ignorant I am not.

It may surprise Simmons to learn that we agree to an extent. In comparing Churchill favorably to Bush, I did not mean to imply that I accept uncritically the Churchill hagiography put out by most mainstream historians. The best biography of Churchill I have encountered is John Charmley's "Churchill, the End of Glory" (Harcourt Brace, 1993). Following the school of Alan Clark and Charmley, I believe Britain both could and should have made peace with Germany in 1940 or 1941. Why? Because it would have saved Britain from becoming, as Simmons says, a vassal of the United States. The collapse of the British Empire led directly to the creation of the American national security state — a continuation of the British Empire "by other means"

which has had profound and deleterious effects on the American people and their way of life. Churchill did not intend for this happen ("I did not become the King's first minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire," he said in 1942), but happen it did, and he bears great responsibility for it (as does Franklin Roosevelt, who unlike Hitler desired the empire's dissolution).

Nevertheless, Simmons should remember that Churchill inherited a losing hand in 1940. If we accept that defeating Hitler was necessary for the preservation of Western civilization, then Churchill did pretty well. Had he come to power earlier, perhaps the outcome for Britain would have been happier. There are those who believe, not without reason, that war could have been avoided altogether had Churchill's policies been followed in the 1930s.

George W. Bush, on the other hand, entered office with his country prosperous and at peace. The government was running a budget surplus of over \$200 billion per annum. When he left, the nation was gripped by the worst economic crisis in history, brought on to a great extent by the reckless overspending and underregulation of his administration. He further involved us in an unnecessary war in Iraq, to the tune of 4,400 American dead and a trillion dollars down the drain. Whether America will emerge from these crises better off than Britain was in 1945 remains to be seen.

### Cold Lampin'

I was amazed at the naivete displayed by Leland Yeager's March Reflection "Enough." Professor Yeager proposes to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute by having "the major powers" impose a solution. Outside rule, in the form of a mandate overseen by said powers (but with day-to-day administration in the hands of "countries considered relatively benevolent, neutral and corruption free" — qualities, in Yeager's view, possessed by the Scandinavian states) is his formula. Wow!

We are not living in the days of the Congress of Vienna, or even of Versailles, when the great powers could decide the fate of continents. Today there is no Holy Alliance before which

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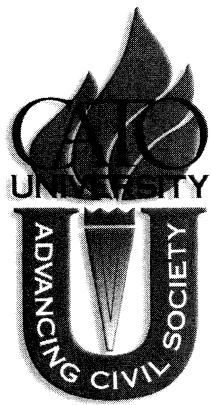
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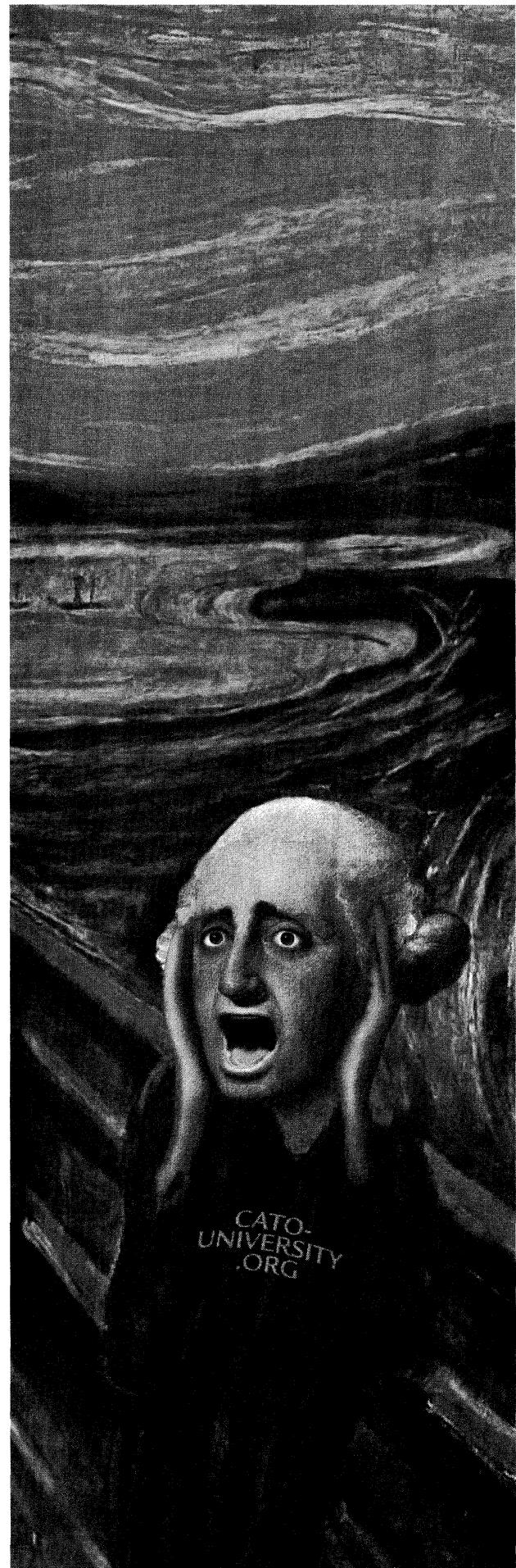
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small states must bow. There is absolutely no chance of the United States, the EU, Russia, and China agreeing on a solution to the problem of Palestine, and then imposing that solution upon the people living there.

One would like to believe with Yeager that "most people in Palestine . . . want to get on with their lives and plan their own futures without suffering from fighting among others." But history tells a different story. There is absolutely no reason to believe the Israelis would agree to give up their existence as an independent state, which is what Yeager's proposal would entail. And there is very little reason to believe that most Palestinians can be reconciled to the loss of lands that their ancestors inhabited for centuries.

Like Yeager, I personally believe that only a one-state solution — a united Palestine inhabited by Jews, Arabs, and Christians living together on a basis of equality — can bring peace to that troubled land. Getting there is the problem. Perhaps mutual exhaustion will eventually bring the peoples of Palestine to their senses. There are small glimmers of hope — in the West Bank town of Jenin, for example. But these are mere dots on a black canvas.

In any case, a call for the great powers to occupy and administer Palestine would find no takers. Neither Jew nor Arab would countenance such an arrangement. There is simply no support anywhere for the idea. Yeager's proposal is utterly impractical — it smells of the lamp.

Jon Harrison  
Poultney, VT

## End the Aid

Apparently even a good libertarian can harbor a totalitarian streak. Leland Yeager's evident frustration that the Arab-Israeli conflict continues to this day shows his ignorance of a more balanced if not more complete history of the conflict. His subsequent proffer of an imposed solution show decidedly non- (if not anti-) libertarian impulses when he is confronted with a situation not easily amenable to solution.

Consider the fact that the United States is financing this ongoing disaster to the tune of \$7 billion-plus annually: three to Israel for military assistance (80% is U.S.-supplied) plus some direct-purposed humanitarian aid; 2.5 to

Egypt for much of the same, including general aid so that Mubarak's regime can maintain food and fuel subsidies to keep itself in power; one to Jordan to enable the kingdom to survive; and 500 million to UNRWA (30–40% of its budget) to maintain third-generation refugees in their misery.

End all the aid. Iran can't afford to pick up the slack, so its influence would wane. Israel would be better off without it. Egypt would have to publicly choose between the delusion of leading the Arab world and the necessity of improving an inadequate economy. Syria would be reduced to a pain in the rear. Lebanon would be able to reassert itself internally. Most importantly, the Palestinians would have to take responsibility for their own future.

David Peters  
South San Francisco, CA

**Yeager responds:** I stand accused of ignorance, naivete, the smell of the lamp, and a totalitarian streak.

Doesn't Mr. Peters, in particular, understand why libertarians rank peace and security, the rule of law, and the opportunity for individuals to move about freely and otherwise run their own lives in uncoerced mutually beneficial interaction with their fellows — in short, personal freedom — above any particular form of government? What counts is whether a government does indeed protect personal freedom. Doesn't he understand that libertarians welcome elections, when they can function well, simply as a means of disciplining government to serve these ends? Hasn't he ever heard about totalitarian democracy? Democracy in itself is not personal freedom. Neither is national independence.

No, I do not advocate totalitarianism for Palestine and Israel. I recommend facing up to 61 years of lessons that democracy does not work for that territory under anything like conditions so far. Mr. Harrison sees glimmers of hope that "mutual exhaustion will eventually bring the peoples of Palestine to their senses." When? After another 61 years? What about the continuing ruin of individual lives in the meanwhile? Mr. Harrison, rather like me, does "believe that only a one-state solution . . . can bring peace to that troubled land."

I hope that most inhabitants of the territory, if not their rulers, will welcome

an international mandate as a transition to a happier future. Conceivably they will agree by plebiscite. The great powers should make that approach available, but not by armed conquest. The threat of withholding aid might help obtain assent. If the Palestinians and Israelis reject a mandate, well, the powers offering it will have done their part and will be even more entitled than now to try washing their hands of the whole business. No one should expect them to go on tolerating the infection of their international and domestic politics.

Yes, my suggestion seems naive and unrealistic. I notice, though, that neither Mr. Peters nor Mr. Harrison offers a specific alternative. Anyway, let's contemplate approaches drastically different from the failures so far.

I applaud Mr. Peters' remarks about how U.S. aid and meddling have intensified the "ongoing disaster" in the Near East. They are just one more example of politicians' propensity to apply their supposed bright ideas to all sorts of problems, real and invented, domestic and foreign.

## The Relevance of Rand

Ross Levatter's reflection on "Atlas Shrugged" (April) was timely for me, in that, what with the unfolding collapse of Western civilization, I had just dusted off one of my copies of that august tome and commenced to reread it. Mr. Levatter makes some salient points as to its somewhat dated tone, but I must point out that all great literature descends and ascends through an ever-changing relevance when reflected in the mirror of current culture. How many "immortal authors" now lay on the ash heap of literary history because their great, urgent message became dated, refuted, and discredited? (I refer to angry young men of a leftist slant from Ms. Rand's era.)

I was a small boy when "Atlas Shrugged" was written. The world she depicted was still very much present. My brother, who was in college at the time, returned from his studies with a copy that soon fell to my father. The political tone of our family was changed forever. The name lodged in my mind and when the day came for me to pick it up,

*continued on page 40*

# Reflections

**Profiles in Privilege** — In his book, "The Cigar," Barnaby Conrad III writes that before John F. Kennedy signed the trade embargo in 1962 banning Cuban cigars he had his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, get him 1,000 cigars. Once Salinger had secured 1,100, the president said: "Now that I have enough cigars to last awhile, I can sign this."

Martha Stewart went to jail for far less than this but it seems that presidents, including those known to preach about "public service" and "sacrifice," are exempt from the moral code that applies to the rest of us.

— David Beito

**Left jab** — The central failure of modern liberalism is that it confuses hypothetical means of effecting a favorable outcome with the outcome itself.

Leftists do not say that they want a country full of healthy people; they only say that they want "universal health care." There is no question in their minds that a nation of healthy people will be the result. They may be concerned with how well situated the human species will be in a hundred years, but they are far more concerned with whether the United States adopts the Kyoto Protocol now. And they do not seem concerned so much with whether children are intellectually, physically, and morally strong, as with whether they possess a talisman called a diploma or degree. That is why, in his big speech on February 24, President Obama was able to say this with a straight face:

It is our responsibility as lawmakers and educators to make this system work. But it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in it. And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.

It is an insulting, stupid, and obviously false thing to say, but never mind that. Here is modern liberalism: attend to the symbol, and the rest will take care of itself. — Patrick Qualey

**Car alarm** — Amid all the chatter about Obama and his attempts to save our country by socializing its economy, a small news story escaped general notice. The Financial Times of London reported on February 4 that for the first time in history, China had surpassed the United States in new auto sales. More Chinese than Americans are buying new cars. In fact, China now has the greatest market for new cars of any country on earth.

Now, the article points out that the American auto market

is down because of our recession. Fair enough. But what it doesn't note is that the Chinese auto makers are not encumbered by militant unions driving up the price of their vehicles, or by a government driving up regulations on the types of cars they can build.

— Gary Jason

**Castration anxiety** — I forget who it was, alas, but one of the Republican talking heads on one of the cable news shows remarked that at this stage in the Obama ascendancy, the Republicans are a little like eunuchs at a Playboy party. They'll be able to observe and offer commentary and criticism on the various goings-on, but won't be able to do anything about it.

— Alan Bock

**Capitol accumulation** — As noted on the blog of Reason magazine, Illinois Senator Burris has set up a website for his 2010 campaign. Katherine Mangu-Ward humorously noted that if you click on "Accomplishments" at Burris' site, there is literally nothing listed.

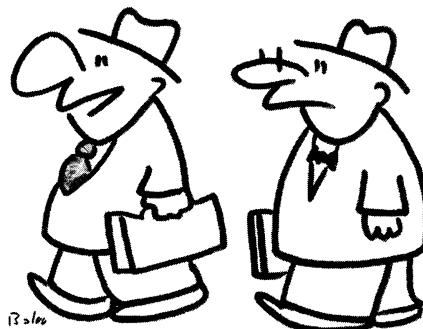
That's funny, but I think Katherine is being a tad unfair. Clearly, the site is designed to list Burris' senatorial accomplishments, and at this writing he's been in the Senate little more than a month. I'm sure, come election time in 2010, he'll have a list of accomplishments. Should he still be running at that time, accomplishment no. 1 will be: "Avoided Indictment." — Ross Levatter

**Taking on Obama** — On February 10, the morning after the crucial Senate vote on the \$838 billion kitchen-sink spending bill, the Washington Post bannered, "New Bailout May Top \$1.5 Trillion." Libertarians barely had time to contemplate having failed to stop the largest spending bill in history before they were hit with another one, this time to funnel money to banks and other lenders. And this one (which other newspapers estimated at as much as \$2.5 trillion,

but what's another trillion here or there?) doesn't even require congressional approval — much like last fall's Monday-morning announcements of what Czar Henry Paulson had done over the weekend.

Back in September and October, I think that libertarians, conservatives, and even Republican politicians were shell-shocked by one blow to free-market capitalism after another: the federal "takeover" of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the bailout of AIG, the all-power-to-Paulson plan, the collapse of Washington Mutual, congressional passage of the power-to-Paulson-plus-pork plan, the 22% drop in the Dow Jones average in one week,

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"I don't know about other problems, but it always helps to throw money at my wife."

the Federal Reserve Board's unprecedented decision to lend directly to nonfinancial companies, the government's partial nationalization of major banks, Paulson's announcement that he would use his bailout money for something other than what he asked Congress to authorize, the auto bailout in direct defiance of a congressional vote, and so on and so on.

There was no time to fight these measures. Most of them were announced as done deals, others as measures to be taken by the Treasury or the Fed without any request for congressional authorization. With the incumbent president in charge, both presidential candidates going along, and most of Congress afraid to challenge the dire warnings of catastrophe, it was impossible to create any real political debate. Defenders of capitalism were reeling.

And there were two other problems. Too many small-government advocates always felt some ambivalence about ripping into the Bush administration. Republicans, they thought, really do believe in smaller government and free markets,

no matter how many trillions in new spending they run up or how many Americans they incarcerate without access to a lawyer. That misperception limited libertarians' ability to organize a broader freedom movement to oppose the Bush administration. And during the height of the financial crisis, some business people and even some free-market economists felt uncertain about opposing the emergency measures being taken by Paulson and Fed chairman Ben Bernanke. "If Bernanke has seen all the data and really feels this is necessary," one economist told me, "I'm inclined to believe him."

Things are different now. Smaller-government folks feel no compunction about vigorously taking on the Obama-Pelosi-Reid government. And instead of a financial "rescue package," which one conservative called an attempt to "save the capital markets on which the process of creative destruction depends," we moved on to debating an old-fashioned, Keynesian, throw-money-at-the-problem spending bill described as "economic stimulus." Most free-market econ-

## Word Watch

by Stephen Cox

Readers of this column have always been generous. They've overlooked its frequent failings, they've hailed its infrequent shows of strength, and they've cheerfully participated in its expeditions through the dismal swamps of the modern American language. If you want to know why this column is still running, *blame the readers.*

Many readers have shown an even deeper commitment. They've acted as the column's spies behind enemy lines. Whenever a windbag stands before the camera, spouting political mumbo-jumbo, his audience is sure to include a Word Watch spy. Whenever a daily newspaper hits the streets, a gloved hand reaches out to snatch a copy and carry it back to a lair of Word Watch sympathizers, prepared to ransack the thing for evidence of treason to the language. (Their search is never long.) And woe betide the congressman, CEO, or "educator" who opens his mouth in private, presuming that he is safe. If there are three people gathered in the room, one of them will be a Word Watch spy, and in minutes the exalted person's disgusting gaffe will be transmitted to Word Watch HQ.

Lately, the efforts of these spies have been greeted with particular success. Here are some samples of their work.

I want to begin by crediting Carolina Barnes for communicating to Word Watch the deepest secret of the Bush regime. She found the evidence in a sentence stashed in a place that almost nobody visits — the news columns of the London Sunday Times: "President George W. Bush has enlisted British special forces in a final attempt to capture Osama Bin Laden before he leaves the White House." Carolina immediately identified the significance of this remark. "Bin Laden," she reported to Word Watch, "has been hiding in the White House all this time! And they need British special forces to arrest him."

Some Word Watch agents (Ms. Barnes is a distinguished example) don't mind being outed. They consider their work a patriotic duty, and they are willing to let people know they've done it. Others prefer to remain anonymous. From a deep source comes word of Senator Dick Durbin's comments about qualifications

for public office, as understood in the inner circles of our nation's capital. On February 3, the senior senator from Illinois commented on the withdrawal of his former Senate colleague, Tom Daschle, from nomination as secretary of Health and Human Services. "It really sets us back a step," Durbin said. "Because he was such a talent. I mean he understood Congress, serving in the House and Senate; he certainly had the confidence of the president." This is it! The secret formula for *talent* is known at last! Talent = serving in Congress + being liked by the president. It won't cure cancer or send a rocket to the moon, but it explains a lot about how things work in Washington.

From the recesses of the national bureaucracy come other indications of strange goings on. At this moment I am looking at a transcript of a Peace Corps email about the safety of American volunteers in Madagascar. "Over 811 Peace Corps Volunteers," it reveals, "have served in Madagascar since the program was established in 1993." Now consider the implications. The number is precise: 811. If 812 or 813 volunteers had served in Madagascar, the message would have specified that number. So how could there have been "over 811" volunteers? Clearly, the Peace Corps traffics in fractional volunteers! I am assured by the Word Watch Department of Intelligence Analysis that this conclusion "is not wholly out of the realm of probability."

Still more disturbing, however, are intelligence reports about the mental condition of people now suffering behind the lines in the War of Economic Stimulus. Sadness, frustration, and bewilderment prevail. Morale has sunk to historic lows. I quote the report of Carl Isackson, a Word Watch spy whose front it is to operate a construction business in Northern California — a region on the point of succumbing to economic and linguistic distress. Among other evidence, Mr. Isackson instances his own inability to adapt to the Obamistic phrase "shovel-ready": "I'd like to do something constructive around the house this weekend, but I don't believe I have anything shovel-ready. Oh wait, the sandbox. But that's an ongoing project. No stimulus there. I've been in this biz for 30 years and I don't believe I've ever

omists felt no ambivalence about opposing that bill. Robert Barro of Harvard called it "probably the worst bill that has been put forward since the 1930s."

The reaction to the so-called stimulus bill may have been the beginning of the renaissance of the free-market movement. Freed from the burden of feeling some connection to a big-government Republican president, Republicans voted overwhelmingly against the bill in both houses of Congress. Libertarians played leading roles in galvanizing the opposition. The Cato Institute ran full-page ads in almost every major newspaper in the country, with the names of more than 200 economists who "do not believe that more government spending is a way to improve economic performance." The ad was talked about on television, was waved by Republican senators at a press conference, and seemed to energize free-marketers who felt their voice hadn't been heard in national debates over the past few months. Gov. Mark Sanford of South Carolina was all over the media, warning that the spending

bill would "mortgage our children's future," Jerry Brito of the Mercatus Center created StimulusWatch.org, and Americans for Prosperity invited people to sign a petition at NoStimulus.com.

So the bad news is that the federal government has now committed at least \$7.8 trillion in loans, investments, and guarantees since the beginning of last year. But the good news is that the free-market movement is back in gear. The movement is in much better shape than it was in the FDR era. No one in today's government is actually calling for abolishing private business, as some of FDR's pals did; but we may be starting over in building a broad movement against ever-bigger government.

— David Boaz

**Null set** — Can I be the only one to notice that none of the economic bailout packages from Washington have beneficially affected anyone I know? That's none. Count 'em, if you can.

— Richard Kostelanetz

heard the term 'shovel-ready' before." Reports from Special Agent Isackson project the vision of a society in which the old words, the old customs, and the old morale are rapidly perishing, all victims of Obamization.

Disquieting reports have also been filed on the state of the American media. Analysis suggests that the few literate people who were responsible for the prestige of the modern-liberal propaganda machine have all emigrated, defected, or died. What's the proof? Consider this — a headline from Yahoo News (February 3), delivered to Word Watch by an anonymous source: "Analysis: Economic stimulus package will increase federal debt." *Really! And will the sun rise tomorrow?* Obviously, it's only fanatics and hopelessly naive, untrained conscripts who are trying to fill the gaps in Obama's lines.

There's plenty of confirming evidence. Take, for example, this AP report on the stimulus package (February 6, emphasis added): "Officials put the cost of the bill at \$827 billion, including Obama's signature *tax cut* of up to \$1,000 for working couples, even if they earn too little to pay income *taxes*." A certain level of math skills is necessary to operate a civilization. Nothing is more ominous than the loss of those basic skills. But here is information, obtained from the Obama camp, indicating that in those precincts it is generally assumed that when you start with zero, and subtract from it, you end up with \$1,000. And what does "signature" mean? It means that Obama is actually proud of the whole thing.

Some of Obama's cadres sense that something is wrong, but they are encouraged to trust in the regime to reform itself. On February 7, the AP issued the following communiqué: "Analysis: Obama may learn from slips on stimulus." In other words, we now have a president who may, conceivably, learn from the mistakes he committed when he stole and spent nearly *one trillion dollars*.

Evidence of cultural decay doesn't come strictly from the self-important media. The whole population appears to be reaching an unprecedented stage of demoralization. Here's a report from Word Watch Agent Deron Gormish, commenting on a recent adventure in intelligence gathering:

I watched television for about two hours yesterday. I know I probably shouldn't have. In that time I heard the phrase 'if you will' eight times on different programs. Yes, I counted them. The speakers were

using it in the same way in which a teenage girl would a giggle after saying something slightly amusing but out of place for the subject.

Word Watch technicians, monitoring broadcasts from Greater Obamaland, have confirmed the report of Agent Gormish. "If you will" has become almost as frequent as the incorrect usage of "begs the question" (and that's saying something). How shall we explain the phenomenon? Perhaps in this way. In the last stages of a war, the losers become cynical. They laugh; they joke; they *giggle*. Morale is gone. That seems to be the situation now. The majority of the American people waged war on reality. They spent without saving. They followed leaders and advisors without noticing what crooks and fools they were. Now, instead of making their peace with reality, they put it in quotes: "if you will."

In these circumstances, any kind of nonsense can be spoken. A correspondent from Illinois caught Senator Burris (you know, the one that Governor Blagojevich appointed) uttering these astounding words: "I've always conducted myself with honor and integrity. At no time did I ever make any inconsistent statement." I wish I could say that, but if I did, nobody would believe me. Nobody would believe you, either. And nobody believes Senator Burris. But what difference does it make? He's still a senator, if you will. And Joseph Biden is still the vice president, even after saying that the administration wants to use the stimulus program to "drop kick" the economy. Sure and it's a manly thing for the big guy to say so, but I'm not certain that *kicking* the economy will do it much good.

I realize that by shrinking from contact with the vice president's boot, this column runs the risk of being considered *out of touch* — a condition that, according to Agent Bruce Ramsey, is becoming a major offence. Ramsey reports that he's "getting very tired of that epithet 'out of touch.' So often it's just a hard word that seems to mean, 'You don't agree with us.'" Indeed, according to analyses of recent data, it always means that.

So, despite the loss of morale, loss of literacy, and loss of brains that currently afflicts the Other Side, it's apparent that Word Watch and its sympathizers, overt and covert, are in for a long, hard struggle. But know this: we shall fight in the principles, we shall fight in the metaphors, we shall fight in the subordinate clauses; we shall never surrender — not as long as Word Watch continues to have so many intelligent and faithful readers.

**The money pit** — I have often reflected on runaway unfunded government pension and healthcare liabilities, such as Social Security, Medicare, the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation, and the various state and municipal employee health and retirement systems. But I must commend Henry Olsen and Jon Flugstad (of the American Enterprise Institute) for bringing to light yet another rapidly metastasizing entitlement problem ("The Forgotten Entitlements," in the February 2009 issue of *Policy Review*).

Olsen and Flugstad note that the public (to the extent it even notices) understands that Social Security and Medicare are exploding. By 2082, these programs alone will take 18% of GDP, roughly the cost of the entire present federal budget! But unnoticed are two disability programs that are highly problematic: Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Medicaid Long Term Care (LTC).

Already, SSDI and LTC together account for about 6% of the federal budget. If they were one program, they would already be fourth in terms of federal spending, behind Social Security pension outlays, Medicare, and defense spending. And they are growing like a rash.

SSDI supports individuals who are below the Social Security age but are disabled. Now, there's the rub: what does "disabled" mean, exactly? You think immediately of quadriplegics, but far and away most SSDI beneficiaries are disabled for such conditions as mental problems and chronic back pain. As the government has increasingly subsidized disability, disability cases have swelled. Over the decade from 1996 to 2006 alone, 2.5 million more people became SSDI beneficiaries. Currently over 8.9 million are on SSDI.

Medicaid LTC is also growing rapidly. It is a program that helps the elderly pay for nursing-home and other institutional care. In theory, the program is limited to the "poor." In fact, it is fairly easy for middle-class families to transfer assets ("spend down") so as to qualify for assistance. The result is the predictable entitlement expansion. From 1996 to 2006, total Medicaid LTC spending grew by 100%, to about \$111 billion.

With the coming "Boomer Bust," the total number of elderly will grow from 34.8 million in 2000 to 77.2 million in 2040. You can expect programs to grow even more dangerously unless they are reformed. Olsen and Flugstad suggest some commonsense reforms. But common sense is in short supply these days, so I expect that the less well-known programs will just continue to get worse, along with all the other, more familiar entitlement programs.

— Gary Jason

**Night of the banking dead** — For all the rhetorical horrors visited upon us by our mass-mediated society — many of them hunted down and speared by Stephen Cox in his "Word Watch" — occasionally there will burst forth an image so apt that you could swear someone had actually thought about it before propelling it out of his mouth. Such, by my estimation, is "zombie bank." The term has come into vogue to describe those financial institutions that are bankrupt, yet thanks to the government's largesse continue to operate: they are dead, and still they walk.

Of course, the metaphor runs deeper than this quite limited usage. For, like old-style voodoo zombies, these banks have a master whose will they are bound to — just check out

the proposed limits on executive salaries, etc., being pushed by the Commerce Department. And, like new-style John Romero nihilist zombies, these banks consume everything they come across — that's how they got into this mess, snapping up first "toxic" loans and now massive gobs of bailout money. And the more we allow them to consume, the more virulent will be the infection — which brings me to my favorite thing about "zombie bank." The term suggests a simple strategy for dealing with the problem: shoot them in the head. For the love of God, before it is too late, shoot them in the head.

— Andrew Ferguson

**Inadvertent libertarians** — So, Timothy Geithner and Tom Daschle both cheat on their taxes. Each makes a ritual mea culpa and one takes his place in an administration eager to spend a lot of other people's money. Some people are outraged at all of this. They cry "elitism" and "hypocrisy!"

I feel no outrage — a slight sense of vindication, perhaps. For more than two decades, statists have been using the U.S. tax code as means of redistributing wealth. The result is a corrupt system that no one, not even the statists themselves, trusts. I suspect there will be more controversies about government appointees with tax problems. And, in the long run, the public will be more open to the idea of a flat (or at least flatter) tax.

Nice work, guys.

— Jim Walsh

**In the stocks** — President Obama's facade of competence began cracking on the day he started assembling his administration. A huge chunk of the upper story fell into the street when, on March 3, he started talking about movements in the stock market.

The market had been falling farther and farther since he took office, with many of its motions linked directly to the confusing and irresponsible acts of his administration. On March 2 it reached levels not seen for 12 years. Obama's response was to slight the importance of the market. "You know, it bobs up and down every day," he said, as if no one had ever noticed its mobility before, or as if no one had noticed that, right now, it was pretty consistently bobbing *down*. The sage continued: "And, you know, the stock market is sort of like a tracking poll in politics." He indicated that he therefore wasn't paying much attention to it.

Obama's remarks were of special interest, coming as they did from a man who had spent the past several years of his life governing his career by political polls, and making his oratory bob up and down in response to them. Further: the society in which this man functions is one in which the political leadership has imperial power over the economy. His every political deed has been aimed at extending that power. At this point, however, he affects to scorn the idea that the daily activity of the stock market has anything significant to do with the actions of the president.

Either Obama doesn't know that the stock market is the greatest and most serious poll on the president's performance, or he knows this thing that all others know but brazenly seeks to deny it. In either case, his incompetence is manifest.

— Stephen Cox

**If I had a hammer** — I recently flew from Washington, DC to Phoenix, AZ, and had the pleasure of sitting for several hours next to a gentleman in his late 20s who turned out to

be a good conversationalist. Although not in uniform at the time, he was a member of the U.S. military, had been for nine years, and had done a term in Iraq in 2003, part of the original invasion force. We spoke on many related topics — he was not surprised by Abu Ghraib, for example — but the thing he said that struck me most was when I asked whether the people he knew in the military were resentful toward Bush as commander in chief for putting them in harm's way — invading a country halfway around the world, on what turned out to be grossly inaccurate if not false and fabricated claims of "Weapons of Mass Destruction." He answered as follows:

The military is like a large finely tuned instrument, and those in it joined to play that instrument. The military buys the best equipment — best ships, planes, bombs, and after a while if you never get to use them as they were meant to be used — fighting wars — you get very antsy. Frankly, Bush could have told us Iraq was hoarding purple dragons and it was vital to invade and capture them, and we would have been happy to go in.

I can understand the sentiment. I've been frustrated in my medical career, knowing there is great imaging equipment (say, a 128-multislice CT or a 3 Tesla MRI) available but not being able to use it in my practice. And the practice of a standing military is war. It's like the old saying about a carpenter with only a hammer: any nations that our politicians designate as evil (no matter how backward and economically feeble), any political figure from abroad that our leaders choose to call the next Hitler, no matter how limited his reach — and they all begin to look like nails, with our guys just itching to hammer them.

Many Americans today either don't know or can't imagine why the Founding Fathers opposed standing armies. Today we know that our powerful military (the U.S. military budget is about half the entire world military budget, more than the next 46 largest military budgets combined) is all that prevents us from hostile takeover by countries whose average per capita income is a small fraction of that of the United States. A fledgling American nation in the late 18th century may not have had to worry about weapons of mass destruction (though, as it turned out, neither did we), and it seems not to have realized how dangerous Islam was, but it knew about hammers and nails, and human proclivities, and factions, and power. People in that America knew about things we have forgotten, or never learned, or are too easily frightened to recall.

— Ross Levatter

**Trading spaces** — It will be interesting to see how international trade fares in the current global downturn. In a recession, the almost universal temptation for governments of every stripe is to turn toward protectionism. President Obama insisted that the "Buy American" provision regarding steel for infrastructure projects be amended to make it clear that it would be implemented only to the extent that it didn't violate existing trade treaties. And he finessed the NAFTA issue during his visit to Canada, saying little except that any reassessment of NAFTA would have to wait a while. And Obama appointees Larry Summers, Tim Geithner, and Christina Somers come from the relatively pro-trade wing of the Democratic Party, such as it is, although none of his top aides is anything close to being a trade specialist.

On the other hand, even the amended provision brought

protests from Canada and Europe (although the supposedly free-trade European Union is rife with beggar-thy-neighbor trade moves), and it seems apparent that the rest of the world is ready to pounce, should the administration veer sharply from a pro-trade position. There's a huge hole in the WTO agreement as well, in that the agreement to allow competition for government projects is a side agreement to the main WTO treaty to which China and India are not signatories. If they are frozen out of bidding on U.S. infrastructure projects, they could decide to impose retaliatory barriers and buy the heavy equipment for their own extensive infrastructure plans from Europe rather than the United States, which is why Caterpillar and other heavy-equipment makers were so alarmed. And the AFL-CIO will be looking for payback in the form of such restrictions as labor and environmental mandates on developing countries — in exchange for all it did to help Obama get elected.

— Alan Bock

**Return of the goons** — In the last election, Big Labor spent a record amount of time and money to capture the federal government. It spent \$450 million in donations to candidates at all levels and gave roughly that much in donated manpower to elect candidates — virtually all Democrat — to do its bidding. And it is wasting no time attempting to achieve its ambitious agenda.

At the state level, Big Labor directed its hostility at efforts to pass "paycheck protection laws," which seek to implement the right given to workers by the Supreme Court (in the *Beck* ruling) that their dues not be taken from them and used for political advocacy unless the workers agree to that in writing. Sixteen states have such laws, much to the fury of unions, and the unions want those laws repealed. In 2008, in Colorado alone, Big Labor spent \$13 million — ironically, forced contributions by workers — to defeat a paycheck protection ballot measure. No doubt it will push for a federal law against state payroll protection measures.

Also in Big Labor's crosshairs is last year's Supreme Court ruling (*Chamber of Commerce v. Brown*) that struck down California's law that prohibited private companies who received state contracts of over \$10,000 from arguing against unionization — in effect, eliminating those companies' right to free speech. The court held that only the federal government has the power to do that. So count on a push in Congress to force such laws upon the states.

But the real centerpiece of the Big Labor agenda is elimination of the right to secret balloting in votes to unionize workplaces, a right currently protected by federal law.

Big Labor has already set up a propaganda machine called "American Rights at Work," which has already spent \$3 million on an ad blitz called "Hope and Change," using President Obama's trademark slogans. Playing the class-warfare card, the ads feature workers saying that they aren't CEOs, and they deserve more money and free health care. These ads are clearly aimed at bolstering Obama's push for a national health service.

The propaganda machine is ready to start the campaign for the Orwellian-named "Employee Free Choice Act," which will eliminate secret ballots and substitute the infamous card-check system. Under card-check, employees are confronted by union organizers and publicly asked to sign a card authorizing

the unionization of their worksite. If the majority of workers sign the cards, the workforce is automatically unionized.

Of course, the reason that unions are desperate for this legislation is that only 12.4% of workers are now in unions, and the unions want to make that figure much closer to 100%. By forcing workers to vote publicly, they know that they can easily intimidate them. If you don't sign, you had better watch your back. And if we win, we will control the workplace, and we will retaliate against you seven ways from Sunday.

Walking the point for this legislation are Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Rep. George Miller (D-CA). They will be joined by Hilda Solis, Obama's choice for labor secretary, who survived her husband's tax scandals and won confirmation. Solis was treasurer and a member of the board of American Rights at Work, and was a cosponsor of the card-check bill when she was in Congress.

On February 4, hundreds of union activists demonstrated on Capitol Hill for the card-check bill, presenting to Congress a million signatures of supporters. Harkin and Miller rallied the crowd. As for Obama, that America's first African-American president should be instrumental in taking away the voting rights of millions of hard-working citizens is as despicable as it is ironic.

A couple of organizations have stepped up to fight the union power-grab. One is the Workforce Fairness Institute, which has mounted a website to collect petitions against the card-check bill to present to Congress. The other is Save Our Secret Ballot, which is organizing at the state level to write guarantees for secret ballots into state constitutions.

One can only hope that they succeed, but given the unions' total control of this government, it will be an uphill fight.

— Gary Jason

**Gutenberg's decline** — The old-fashioned print media — books, magazines, newspapers: all passe. The pundits, from their TV pedestals, have announced the death of reading. It's the internet, they say. Or the movies, the TV, maybe.

But a more comprehensive explanation would include the idea that decades ago only the written word and the reality of life itself portrayed our time on earth and all its bittersweet components. Death, love, envy, cupidity, lust, success could only be experienced in the pages of a book, in your imagination, or in reality.

A few decades back, if you wanted to see beloved Uncle Jack pass away and share the emotional throbs of his loved ones, you could read about it. Or suffer it. Want to see Galahad parry and thrust with evil? Read a book. Want to see goodness shine and change a crummy world? Read a book. Want to see Guinevere in the arms of Lancelot? Read a book. But who needs books now? I can see it, hear it, with no exertion of mental image-making. And the entire world is my stage.

Formerly, there was nowhere, except in books, where we received the vicarious depiction of life's joys, sorrows, and in-betweens. And only rare lives played out on a huge stage could boast such drama in reality. How many readers in 1882 had crossed swords with a foe, found a buried treasure, dodged the flaming breath of a dragon? Not to mention lying beside Princess Matilda and caressing her snow-white limbs.

Ah, the movies were the first trespassers on reality. They

wrecked the spell of those rectangles of bound pages. Then TV. Every emotion, every cycle of life, every incidental flick of life's pen was drawn 10,000 times in a single TV series.

Well, today these and 10,000 other experiences are on TCM, NBC, and ABC all day long. You're bored silly with deadly contests, verbal battles, life-changing decisions, the making of love, birth, and death — all the flickering faces of life. If you want to know the height of the Andes at the Uspallata Pass, ignore your ten-pound tome and punch up Google. Books no longer are the monopolists of life and knowledge. The internet — and TV and electronic mines of knowledge yet to be imagined — deliver the coup de grace to books.

However, now that I have said all this, allow this crusty curmudgeon to admit that the Encyclopedia Britannica — if I walk into the den, find the volume, extract it from the bookshelf, walk it to the table, and look up "Andes" — does a better job than Wikipedia. But come to think of it, Britannica's on the web, too. Technology in general has emptied our bookshelves.

— Ted Roberts

**Ratings wars** — The latest ratings of presidential greatness (WCBSTV.com, Feb. 16, 2009) tells us more about the priorities of historians than they do about the presidents. In a survey organized by C-SPAN, the following were rated as the greatest presidents: Lincoln, Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, and Harry Truman.

There is merit to the high rating for Washington. As to the others, they include a president who did nothing to stop lynching, needlessly prolonged the Great Depression, sent a shipful of Jewish refugees back to their doom in Germany. They include another president who fried thousands of Japanese babies (thus violating all the dominant theories of just war). They include a president who shredded the ancient constitutional right of habeas corpus. Finally, they include a president who openly defended war and imperialism. Between them, they brought the United States into three major wars that resulted in over a million American deaths.

Rated by the historians in the "worst" category is, you guessed it, Warren G. Harding: a president who successfully promoted economic prosperity, cut taxes, balanced the budget, reduced the national debt, released all of his predecessor's political prisoners, supported antilynching legislation, and instituted the most substantial naval arms reduction agreement in world history. Go figure.

— David Beito

**Conversion experience** — In a grand concession to the stupid, Congress bumped the deadline for the transition from analog to digital TV from February 17 to June 12. I was really disappointed, because I wanted those annoying commercials off the air. I couldn't believe that there was one single American left that didn't know he needed a converter box if he watched TV over an antenna. (I can hardly believe there is one American left who still gets his TV signal from an antenna.)

This means we're going to have to sit through another four months of the deadline commercials. Here's an idea. How about you just make the switch, and people who see their television sets go blank will go to the store and ask someone what happened? Or they'll call their grandkids. (I can't tell you how many times I've had to reset my mother's set, because she tried to watch a DVD and now the TV doesn't work

anymore.) Leave the rest of us alone!

Meanwhile, Congress allocated another 650 million dollars for more \$40 converter box coupons. I'm not sure what this will do, other than raising the cost of converter boxes 40 bucks, since the units (which cost about a buck to make in China) are now going to be inflated 40 bucks beyond their worth (see: Econ 101). I wish the FCC was as concerned about the lack of economic knowledge in this country as they are about the stupid digital changeover. Because essentially we're shipping 2 billion tax dollars off to China, so they can buy \$2 million of T-bills.

But there is something wrong with the math here: we have now spent over \$1.4 billion on those coupons. That means there should be 35 million converter boxes out there. That means there should be boxes in one out of three households already. Yet in the "stimulus" bill, there is enough money for another 17 million boxes. That means close to half of American households will soon have converter boxes — and I don't know anyone with an antenna and an analog set. It seems that the TV conversion program has morphed into another one of those federal programs, like the Rural Electrification Act, that will live a century past its stated goal. I wonder what kind of holographic display we'll be watching when the converter box program is finally closed down?

— Tim Slagle

**Nuclear future** — In a prior Reflection ("Nuketoberfest," October 2008) I noted that Germany, long a stronghold for Green thinking, has begun to rethink nuclear power. To placate the Green Party, Chancellor Merkel had agreed to

shut down all Germany's nukes by 2021. But the soaring price of energy, and the growing Soviet — oops! Russian — use of natural gas and oil as a geopolitical weapon to reclaim a former empire has made many in Merkel's government rethink that commitment.

A recent piece in The Wall Street Journal (Feb. 6) shows that the reevaluation is spreading. Sweden has announced that it is planning to rescind the ban on new nuclear power plants that it enacted in 1980, right after the Three Mile Island accident. At that time it had ten plants, which still supply nearly half the country's electric power. According to a bill that the government will shortly introduce in parliament, the plan to close nuclear plants will be replaced by a plan to keep the ones Sweden has and build new ones.

One motive, of course, is continuing fears of global warming. Nuclear plants emit almost no greenhouse gases. And the recent do-wop between Russia and Ukraine, which interrupted supplies of natural gas throughout Eastern Europe during a frigid winter, concentrated European minds wonderfully.

Indeed, that interruption prompted Slovakia to announce that it would reopen an old Soviet-design reactor that it had closed when it joined the EU. It backed off from the decision when Russian gas started flowing again, but it is just a matter of time before Slovakia builds nuclear plants.

Other European countries are warming to nuclear power again. Bulgaria is seeking to reopen two obsolete nukes. Italy, which banned nuclear power in 1987 after Chernobyl, has moved to end the ban. The U.K. gave the green light last year for a new generation of nukes to replace its aging plants. And

#### News You May Have Missed

## Feds Call It Quits

**WASHINGTON** — The federal government went out of business Tuesday, after former President Obama revealed that it was losing money hand over fist, with costs far outstripping profits. All federal employees, including Obama and Vice President Biden, were told to clean out their desks and were sent home at noon Tuesday, except for the nine justices of the Supreme Court, since nobody was sure who was authorized to present them with pink slips. The problem was solved when the court itself, in a controversial 5–4 decision, voted to knock off work early and head for a nearby strip club. Then, in a unanimous decision early Wednesday morning, the justices declared themselves unconstitutional, which meant that they didn't have to get out of bed.

Many leftover government programs were marked 50–75% off, but there were few takers despite the huge "Going Out of Business Sale" banners in windows along the Mall. "I mean, who wants a used Earmark, or an unwieldy Teen Pregnancy Prevention program that doesn't even work when you plug it in?" said shopper Page Turner as she ignored the crates of pungent

pork and the clutter of clunky, obsolete initiatives and headed home empty-handed, passing newly dismissed government employees huddled against walls with signs saying "Will Pretend to Work for Food."

Congress, which had dug itself into a deep hole with unaffordable new spending bills, tried to recoup some of its losses by designating the hole Budget Deficit National Park. Taxpayers and other sightseers were encouraged to make a wish and throw a few coins, or their entire life savings, into the scenic, apparently bottomless abyss, but it had to be closed after several visitors threw themselves in instead. They had apparently looked at their 401(k) plans.

An initial attempt to outsource all federal jobs to Bangalore broke down when no Indian workers could be found to take over such positions as Associate Assistant to the Temporary Subassistant to the Accounts Supervisor of the Case Manager of the Headache Division of the Department of Health and Human Services, or the Certified Public Clown at the Office of Management and Budget, even for wages as high as

\$2.25 an hour. An attractive 19-year-old woman with limited English named Macharandee Rupeesari was believed to be in Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin, after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was let go.

Economist Flagrante Delicto of the now-disbanded Council of Economic Improvisors believes that the government went broke because printing money costs too much. Ex-Secretary of the Ex-Treasury Tim Geithner has admitted that the American government was losing money on every dollar it printed (much like Detroit companies on their cars). The cost of paper and ink, plus labor (including that of the artist who draws George Washington on each and every bill), plus distribution has meant that the average one-dollar bill costs the government approximately \$286,357.16 to manufacture. But Geithner argued that it was necessary to keep printing currency so that there would be enough on hand to meet the demands of the staff at the U.S. Mint, who were refusing to make more money unless they made more money. — Eric Kenning

Poland, rightly fearing a resurgent Russia, has announced that it will build its first nuclear plant.

Of course, we in America are now ruled by President Obama, who has made it clear that he wants wind power, not nuclear. He is Jimmy Carter *redivivus*. — Gary Jason

**Court-ordered jubilee** — The statists on Capitol Hill are hiding much mischief within the president's "stimulus package" and behind more general calls for the federal government to "do something" about the current recession.

House Judiciary Chairman John Conyers' mortgage modification bill is one such bit of mischief, an especially nasty piece of work. To simplify it some, it allows bankruptcy judges to modify home mortgages, adjusting both the interest rate and principal amount of a loan. Hello, moral hazard!

Responsible homeowners around the nation are complaining, rightly, that these adjustments will be a windfall for foolish borrowers and a big loss for lenders, a loss that will be transferred to all taxpayers by the various bailout programs.

Approximately 800,000 households in the United States filed for bankruptcy in 2007. The number climbed to just under one million in 2008. At these levels, according to one bankruptcy judge, the system was "swamped." Under Conyers' plan, things would get much swamplier. About 5 million U.S. homeowners have fallen behind in their mortgage payments; and more than 12 million are "underwater" on their homes. If mortgage modification includes reducing the principal amounts of loans, these millions will have a strong incentive to file for bankruptcy. And if half of the 12 million have negative equity of \$50,000 in their properties, Rep. Conyers will have added \$300 billion to the current crisis. Those additional losses will surely scare lenders away from the mortgage markets and drive housing prices down even more.

Adjusting the interest rates on pricey home loans is bad. Adjusting the principle amounts on those loans is disastrous. If either Congress or the president has any sense, at least that part will be cut out of the Conyers bill.

Here's the important thing to remember when you hear that someone is underwater on his home mortgage: that only matters if he intends to sell or refinance the house right now. If he stays put, the current market value of the house doesn't matter. All he needs to do is keep making his mortgage payments and wait for a better market to sell or refi.

But Conyers' bill gives that homeowner an incentive to use bankruptcy as a government-subsidized refi. He may owe more on his house than it's worth because he refinanced or took out a home-equity line (or did both . . . multiple times) to buy consumer goods — cars, electronics, vacations, clothes — that he couldn't otherwise afford. If he files for bankruptcy, he can ask a judge to wipe out the debt he took on to buy those things. Then, if he makes payments for five years and the housing market recovers, he can sell the property and keep any profit. Good for him. Bad for the rest of us. — Jim Walsh

**Phonocracy** — According to a February Rasmussen Report: "44% of voters . . . think a group of people selected at random from the phone book would do a better job addressing the nation's problems than the current Congress, but 37% disagree. Twenty percent are undecided."

I'm not surprised by the large plurality of people who think that random appointments would be better than the

current system. On this point, the survey is likely correct.

I am shocked, however, by the 20% who are undecided. One in five people are actually undecided about whether random choices from the phone book are better than holding elections to fill seats in Congress? What does it even mean to be undecided on a question like this?

"Hmmm . . . random people chosen from the phone book versus our actual elected officials; gee, that's a tough one. I guess it might depend on the phone book. Are we talking, like, the Manhattan and Boston phone books, or randomly sampling all phone books throughout the nation? How is the sample made? Are we talking dartboards, or is there a pseudo-random number generator? What about people who have unlisted numbers or have only cellphones? I think it's wrong not to include them. Sex offenders and felons are listed in phone books . . . oh, wait, we already have some of them in Congress, so I guess that's not a problem. You know, there are a lot of undefined variables here . . . I guess I'd have to say I'm undecided."

— Ross Levatter

**As ye reap . . .** — You've heard, in various forms, the idea that "civilization is measured by the way it treats the poor." But this also needs to be said: civilization is measured by the way the poor treat it.

An Associated Press report, February 26: "Three and a half years after Hurricane Katrina, the National Guard is pulling the last of its troops out of New Orleans this weekend, leaving behind a city still desperate and dangerous." Reason for the Guard's withdrawal is said to be a shortfall in Louisiana's budget.

One resident of New Orleans said, "This is still a spooky place after dark." Another said, "People would put the things to rebuild in their houses and thieves would come along and take them right out again." In 2007, New Orleans was "the murder capital of America." The rate was almost as high in 2008.

Three and a half years.

— Stephen Cox

**Afghan again** — If there is anything encouraging about the fact that the Obama administration has committed 17,000 more troops to the desultory war in Afghanistan, it is that various administration spokesmen have said that the purpose of the additional troops at this point is to stabilize things in Afghanistan (where the various insurgents are getting more active as the snows melt), while the administration does a thorough reassessment of the situation to come up with a new strategy.

If it really is a thorough reassessment, things might not be so bad. I talked recently with George Friedman, CEO of Stratfor.com, a thoroughly "realist" outfit, about a piece he did suggesting a nonmilitary approach to Afghanistan. He pointed out that the real strategic interest of the United States in Afghanistan is to be sure that al Qaeda is not using the country as a base from which to plan or execute further attacks on the United States or Europe. Whether the country is ruled by Hamid Karzai, the Taliban, or somebody else is of not strategic interest to us, so long as al Qaeda is denied a base of operations there.

That goal has actually been accomplished as of now, given that al Qaeda, to the best of our knowledge, is holed up in the Pakistani mountains along the border with Afghanistan, and

its operational ability is considerably less than it was before 9/11. So the thing to do is to pull the U.S. and NATO military forces out and inform whoever rules – nominally, given that Afghanistan has seldom had an effective central government and doesn't seem to want one – that if we detect any al Qaeda operations in Afghanistan, we will take them out, perhaps after giving the government five minutes' notice or so. Then focus on al Qaeda in Pakistan, with intelligence activities and maybe a Special Forces operation from time to time as appropriate.

The thing to remember is that from an Afghan perspective, the Taliban is indigenous and will be around for the duration. Al Qaeda consists largely of foreign fighters, foreign both to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan's shaky government is facing an indigenous insurgency as well, and since it has nukes the situation is worth paying attention to. While al Qaeda may be contributing to that problem for Pakistan, the core U.S. interest is containing it so that it has trouble operating internationally. That should be doable, and probably more doable without a significant U.S. military presence in the region than with one.

— Alan Bock

**Caste away** — Over the past decade, India has been making amazing economic gains, as it has begun to shed its quasi-socialist economic system. Its growth rate hit almost 9% per year over the last four years before the global recession. Also amazing is the fact that this world-historic economic transformation has typically been overlooked in the American press, which is generally focused on China. But I suspect that the future looks brighter for India than it does for China, for several reasons, reasons owing in great part to India's cultural legacy from Britain.

First, China has an increasingly aging population, because of its aggressive — nay, fascistic — population control program. Under this "one-child" program, parents face draconian measures (including forced abortion) if they try to have a second child. This has led, in particular, to many female fetuses being aborted. An unintended consequence of the one-child program is that a large number of Chinese men will in the future never find mates — bad for them, but perhaps good for the People's Liberation Army.

However, India has a youthful population, thanks primarily to its generally democratic political system, a legacy of British rule. India has a culture supportive of reproduction, and its democracy makes a Chinese-style authoritarian population-control program hard to enact or enforce.

The resulting demographic figures are astounding. One-third of India is under 15 years of age, and over the next five years, India will contribute one-fourth of all the world's new workers. By contrast, China's working-age population as a percentage of the general population will shrink from over 67% today to about 57% by mid-century.

Second, in India, English is spoken widely, again as a legacy of its colonial past. This puts India in a great position to take advantage of the transformation of the world's economy from industrial- to knowledge-based enterprise. Manufacturing jobs are being lost even in China. The future belongs to the brain, not the hands. But high-end service work is increasing rapidly in India.

Third, because India is a democracy, other countries are

more likely to welcome it as a trading partner. If we don't need to worry about a trade surplus being used to fuel a military machine that is aimed at our destruction, we can be more accepting of it.

Fourth, India has a legal system surprisingly similar to ours, because both our systems are grounded in the British legal system. As an article in The Wall Street Journal reports, this has led to a surprising new type of outsourcing. Indian lawyers are now busily doing work for Wall Street banks, now inundated in a flood of lawsuits filed by victims of the sub-prime mortgage meltdown.

The high cost of American legal talent and the increasing prevalence of Indian legal talent mean that it is increasingly cost-effective for companies to contract out routine legal work (document review, due diligence, research) to Indian firms. The cost savings is considerable: American lawyers typically charge \$200 per hour, compared to \$75–\$100 per hour charged by Indian lawyers. Indian legal firms such as Pangea3 and Computer Patent Annuities are growing rapidly, and the type of work they are taking on is increasing in sophistication.

An unintended but favorable consequence of India's rapid growth is that it is helping to eliminate the deeply ingrained caste system. One thing about the free-market system that infuriates its enemies but often escapes its defenders is its power to sweep away traditional hierarchies. The same creative destruction that sweeps away old industries sweeps away old elites. Because India's economy is expanding and wages are rising, members of the lowest castes are able to send their children to school, where along with useful facts they discover the revolutionary idea that they are as good as anyone else.

Moreover, new sectors of the economy are opening up, such as insurance, travel, and the burgeoning distribution and retail sectors, which are freer than the traditionally upper-caste dominated IT and medical sectors from the heavy hand of India's still statist government — another, but less advantageous, legacy of British rule.

The children of the Dalits (the "untouchables," the caste that was locked into the most menial and despised jobs) can now move up the economic ladder.

It is easy to see the downside of capitalism's creative destruction, especially if you are a member of the elites that are challenged or dispossessed by "lower" classes moving upwards. But rapid economic mobility serves as an effective instrument for battering down unjust social barriers — a feature that creates enemies for capitalism on both the Left and the Right.

India still faces formidable problems: massive poverty, an educational system plagued by inefficiency, endemic corruption, and so on. But we should keep in mind that no system is free from difficulties. The Chinese economy has boomed for well over a decade, despite the heavy hand of an authoritarian regime, and massive human rights abuses. Our own country is hardly an ideal Misesian-Hayekian paradise. Yet as India continues to liberalize its economic system, its resulting prosperity will help eliminate ethnic and caste frictions. There is cause for optimism.

— Gary Jason

**The new conformity** — Since an architect was the hero of an Ayn Rand novel, "The Fountainhead," that has

been forever in print, why don't I know any Randian architects? Or any architects whose politics are anything other than moderately liberal? Likewise any therapists, whether psycho- or physical?

I once swam at NYU with a post-doc untenured university professor whose politics were decidedly conservative. He was last heard teaching in the Turkish interior. (No joke.)

My simple answer is that these people depend on pleasing their bosses and customers and thus feel they must bite their tongues before saying anything that might offend too many of their benefactors. When I passed through my teenage years we spoke of the Age of Conformity, which I feel has come around again 50 years later, albeit with mostly different pieties. That explains why Rand remains relevant and, more specifically, why her books continue to sell so well.

— Richard Kostelanetz

**Verbally handicapped** — According to the Seattle Times: "The term 'mental retardation' would no longer be used in new state laws, under a bill that has passed the state House." From now on, people who fall under that category will have an "intellectual disability." As I mentioned on these pages in the past (Reflections, October 2008) it doesn't really matter what you call the mentally disabled, it will always become an insult, and eventually need to be replaced again.

As we work our way up the intellectual ladder, trying to find a label for the retarded that won't make them feel retarded, we will eventually run out of options. Some day we might find ourselves using the term "Rhodes Scholars" to address the mentally challenged.

On second thought, some of us already have. — Tim Slagle

**The many faces of herding** — The current recession is only one among many examples of herding — following the crowd, jumping on bandwagons, getting swept up in mass psychology.

Each of us gets only a tiny fraction of our knowledge from direct personal experience. Most of it necessarily comes from other people, with their enthusiasms and fears. Many people join in a speculative boom, as for tulip bulbs in 17th-century Holland, or dotcom stocks in the recent history of the United States, not because they themselves grasp underlying fundamentals but because they assume that the supposed professionals know what they are doing.

The collapse of a mania for profit on houses triggered the current recession. Arguably, that mania can be traced to irresponsible government promotion of housing credit in many ways and over many decades, and more recently to credit from excessively easy Federal Reserve policy. The bursting of the bubble impinged on a financial system already rendered fragile by two types of contagion.

The first, which we might call "structural," involves multiple tiers of securities and derivatives based on other securities based ultimately on mortgage and other debt, as well as the financial leverage so sought. But a second, closely related type is largely psychological: actual or rumored losses of some firms devalue others, which are holding their debt, throwing some into bankruptcy, intensifying a general panic, and driving investors into supposedly safe assets (such as U.S. government securities).

Even today the U.S. economy remains "fundamentally

strong" in the sense that productive capacity survives, along with willing workers and creative entrepreneurs. Millions of consumers would eagerly spend money if only they could be confident of jobs, while thousands of companies would hire or retain workers if only they could count on selling their products. Desires to trade work and products for one another remain strong, but coordination keeps these desires from meshing.

The financial structure is a large part of the difficulty, certainly, but so is an atmosphere of apprehension and fear, emphasized by a bearish stock market. Gloom pervades the media; for, in contrast with routine prosperity, bad news is, well, news. The president keeps threatening "catastrophe" unless he gets his way on legislation. (As H.L. Mencken used to explain, politicians thrive on promising salvation to a terrorized public.) Businesses and consumers alike hesitate to spend money, prudently from their individual points of view, yet intensifying each others' distress. Measures to "stimulate" spending seem plausible in the short run; yet paradoxically, a record of profligacy and debt by both the public and the government forms the long-run background of our woes.

Bringing pop psychology into diagnosing economic trouble may seem lowbrow and imprecise. It lacks the cachet of high-powered abstract theory and mathematical models. What does one do, though, if psychology really belongs in the story?

Furthermore, "behavioral economics" is now gaining adherents and academic respectability. That new field recognizes how decision makers depart from the hyperrationality postulated by standard theory, and depart in ways that may be explained by natural selection operating on the human race many millennia ago.

As I suggested at the start, herding and bandwagon effects are not confined to strictly economic affairs. Politicians and ignorant celebrities and even energy companies echo politically correct alarm over global warming to the point where the rest of us can hardly know what to believe as solid science. Many scientists accept grant money that they would hardly receive if they expressed doubt over the very phenomenon to be investigated. Auburn University recently announced that an entomologist who specializes in butterflies has received a grant to study the impact of global warming on butterflies.

Being politically correct, the university has an Office of Sustainability to reinforce pressures on people to change their behavior. Dormitories are pushed to compete on cutting consumption of water and electricity and who knows what else. Also following fashion, the university has an Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs.

The War on Drugs as waged so far is lost. I do, however, applaud warning teenagers, honestly and emphatically, about the dangers of drugs. Still, I am squeamish about an approach being taken here in Auburn. Retailers are urged (pressured?) to issue discount cards to teenagers who take a pledge to abstain from drugs and submit to random testing. Doesn't that carry intrusiveness and presumptuousness too far?

But one thing is certain: anyone who tries to explain contemporary events, and neglects the importance of herding and bandwagon effects, theorizes at his own peril.

— Leland Yeager

**Ink by the thimble** — Newspapers are dying like flies. The Rocky Mountain News folded, the Miami Herald and the San Francisco Chronicle are on the auction block, and the Tribune Company and the Philadelphia Inquirer went bankrupt. Here in Raleigh our News and Observer gets smaller and smaller — on March 1, it cut its comics from six pages to four.

We are beginning to hear recriminations, as if this were the fault of the newspapers, in the same way in which the collapse of the American automakers can be traced to the companies themselves. In Howard Kurtz's gloomy Washington Post article (March 1) lamenting the decline of the industry, Nicholas Lemann, dean of Columbia University's journalism school, says that the newspapers made a big mistake in offering their content free online. Jeff Jarvis, a former newspaperman, now a blogger, asks in the same story, "Why didn't we take more aggressive action and use the power of our megaphone to promote the product and change the organization?"

Okay, newspapers made mistakes, but this is a tsunami, not a suicide. The Big Three automakers self-destructed with their high costs, but newspapers are up against a massive new technology. Just as the automobile reduced carriages and horses to a niche market; the internet is transforming demand and supply.

We also hear the alarm that society is going to suffer because no one will report on the difficult, important stories. "In a world where all content is free, original newsgathering doesn't happen," Lemann told Kurtz.

This is arrogance. If there's a demand for those stories, they will be written. Some people are going to figure out new internet-based business models. If I may say so, nonprofit organizations such as the one I head may have a role. The Pope Center currently produces three new articles a week about higher education — serious, journalistic articles, not just blog postings.

The John Locke Foundation, a thinktank in North Carolina with which we are loosely affiliated, publishes a monthly newspaper, the Carolina Journal (print and online), which is known for its investigative reporting. This is the paper that revealed presidential candidate John Edwards' 28,000-square-foot new house, at a time when he was best known for empathizing with the poor.

And the Tennessee Center for Policy Research, another nonprofit, revealed that Al "Inconvenient Truth" Gore spent nearly \$30,000 for electricity and natural gas at his Tennessee home in 2006.

Believe me, I am sorry to see the newspapers go. I hope that the print version of the News and Observer hangs on and that it continues to be delivered to my door. And I'm sorry for the reporters who are going to have to do something else.

But journalism isn't dead. It may even get better.

— Jane S. Shaw

**Calling them out** — I recently had an unpleasant experience, arising from a column I penned for a local newspaper, a column that was somewhat critical of our new president. I had written that I felt he was hypocritical for calling for more taxation, while nominating a man to head the Department of Treasury who had (in my humble opinion) evaded taxes.

The result was a person calling my employer — the head of the department for which I am an adjunct professor — demanding my termination for spreading "nutcase, rightwing propaganda" directed at our Dear Leader. I was called in to explain my article — an unpleasant situation for an instructor who is unprotected by tenure. Since the McCarthyite didn't feel confident enough to contact me personally, I couldn't speak to him directly, so I thought I would put some thoughts into writing.

The idea that anyone objecting to any of President Obama's appointments, policies, or proposals is disloyal — even unpatriotic — has become widespread in our political culture. I don't recall that criticism of Bush was widely regarded as disloyal. Indeed, criticism of our former president was nearly universal in Washington. Yet today, those of us who have questioned Obama in any way are told, sternly, that we must "give him a chance." The mantra here is, "Don't you want him to succeed?"

Now, I confess a certain amusement at the thought that a man who was able to raise the better part of a billion bucks for his campaign, so as to outspend his opponent two-to-one in the general election, received slavish coverage by a fawning press, and won a complete victory (including complete control of Congress), needs much of a chance.

But I am piqued by the question about whether I want him to succeed. The problem here is really a logical one — namely, an equivocation involving the description of goals. When people put the question, "Don't you want Obama to succeed?" they are deliberately playing on an ambiguity. Specifically, when somebody does something, he often has both immediate and ultimate goals, which can be quite different. This makes the question of whether you want someone to succeed ambiguous: succeed at what, exactly?

Consider the grotesque legislation that Obama is currently trying to push through Congress. I take him to be a well-meaning man, so let's agree that his ultimate goal is to revive the economy. Do I want him to succeed in that goal? Of course. I, too, am a well-meaning person. But his immediate goal is the passage of enormous, poorly thought-out spending legislation, loaded with pork, which will require either massive tax increases or enormous deficits, leading inevitably to high inflation. That immediate goal, his method, is what I don't agree with, and it is that at which I hope he fails.

This idea — that you can share someone's ultimate goal and so hope that he reaches it, but oppose his method (because you think it will fail or worse) and so hope that he fails in that respect, is surely obvious. It should be obvious even to those on the Left who are, for example, bitterly denouncing Rush Limbaugh for saying he hopes Obama fails. They all know exactly what Limbaugh meant.

After all, those who attack Limbaugh (and attack any other critics of Obama too) were the same people who said, when Bush was asking Congress for authority to invade Iraq, that while they shared the goal of keeping America safe from terrorism, they opposed invading Iraq because they thought it was a counterproductive way to achieve that ultimate goal.

I'll take the thought a step further. Since all Americans share the basic goals of safety and prosperity for the nation, loyalty doesn't just permit, it demands, that if we see someone using a method to achieve those goals that we feel strongly

is exactly the wrong one to use, we should say so loudly and publicly.

— Gary Jason

**Change you can believe in** — Barack Obama promised us change, and less than two months after his inauguration it can be seen he was as good as his word. Our budget, already historically high under the profligate spending of the Bush administration, has skyrocketed. His 2009 deficit is, in just one year, even after accounting for inflation, barely less than the combined deficits for the six years it took to fight World War II.

Can't say that isn't change. Change is difficult, so the psychiatrists tell us, but Obama makes it seem easy. Deficits as far as the eye can see, reaching the point where foreign concerns over U.S. default on treasury bills become a growing concern? Yes, we can.

I'm guessing that when this is all over, change is all we'll have, and that only if buddy can spare a dime.

— Ross Levatter

**Fit for the gods** — The way Cairo has been creeping up on Giza, the time has arrived when you can sit in a Pizza Hut and gaze out on the Sphinx and all three pyramids while munching multi-grained pizza crust topped with anchovies and garlic and olives. It's a pretty good view from that window, although you can't see everything. The hole in Menkaure's pyramid modestly faces away from you.

The hole dates back to the 12th century when one Malek Abd al-Aziz Othman ben Yusuf set out to demolish the pyramids — presumably because they were built for the wrong gods.

Divinely ordained as the project may have been, it didn't go well. M.A.a-A.O.b. Yusuf started on Menkaure's pyramid because it was the smallest, and kept a crew on the job for eight months. But the most the crew was able to work loose was two stones a day. When ben Yusuf gave up, he left a hole as empty as his religious sensibilities.

The Pizza Hut in Giza is just the kind of thing I imagine a modern-day ben Yusuf might want to dismantle, although ridding the world of pizza is going to be a lot more difficult than he might suppose.

When you think about it, the people who heaved the stones up into the pyramids didn't just hop the Metro back to Cairo when it got too dark to work. They bedded down in workers' villages right there on the Giza plateau, on the very spot where the Pizza Hut is today. And, I'm pretty sure, they ate a lot of unleavened bread topped with olives, garlic, and salted Nile perch. And washed it down with good fourth-dynasty beer.

Things have picked up since Menkaure's day. Today, anybody with a few Egyptian pounds can go out to Giza and enjoy a meal as enduring as the pyramids, while looking out on some of the most remarkable handiwork of all time — through a window marked with the words tuH azziP.

— Bill Merritt

**Obamanomics** — If anybody had a notion that Obama was going to govern "from the center" rather than from the Left, as some of the early appointments and much of the president's rhetoric indicated (to the hopeful as well as the disappointed), it was blown out of the water by his massive \$3.55 trillion budget proposal. The "stimulus" bill, with its

pork and spending projects, was an early indicator, but a case could be made that this was largely the work of Nancy Pelosi and the Democrat-controlled Congress, which threw in just about everything on the Democrats' wish list for the last several years. But the budget suggests, as both the Washington Post and The New York Times noted, an effort to create an ideological shift in the country on an order of magnitude similar to what Reagan is said to have accomplished in the 1980s. At various times during the campaign, Obama talked about the importance of markets as the ultimate wealth-generators, but the budget indicates that he believes the key to the good society is that the economy is not just prodded but led by large-scale government programs and initiatives.

Putting grand ideas into the form of budgets has a way of concentrating the attention and inducing a certain realism. The happy talk about getting millions more into some kind of government-provided health care, while getting enough efficiencies in the process to bring the total cost down, is belied by the fact that the budget includes some \$680 billion over ten years as a "down payment" on a more comprehensive approach.

The EPA, newly empowered to treat CO2 as a pollutant, will have its budget increased by 34%. The foreign aid budget is to be doubled. And there's a \$250 billion TARP "reserve fund" that's actually \$750 billion; it gets to \$250 billion when one assumes that the government will be able to resell "toxic assets" to the tune of \$500 billion, probably an unrealistic assumption.

The notion that all of this can be funded by increasing income taxes on "the rich," who make more than \$250,000 a year, by 4 to 7% (depending on how you calculate the reduction in the amount they can claim for charitable contributions and the like) is the stuff of fantasy, of course. The real kicker is the cap-and-trade energy scheme, which is designed to raise the cost of energy so that "alternative" energy isn't all that much more expensive. This will hit the pocketbooks of rich, middle-class and poor alike (with the impact felt disproportionately by the poor, of course) and raise oodles of money for the government.

I think there will be resistance — will we hear from the Blue Dogs? — but you can't deny that this is an ambitious budget, intended to change the nature of political debate for decades.

— Alan Bock

**House rules** — We can get a sense of how the Democrats will use their absolute power by reflecting on a recent development that has been passed over in silence by the mainstream media.

House Speaker Pelosi has recently rewritten the House rules to minimize the ability of the Republican minority to influence legislation. Under her new rules, Republicans will be unable to offer alternative bills or even have serious debate with motions to recommit legislation — that is, to send bills back to the committees that approved them with recommendations for new amendments.

In the past, minority party members could use that tactic to delay or even halt a bill. The Democrats used it when the Republicans were in power, and the Republicans used it when the Democrats were in power. But the new rules allow the House to reconsider bills almost immediately, blunting the

former power by restricting motions.

Pelosi has also reversed the rules that Newt Gingrich crafted in 1995, designed to open up the legislative process. Those rules opened House committee meetings to public scrutiny, imposed term limits on committee chairs, guaranteed minority party rights to amend legislation, and included other measures aimed at transparency.

Those rules are now gone. Pelosi's preference is obviously for opacity, not to mention unchecked power for the majority party — as long as it is hers.

— Gary Jason

**My gun is my car** — Whenever an antigun advocate tells me how many people are killed by guns, I necessarily remind him that automobiles kill many more and that the AAA is the NRA waving a different flag. Would he want to ban autos? Of course not, he replies, because he uses them. Didn't Thomas Sowell somewhere mock do-gooders who want to ban boxing, even though blacks become millionaires from the sport, but can't accept statistics about skiing being more dangerous, because do-gooders ski?

Since I don't own a car, I wouldn't lose much if they vanished. In New York City, public transportation can get me almost everywhere. So I celebrate the great discovery of 2008 by people around the world that they can survive quite well, thank you, without purchasing new cars. The economic downtown rationalizes this new sentiment, one that may persist when the economy revives. The deadly car problem is vulnerable to an economic solution, wholly without any changes in the law; and that's how it should be.

But I do find it hard to imagine a time when someone socially vulnerable wouldn't want to own a gun.

— Richard Kostelanetz

**Two-ply** — Greenpeace recently issued a guide to which toilet papers were best for the environment. Strangely, the soft brands most preferred by Americans were the hardest on the environment. They suggest that Americans switch to recycled paper.

Perhaps we could start with the ICCC report?

— Tim Slagle

**Mock heroic** — On February 16, after approximately two weeks of investigation — read: two weeks of getting international coverage for himself — Richland County, SC Sheriff Leon Lott announced that he would not be charging Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps for smoking pot at a party in Columbia, SC, last November.

Lott *did* manage to arrest eight other people connected with the party, all but one on simple possession of small amounts of marijuana found during raids on their homes. Phelps' home was never raided. A single charge of distribution of marijuana was filed as well. So eight peaceful people have their lives torn up because a British tabloid ran a cellphone photo of a famous person taking a bong hit at a party.

Sheriff Lott said of the Olympic swimmer, "Michael Phelps is truly an American hero." It seems to me — someone who admires Phelps and is not at all concerned that he might have won even more than 14 gold metals if only he had not occasionally inhaled the Devil Weed — that in addition to his other obvious limitations, Sheriff Lott has a poor understanding of the English language. Michael Phelps is not a hero. He is an athlete, and an excellent one.

Heroes are different: they show valor in the face of oppression, they strive for justice against overwhelming odds, they work for freedom against tyranny. They are people like Harriet Tubman, who before the Civil War took 18 trips on the underground railroad, risking her own liberty to free over 300 slaves. Lott would have felt compelled to arrest her for violating the Fugitive Slave law.

Heroes are people like Oskar Schindler, who kept over a thousand German Jews from Hitler's death camps, although if Lott were a German constable at the time, he no doubt would have felt the need to arrest him because of the bribes and black market purchases — all illegal — with which he depleted his fortune, trying to save his employees' lives.

Heroes are people like the men and women, black and white, who violated Jim Crow laws and were arrested by Leon Lott's Southern brethren. Heroes are people like the gay men who at last stood up to thugs in police uniforms at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, refusing to accept second-class citizenship from people who, like Lott, and like the German officers tried at Nuremberg, were just following orders, just enforcing the law.

So Lott is wrong: Michael Phelps is not a hero. It's not surprising, though, that Lott has difficulty with the concept. He probably thinks of himself as a hero, too.

— Ross Levatter

**She blinded me with junk science** — In mid-February, a special federal court ruled that vaccines don't cause autism. One of the three special masters writing the opinion concluded:

The evidence presented was both voluminous and extraordinarily complex. But [the experts denying any link between autism and vaccines] were far more qualified, better supported by the weight of scientific research and authority, and simply more persuasive on nearly every point in contention.

The ruling dealt a major blow to purveyors of junk science and thousands of American families with autistic children who are seeking compensation from the drug companies that make the vaccines. It vindicated the bulk of the scientific establishment, which has maintained that there is no cause-effect relationship between childhood vaccines and a growing number of reported cases of autism.

The ruling makes enemies of two groups that are usually aligned in the public policy realm: spoils-seeking victims of alleged wrongs and federal government agencies. The mother of one of the autistic children seeking damages said: "We are terribly disappointed by the decision. I feel [my daughter] was vaccine-injured and should be entitled to compensation."

The ruling involved three separate cases, originating in Tennessee, Arizona, and Florida, each of them involving its own theory of how vaccines might cause autism. (The three cases were selected as representatives of nearly 5,000 similar claims.) The conclusions were especially damning because the

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rules of a special "vaccine court" established by the federal government don't require plaintiffs to prove their claims with scientific certainty; they merely need to establish a "preponderance of the evidence." According to the court, they didn't.

Most credible scientific studies have concluded that there is no causal link between vaccines and autism. (And government public health officials warn that fewer immunizations will endanger children.) In reply, attorneys for the plaintiffs in the vaccine cases argue that vaccine manufacturers, scientists, federal agencies, and mainstream media outlets have engaged in a conspiracy to silence inconvenient truths.

One of the many problems in linking autism to specific causal factors is that autism isn't one disease; it's an umbrella term used to describe dozens of specific syndromes. In fact, most health experts refer to an "autism spectrum" of mental and brain-related disabilities. Such broad, and constantly broadening, definitions are one reason that the number of reported autism cases has risen.

Purveyors of junk science, who seem to share a statist bias for arranging "compensation," have sensed an opportunity lying among heartbroken parents and vague definitions. Some of these junky types have included celebrities, such as the ditzy TV comedienne Jenny McCarthy and the unintentional political comedian Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

After the February ruling, high-profile plaintiff attorney and antivaccine activist James Moody told one newspaper:

The government does not fund the science to show a connection between vaccines and autism, and the courts say there isn't enough evidence to show a connection. When the vaccine court says you haven't met the standard of evidence, that is a call for more science, not that this controversy is at an end.

This is logic? The government should pay for certain people's suffering. And it should fund scientific research that proves its liability. If it doesn't fund this research, it's obstructing justice.

I keep coming back to the observation that statism devours its own children.

— Jim Walsh

**School choice for us, not for them** — When President Obama, hero of the teacher unions and ardent foe of vouchers, moved to Washington, he and his wife chose an elite private school for their kids. Not surprisingly, it was the same tony prep school to which the Clintons — also beloved by teacher unions and opponents of school choice — sent their kid. (Obama is nothing if not a big admirer of the Clintons — his cabinet proves that!)

Obama's compliment to private schools, though hypocritical, is justified by a recent study by Martin West and Ludger Woessman in the Winter 2009 edition of the journal *Education Next*. West, professor of education at Brown University, and Woessman, professor of economics at the University of Munich, studied extensive data from the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Specifically, they examined whether school choice (vouchers, charter schools, and tuition tax credits) improves education in public schools. The common-sense theory here — hotly denied by opponents of school choice — is that competition by private schools will force public schools to offer better service. Until now, studies have focused solely on the effects

of competition within a single country, and they have been indecisive, because any positive correlation between private schooling could be explained by the possibility that people with the means to send their children to private schools are more interested in education generally, or that private schools "skim" good students away from public schools.

So West and Woessman used the rich PISA treasure trove of international data. These data measure the literacy, scientific knowledge, and mathematical skills of about 220,000 students in 29 countries, from both public and private schools.

Countries range widely in the percentage of their students who attend private schools. In countries such as Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, and Poland, only about 5% of 15-year-old students go to private schools. In the United States, the figure is about 10% (although in the PISA sample it is about 6%). In Belgium, Ireland, and Korea it is about 50%. In the Netherlands, the figure rises to about 75%.

West and Woessman found that, indeed, the greater the percentage of private schools, the better is the overall (i.e., public and private combined) student achievement. A 10% larger enrollment in private schools raised PISA math scores in a country by about a tenth of a standard deviation (roughly a semester's worth of learning). In reading and science, a 10% larger enrollment in private schools produced about 5% of a standard deviation in better scores (about a fifth of a grade level difference). Raising the percentage of private schools in the United States merely to the level of Belgium or Korea would likely raise the math scores by four semester's worth of learning, overall. And a 10% larger enrollment in private schools will result in a savings of about \$3,200 per student.

Moreover, to address the issue of competition directly, they reanalyzed the PISA data after removing all the private school students. The results were not significantly different statistically from the data for all students combined. Public school students in countries with high enrollments in private schools did better than public school students in countries with lower private school enrollments. This indicates that much (if not all) of the better school performance of school systems with higher levels of private school enrollment can be attributed to the pressure of competition from private schools on public ones.

In short, private schools not only educate their own students better; they force public schools to do the same, and simultaneously reduce the costs of education.

Of course, in the real world, this would seem obvious. We routinely expect restaurants to serve appropriately good food for the price they charge, because those that charge high prices for lousy food soon lose their customers and go out of business. And we shudder to think what would happen if, as in the old Soviet Union, the government owned 90% of the restaurants. They would offer lousy food at exorbitant prices, tossed at the customers by surly food servers.

Ah, but the world of education is the wonderland of anti-common sense. In that daffy world, the news that competition works is news, indeed.

— Gary Jason

**Past is prologue** — In the wake of 9/11, the Bushies quickly marshaled the PATRIOT Act, whose back pages included a mess of proposals that otherwise couldn't get through Congress. In the wake of economic decline the

Obamas quickly assembled a stimulus bill, whose hundreds of pages contain a mess of dormant proposals that couldn't otherwise get through Congress. In both cases, as the great Robert Higgs reminds us, real crisis is exploited to expand unnecessary governmental activities. Does this represent "change"?

— Richard Kostelanetz

**Follow the money** — In late February, the Seattle City Hall had a program on the future of daily newspapers. The speakers and commenters included people from the Seattle Times, which was financially suffering, and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, which was about to close. It was a gloomy time. I know newspapers. Despite the crowing on the Right, their sickness has little to do with political bias, which is a low-level affliction that they have always had. It has to do with a big shift of advertising money.

Printed newspapers used to get 10% of their revenue from subscribers and 90% from advertisers — and half of that from classified ads. The classified business has been taken away by Craigslist and is not coming back. Much of the display-ad business has stayed with newspapers, printed and online, which is why they are still around; but the revenue is smaller.

Many at the Seattle hearing seemed to think the problem could be fixed with new owners. Nobody mentioned the Washington Times being owned by the Unification Church, but that was the idea. The problem was, someone might want a newspaper in Washington, DC, for ideological reasons, but who would be willing to lose \$14 million a year, which is what Hearst had lost in 2008, to have a daily newspaper in Seattle? Or Denver, where the Rocky Mountain News had just closed?

Some say they will get their news from the internet. But where do they think the internet gets it? Well, from lots of places, including organizations that cover themselves. The internet can function without advertiser-sponsored journalism, but the quality of information will not be as good.

— Bruce Ramsey

**For the want of a spine** — In the March edition of *Liberty*, I compared the Republican margin in the Senate that denied the Democrats a supermajority to the 18th-century British military formation — the famous Thin Red Line. Unfortunately, the Republican line fell at its first test, the so-called stimulus bill. The rout was as complete as it was inglorious.

The Democratic strategy came right from Rahm Emanuel's playbook. He preached that an economic crisis was "an opportunity to do things you could not do before . . . You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." Led by Obama and Pelosi, the Democratic hordes took up the war cry of "Crisis!" the Republican line wavered and fell, and the conquerors rode roughshod over the American people. A pork-ridden, ideologically suspect, and economically flawed bill was foisted on us. We and our children will pay with a longer than necessary recession, higher taxes, and quite possibly a lower standard of living for a long time. Such is the price of defeat.

After the Bush administration's malfeasance and the McCain campaign's ineptitude, it was clear enough that there wasn't much left of the Grand Old Party. I don't want to get overly nostalgic here; I'm not a Republican. But what happened to the party of Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and

dare I say it, even Newt Gingrich? At least the GOP was once a champion of small government and a bulwark against the worst excesses of the Democratic Party. Now, even that is gone. *Sic transit gloria.*

— Bob Marcus

**How low can the economy go?** — The 2008 fourth-quarter GDP figures have been revised, and they were even worse than originally projected. At an annual rate, the economy declined by 6.2% in the fourth quarter of last year, which was the worst quarter since the 1982 recession.

In response, the Obama administration and Congress passed the massive \$800 billion stimulus plan, the "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009" — as mislabeled and pork-riddled a package as has ever emerged from Congress. Hundreds of billions of dollars will be directed to states to allow them to continue to pay public employees' wages and benefits that employees in the private sector do not receive.

The federal budget deficit will now exceed \$1.5 trillion, about 10% of gross domestic product. The federal government will borrow slightly less than half of what it spends.

In the short run, it is possible — perhaps even likely — that the economy will experience an upturn, perhaps as soon as the second half of 2009. But in even the slightly longer run, the economy is likely to hit a wall as increased monetary and fiscal expansion leads to inflation and higher interest rates.

The crucial battles this spring will be about nationalizing health care, higher taxes, and even more spending. The only silver lining is that the worse the economy does, the less likely further changes will be. Voters must look forward to 2010 — and the chance, as in 1994, to change direction.

— Lanny Ebenstein

**Working for no one but him** — Tax Freedom Day — the day, calculated by the Tax Foundation, on which Americans have theoretically earned enough to pay all their taxes for the year — has not come before April 15 since 1967. The dreaded day has even twice fallen in May.

Although Americans are burdened with numerous local, state, and federal taxes, the federal income tax is the one that generally infuriates them the most. And infuriate it should. Americans who are familiar with the welfare states of Europe may be tempted to think that taxes in America are low compared to the world in general, but such is not the case. The United States ranks high in personal income taxes, and even higher in corporate income taxes.

According to the Heritage Foundation's 2008 Index of Economic Freedom — an index that compares personal and corporate tax rates, along with other economic measures, across the globe — there are 86 countries with a lower personal income tax rate than the United States and 124 countries with a lower corporate rate.

As the collector of the income tax, the agency of the federal government that Americans fear and loathe more than any other is the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). But contrary to proponents of the so-called Fair Tax, a progressive, revenue-neutral national retail sales tax on all new goods and services, the only way to eliminate the IRS is to eliminate federal taxes altogether. Changing the name of the IRS and exchanging one tax for another is not real tax reform.

Any hope of abolishing either the IRS or all federal taxes is, of course, a pipe dream. However, there is a way to

substantially lessen their impact on individual Americans. Individual income taxes could painlessly be eliminated if federal spending were simply reduced to about the level it was at the beginning of the Clinton administration. This would still leave the federal government with revenue from corporate income taxes, social insurance taxes, excise taxes, estate and gift taxes, customs duties, and miscellaneous receipts. With no income tax, there would be no capital gains tax, no withholding tax, no alternative minimum tax, and no refundable tax credit income transfer programs.

But because the currently projected federal deficit was not too long ago the total federal budget, I am not optimistic that any real change will be forthcoming. Looking at the Republican Congress under Bush and now the Democratic Congress under Obama, I fear that nothing short of a Congress made up of Ron Paul clones can stop the congressional spending juggernaut.

— Laurence M. Vance

**Pleading allegedly guilty** — Beware! According to television news, we are facing a frightening new category of crime: the "alleged" crime.

Did you think that ACORN was under investigation for voter registration fraud? The truth is much worse. In late October a television commentator announced that "ACORN is under investigation for alleged registration fraud." We knew we had alleged representatives of the people (most of Congress), alleged spokesmen for various interest groups (Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, et al.), alleged businesses (Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac), and alleged juries (i.e., the ones for O.J. Simpson's murder trial). We surely have no shortage of alleged facts, alleged experts, alleged political polls, alleged trends, and alleged diseases — but the mind boggles at the thought of all the committers of alleged crimes that our society now must deal with. How can we possibly contain them in our prisons?

And what is happening to our beautiful English language?

— Barbara Branden

**Popeyenomics** — Shouldn't we learn from past mistakes and reduce both borrowing and long-term debt instead of allowing them to grow year after year? The debt of cities, states, and Uncle Sam now adds up to over \$11 trillion. It reminds me of the cartoon character Wimpy, who would "gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today." Is this the inheritance we wish to leave future generations? Taxpayer dollars should be spent prudently, with minimal taxation, balanced budgets, and means testing for any assistance programs.

Government at all levels needs to do a better job with the trillions of dollars already confiscated, rather than pick the pockets of its citizens for even more. Local, state, and federal government all need to return to pay-as-you go financial management. In the long run, this is the only way to introduce fiscal responsibility and reduce debt.

Under former President Bush and a Republican-controlled Congress, federal long-term debt increased from under \$6 trillion to over \$9 trillion. During this time, pork-barrel projects or "member items" numbered in the tens of thousands, at a total cost of several hundred billion dollars.

President Obama and the Democratic majority in Congress were elected on promises to control deficit spending and

eliminate earmarking. Talk is cheap. It appears both President Obama and the Democrat-controlled Congress intend to continue conducting business as usual.

Under the Democrats' control of the White House, the Senate, and the House, the deficit will increase by \$1.75 trillion in less than one year. Within the proposed \$410 billion supplemental appropriations bill to fund all federal agencies for the balance of 2009 are over 8,500 member item earmarked projects worth over \$8 billion. President Obama promised an end to this pork barrel spending frenzy. Will he use the veto as promised? Does he have the strength to take on Senate majority leader Harry Reid, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY), and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi? Schumer sees nothing wrong with Democrats' earmarking, pointing out that Republicans did the same. While that is true, it hardly justifies repeating the mistake.

How ironic that, after winning the Cold War, our weakened economy may end up being our Achilles heel. America may be on the way to becoming the world's super debtor instead of the world's superpower.

— Larry Penner

**Paul Harvey, R.I.P.** — When I was 7-years-old or so, growing up in the small town of Albert Lea, Minnesota, Paul Harvey was one of the first voices I heard in the morning. His memorable over-the-top radio delivery kept me entertained as I gulped my mother's signature "mush" (which, contrary to the name, was a tasty Norwegian dish of cream, cinnamon, and butter). None of the reserved Minnesota adults I knew sounded like that. Harvey's bracing "Good Day!" helped get me in the right frame of mind for the coming day in school — one my least favorite activities.

After we moved to Minneapolis, I rarely heard him. Even the old fogey stations didn't seem to carry him. His fan base was always in small towns, where he often preceded or followed the daily crop report. Like many other people, I eventually came to dismiss Harvey as an antiquated vestige from a 1950s time warp, a sort of precursor to such bumbling and pretentious fictional new announcers as Les Nessman ("WKRP in Cincinnati") or Ted Baxter ("The Mary Tyler Moore Show").

But later, during research for my book on tax revolts, I gained a new appreciation for Harvey. He stood out as one of the last prominent survivors of the once powerful Old Right of the 1940s and '50s. Old Right conservatives had fought a dogged rear-guard action against the New Deal welfare and warfare states. The man who published Harvey's first books in the '50s was John M. Pratt, an ardent FDR hater who, while in Chicago during the '30s, had led one of the largest tax strikes in American history. He obviously saw something in young Harvey.

While Harvey moved away from his earlier Old Right isolationism, events sometimes pulled him back to it. It was Harvey, along with Walter Cronkite, who was instrumental in turning the heartland against the Vietnam War. In 1970, when Richard Nixon was still popular in countless small towns, Harvey announced dramatically in his daily commentary: "Mr. President, I love you . . . but you're wrong." He was deluged with angry mail and phone calls.

For this expression of old-fashioned Midwestern horse sense alone, Paul Harvey deserves the recognition and thanks of all Americans who value peace.

— David Beito

# Obama: The Hollow Man

*by Jim Walsh*

The president's supporters regard him as a great political thinker. His detractors often regard him as an evil genius. Unfortunately for him, neither is the case.

Normally, I try not to think too much about presidents. The mainstream media focus excessively on them, cheapening the quality of political discourse. As a result, American citizens who are inclined to talk about politics regurgitate pointless trivia about the White House occupant and staff — things they've heard on National Public Radio or seen on TV.

But we have a new occupant in the White House, one whom the popular media laud as a visionary and transformative figure. To anyone who loves liberty, this overwrought praise is by itself a cause for skepticism. And skepticism is surely warranted, on many grounds.

The early days of the Obama administration have been a mixed bag of minor successes and middling failures — pretty much what an objective observer might expect from a politician with native intelligence but little experience on the national stage. The stock markets have gone lower; the general economy remains stalled. The bureaucratic captains of Big Business have worn a groove around Capitol Hill; they sense opportunity in a statist government and seek subsidies to help them survive the current recession.

Around the world, states and leaders who don't much matter rave about Obama; those that matter more comment in a reserved manner. At home, Obama's supporters continue their childlike focus on the man's surface qualities — his over-

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estimated eloquence, his physical elegance, his fashionable wife. And, inexorably, the color of his skin.

As for Obama's critics, they have stumbled through some early efforts to vilify him. They've had a few successes, but they characteristically return to whining about his supposed radicalism and harping on stale conspiracy-nut stuff about his slightly-misstated oath of office, his place of birth, and his "true" religious faith. This is a losing strategy.

Obama does pose serious threats to the republic. But they have nothing to do with his being a sleeper agent for al Qaeda. By most accounts, the president is a decent fellow who means well. The threats he poses aren't in his person; they're in his politics and his philosophy . . . to the extent he has one.

There's a rational, libertarian case to be made against the public policies that this president favors. And, because every president's public self is a product of his policies, it's also a case against Obama the man. At least Obama the public man.

I have no interest in *ad hominem* attacks . . . but I have some interest in *ad principium* ones.

As I see it, the case against Obama can be arranged under five main headings, five main points to take away with you. These are the points to bring up in conversation, when you find yourself talking with people who've taken the easy path and babble about Obama's greatness and historical significance.

People who love liberty need to make this case, in casual conversation and in public forums, as calmly and forcefully as they can. American voters may fall in love from time to time, but they are, at core, practical creatures. At some point, they will see through Barack Obama. The only question is: will this happen before or after he stands for reelection?

1. Obama is no visionary; he's an empty vessel.

The complaints that Obama's nontraditional childhood and young adult years made him a Manchurian candidate are delusional. That said, his background does offer some useful insights into the public man. I've read both "Dreams of My Father" and "The Audacity of Hope," the two volumes of Obama's memoirs — the first primarily personal and the second primarily political.

I reviewed "Audacity" for *Liberty* in the May 2007 issue, and I stand by my conclusion that it's not a very good book. The strongest impression it leaves is that Obama is a passive character, a cipher — a more verbal version of Chance the Gardener from "Being There." No firebrand of populism or progressivism, the president has always positioned himself as a consensus-builder and champion of compromise. That has been his approach since his days on the Harvard Law Review (where he was elected president despite his merely average grades) through his time as a community organizer in New York and Chicago and into his early elected career in the Illinois state legislature.

Champions of compromise are an important part of the legislative process; but, they tend to be more involved in sausage-making than the vision thing. Obama rose above such porky concerns by using personal traits that make him an effective campaigner — and a dangerous proposition as chief executive.

Specifically, his great political strength is the ability to allow others to project their preconceptions and assumptions onto him. It's his genius, really: the chameleon-like capacity to

*This is exactly the kind of foreign entanglement that George Washington warned against. And it's exactly the kind of bad situation Obama is likely to make worse.*

look and sound like whatever an audience wants. One example of this protean skill was manifest on the campaign trail in 2008. Obama, an Ivy League graduate born in Hawaii and raised in Kansas (among other places), developed an ersatz Southern accent. This was a ridiculous affection — like the fake English accent that the singer Madonna adopted during

her brief marriage to a British movie director. But the explanation was simple. Obama's crowds wanted that accent. The American Left has made a fetish of black politicians from the South, so Obama shaped himself to carry the projection that he was *part* of this tradition. Jesse Jackson was so infuriated by that cultural swindle that he threatened (metaphorically, I think) to castrate Obama.

The danger in being whatever your audience wants is that you can end up losing any sense of identity or integrity. And the results can be embarrassing. In February, stumping for his statist stimulus plan, president Obama stopped at a Caterpillar tractor plant in Peoria, Illinois. There he said:

Yesterday, Jim, the head of Caterpillar, said that if Congress passes our plan, this company will be able to rehire some of the folks who were just laid off. And that's a story I'm confident will be repeated at companies across the country.

Jim Owens, Caterpillar's CEO and a supporter of the stimulus plan, was asked if he agreed with Obama's remarks. His response: "I think, realistically, no. The truth is we're going to have more layoffs before we start hiring again."

Another downside of Obama as chameleon is that he has made poor choices of political allies and friends. That is a weakness that his critics on the Right have hit hard. They repeat the names Saul Alinsky, Jeremiah Wright, and William Ayers like spells. They portray the men behind the names as dangerous villains, but the men are not. Alinsky and Ayers are (or were — Alinsky is dead) pathetic radical poseurs driven by middle-class self-loathing. Wright is a media whore who will say outrageous things as if on command, whenever cameras roll. Their significance comes merely from the fact that Obama didn't have the sense to distance himself from them. He claims that he didn't know about Ayers' criminal fugitive past when he first met him. Well, maybe the president is really that stupid. More likely, the other people in the room accepted Ayers, so Obama did too. No integrity.

A similar story with Jeremiah Wright. Obama claims he attended Wright's church for 20 years but never heard a word of the fiery minister's signature anti-American rants. More likely, Obama needed some *local* cultural credibility and could get that in big chunks by sitting in the pews of Wright's church. The substance of Wright's sermons didn't matter to the up-and-coming Obama; the size of Wright's congregation did.

A public person who will stand next to anyone will necessarily stand next to some bad people.

The president has tried to make political virtue of this promiscuity by saying that he will, in matters of foreign policy, meet with any nation and any leader at any time. This may turn out to have been campaign trail rhetoric rather than actual policy. And that's probably a good thing. In the meantime, some nations have taken notice of Obama's lack of philosophical integrity. After a decade of wandering in the political desert, Benjamin Netanyahu has retaken the prime minister's chair in Israel, largely because Israelis fear that warmed-over Clinton-era foreign policy will be bad for the Jews. This is the no-win situation America faces in the Middle East. Our support of Israel is often halfhearted, which means that Israelis and their dedicated defenders in the United States

are never satisfied. At the same time, Israel's many enemies in the region consider our halfhearted support half a heart too much. This is exactly the kind of foreign entanglement that George Washington warned against in his too little regarded and too little read farewell address. And it's exactly the kind of bad situation Obama is likely to make worse.

When we turn to domestic issues, we see the same lack of intellectual energy and integrity. The recently enacted stimulus plan included various provisions that reinstate politically poisonous welfare benefits. Why didn't Obama see the danger in this? Because he doesn't have the political insight.

Welfare reform was the key to rebuilding confidence in statist notions of "affirmative government." Bill Clinton's political successes during the 1990s were built in part on his recognition that voters didn't trust statists to spend government money in productive ways. Clinton understood that voters worried that traditional American liberals would do foolish things, such as using government subsidies to create a nearly permanent underclass of nonworking female heads of shattered households.

As political writer Mickey Kaus has noted, Clinton didn't arrive at these realizations because he was a clear-eyed small government advocate. On the contrary, Clinton realized that "even if welfare spending was only a tiny portion of the liberals' spending agenda, it poisoned the rest of it." Obama doesn't seem to have the instincts or wisdom to build on that insight.

2. Obama's statism comes from political expediency, not philosophy.

This is something of a corollary to point one. Obama owes his political rise to the money and logistical support of government employee unions, particularly the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and a group of teachers' unions. The SEIU organizes janitors and other office workers — most of whom are engaged by government agencies. They were among his earliest and most ardent supporters.

The president is not some dedicated European-style socialist; he's a political hack from Chicago who's made grubby deals with spoils-seeking collectivist groups. Most of his elected career has been spent representing an inner-city Chicago district in the Illinois state legislature. Since the only spoils-seeking that goes on in those Chicago neighborhoods involves government contracts, his market was limited to unions representing teachers and low-level government employees.

When he started his presidential campaign, Obama had to draw heavily on this base of government-employee unions. Hillary Clinton had sewn up most of the high-end Democrats on Wall Street and in Hollywood and the Silicon Valley. So Obama attacked her from the statist Left by tactical necessity rather than idealistic commitment.

One of his first moves after he'd been elected was choosing the same Hillary Clinton to be his secretary of state. In other words, he chose as head of foreign policy a woman whose main qualification is that eight years ago she spent several months "listening" to bumpkins from Buffalo whose only cogent thought was that the Bills haven't had a solid quarterback since Jim Kelly. Admittedly, she has spent 30 years enabling her hillbilly husband's adulteries. That may take a kind of diplomatic skill.

Madame Secretary is making an early habit of bowing before cash-rich Asian totalitarians. She makes an unlikely supplicant. But opportunism, far more than ideology, defines Obama's administration. He's not a communist or socialist. He's a modern-day ward heeler from Chicago with a good fashion sense. In naming Hillary Clinton to State, he was following Vito Corleone's advice to keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

The clearest example of Obama's opportunism is his economic stimulus plan, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This aggregation of statist graft will hurt the economy more than if the government did nothing; but accomplishing actual economic good is of secondary importance. The principal purpose is to flood state programs and their administrative satrapies with money.

In a February letter intended for then-Secretary of Commerce appointee Judd Gregg, the Congressional Budget Office concluded that the new law would help in the short

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*Clinton's successes were built in part on his recognition that voters didn't trust government to spend money in productive ways.*

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term but result in so much government debt that within a few years it would crowd out private investment, leading to a lower gross domestic product by the late 2010s than if the government hadn't taken any extraordinary steps. According to the letter, CBO economists and actuaries used the assumption that, in the long run, each dollar of additional federal debt crowds out (that is, takes the place of or prohibits issuance of) about 33 cents of private-sector capital. This is an interesting metric to keep in mind. Remember that capital is capital and debt is debt.

Obama's stimulus plan is an orgasmic shudder of statist takings. And the K Street sharks were fast on the scene. During the absurdly short time it took the bill to move from the House to the Senate, lobbyists for big pharmaceutical and high-tech companies were adding a new plan to repatriate overseas profits that would yield major tax savings. California winemakers and Florida citrus growers were changing the phrase "ready to market" to the word "planted," thus creating windfalls from a new bonus depreciation incentive. This undisciplined subsidy and spending is like driving a car with no headlights on a road at night. You might get somewhere. Or you might get wrapped around a tree.

If you don't like the image of driving in the dark, try another: Obama's stimulus plan is like paying your utility bills on credit cards while you spend your cash on dinners at fancy restaurants. You can probably manage that for a while. But, some months or years down the line, you'll run out of credit on your cards, and you'll have to pay off the balance. Oh, and you'll also have to keep paying your utility bills. This will force you into some hard choices. You can stop eating out — perhaps stop eating — or you can declare bankruptcy.

Former U.S. comptroller general David Walker, who's been doing good work for several years to educate Americans about their government's spendthrift ways, has noted that Obama's stimulus plan has no mechanism for directing expenditures. That's left to state and local officials, who often don't have the means or skills to spend money intelligently. The plan makes it possible to track the money, but only after it has already been spent. Walker says this is likely to result in "a series of disappointments that it's too late to do anything about."

Problems like these aren't new. Sixty years ago, Henry Morgenthau, FDR's treasury secretary, said this:

We have tried spending money. We are spending more than we have ever spent before, and it does not work. . . . I say after eight years of this administration, we have just as much unemployment as when we started — and an enormous debt to boot.

Does Obama, the supposed intellectual, have any knowledge of history?

The media's "we're all socialists now" claptrap is just that — claptrap. Much of the justification for government intervention comes from the assertion that the financial markets have failed. That is false. The markets haven't failed; they've given people some hard answers about the condition of America's debt-clogged economy. But the people want a second opinion. Or, more accurately, a do-over — one that has nothing to do with economics, or with common sense.

We don't have much room left. We can't keep paying the bills from our statist utilities with government credit cards. We're getting close to a global crisis of confidence in the U.S. economy, a crisis that could involve a run on the dollar and a hyperinflation that would wipe out the American middle class. There won't be any do-overs then. That's the problem with opportunism: it often seems smart and cagey, right up to the point at which its context collapses.

3. Obama believes in a warped form of meritocracy.

To the extent that Obama has exhibited a political philosophy, it's a shallow version of meritocracy. He believes in a brand-name social hierarchy, purchased retail. Like Bill Clinton, he has surrounded himself with striving Ivy League

graduates who are much better at repeating the wisdom of their professional schools than at developing original ideas.

What's wrong with this? Isn't that the American Dream? Well, no. The dark side of manic meritocracy is the elitist idea that education and social standing give a person or group of people an inherent right to coerce others. This is wrong in many ways. The most important is suggested by the fact that our Constitution requires the protection of individuals from the tyranny of consensus, which is precisely the tyranny that Obama and his associates represent.

Liberty protects nonconformists; elitism punishes them, rewarding conformists and social strivers instead. The self-styled elites are the Pharisees of our day. They are dogmatic, shrill, and tyrannical. They don't hesitate to use any means available, starting and ending with state power, to coerce others to do as they say.

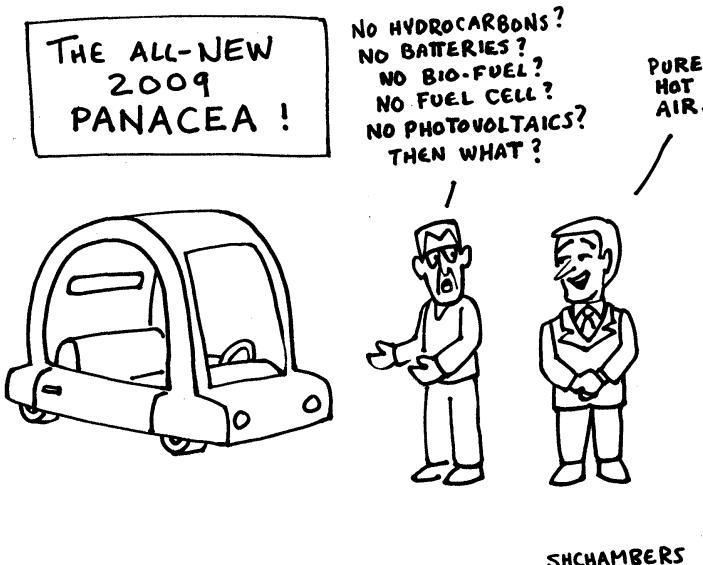
Obama himself is a pliant conformist to the conventional pieties of the American Left. His memoirs indicate the degree to which he's been so since he was young. Upon his graduation from the elite Punahoa School in Honolulu, he didn't matriculate in an Ivy League college. He was admitted, instead, to slightly eccentric Occidental College in Los Angeles. Oxy has a good regional reputation; but the striver Obama apparently considered his admission a grievous failure. Rather than making the best of his experience at Oxy, he sent out transfer applications and moved as quickly as he could to Columbia University, a school in the bottom tier of the Ivy League — but at least in the Ivy League.

Elitists adhere rigidly to social conventions; and their rigid adherence results in spiritual and intellectual weakness. Also, dangerously for politicians, elitism results in hypocritical exceptionalism when members of the elite fail to maintain the social conventions to which they adhere so strictly. Much ink has been spilled over candidate Obama's ill-advised answer to some unexpectedly hard questioning from a regular citizen he met at an Ohio campaign stop. Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher ("Joe the Plumber") complained that Obama's proposed tax policies would make it impossibly expensive to take over an existing plumbing business. Flummoxed, Obama made what was apparently an ironic or humorous crack about the need to "spread the wealth around" by means of higher taxes.

Some commentators on the Right screeched about the Marxist qualities of the remark. But they missed the real insult in Obama's response. It dripped with contempt for the working-class plumber who was trying to buy his own shop. The candidate didn't take seriously the aspiring small business owner's worries. He sized up Wurzelbacher's appearance and banked on the idea that a blue collar voter from Ohio would instinctively support a vague income redistribution scheme.

This was a low point in Obama's campaign. Confronted with polls that showed strong opposition to his "spread the wealth" talk, he fell back on Jesuitical word games: he insisted that there was an obvious difference between "redistributing" wealth (bad) and "rebalancing the distribution" of wealth (less bad).

Obama's slavish elitism explains some of the poor choices he made after his election. It explains why he picked Tom Daschle, Timothy Geithner, and would-be Performance Czarina Nancy Killefer. They were bona fide members of the Democrat elite. It's also the reason why he abandoned Daschle



and Killefer. As Pharisees, they didn't think the rules that apply to nonmembers of the elite — say, plumbers from Ohio — applied to them. Obama, as a Pharisee himself, couldn't afford to be seen condoning their hypocrisy.

Daschle was supposed to become health and human services secretary, but his dirty laundry included more than just unpaid taxes. He had been getting \$1 million a year from a big

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*The markets haven't failed; they've given people some hard answers about the condition of America's debt-clogged economy.*

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D.C. law firm — and he's not a lawyer. He had been getting another million a year (plus the limousine and chauffeur that became the flashpoint of his tax evasion) for unspecified services to an investment firm. Why were these companies paying Daschle so much money? Because he was an elitist in good standing and would use his influence to their benefit.

Obama couldn't defend Daschle because he'd used a lot of his own political capital defending Treasury Secretary Geithner's failure to pay significant amounts of his taxes over a period of several years. Geithner, the former head of the New York Federal Reserve, an ally of W. Bush Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, and a maker of some of the economic policies that Obama criticized on the campaign trail, defended his deadbeat behavior with the preposterous explanation that he didn't think he owed Social Security or Medicare taxes on moneys earned from the IMF while living and working in the United States. Obama endorsed that lame explanation because he needed Geithner's credibility with the banking and investment communities.

It's not the resistance to pay taxes that's the problem with the likes of Geithner. Any rational libertarian has considered the ethics of tax resistance. The problem is the hypocrisy. I would welcome a federal government official who admitted that he hesitated to pay taxes that support waste, inefficiency, and worse. Sadly, that's not Geithner. Nor is it Obama.

Geithner, like his boss, is at heart a bureaucratic sausage-maker. Earlier this year, he announced plans to allocate \$175 billion in funds from the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) to a so-called "Mo Mod" (mortgage modification) platform.

Mo Mod is a mortgage processing program that uses algorithms to rewrite groups of home loans. It resets individual mortgages to reflect the current market value of the underlying properties, and then applies those new values to the various tranches and categories of derivative investment securities that were based on those mortgages. It's a whiz-kid application that gets a lot of technical details right but ignores one major, philosophical problem: resetting mortgages will cause massive moral hazard in the residential real estate marketplace. It will reward and encourage bad investments.

Elitism makes the mistaken assumption that Middle America is stupid. It's a kind of logical fallacy: I'm smart and have the degrees to prove it. You're different from me; you

don't have the same degrees. Therefore, you're stupid. But businesses, especially small businesses, aren't stupid. They can't afford to be. They're not going to invest in equipment and new hires based on one-time, short-term stimulus checks. What they need is permanent tax cuts.

4. Obama believes, as Dick Cheney did, in an imperial presidency.

There's an irony about the claims of power that presidents make. In fact, the more powerful a chief executive is, the less he needs to make extraordinary claims of executive power. The less powerful the president, the more he hides behind political artifice.

Bush and Cheney seemed the nadir of this grasping weakness. But Obama has followed W to an unexpected degree. The man who swore to change the way the White House operated has maintained some of his predecessor's worst practices. He has continued W's policy of using the terms "state secrets" and "national security" to justify White House obscurantism. He has kept extraordinary rendition alive as a federal law enforcement option. He has even planned to move direct oversight of the politically sensitive Census Bureau from the Commerce Department to the White House — more specifically, to the bailiwick of his chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, a bare-knuckles political bully.

Some of these moves, considered out of context of the others, might make tactical sense. But together, they indicate a statist urge for a regal leader. Little wonder, then, that Obama transition team co-chair Valerie Jarrett told NBC News personality Tom Brokaw that the new president would be "prepared to really take power and begin to rule on Day One." Begin to rule? Apparently, he was.

The president's assertion of the "state secrets privilege" to shield the workings of the White House staff from disclosure — usually in the course of some deposition or testimony — is emphatic evidence that he wants all the powers that Bush and Cheney claimed. During his presidential campaign, Obama promised to abandon their approach to governmental secrecy and to create more transparency within the executive branch. But faced with the appeal of a lawsuit that had started against the Bush administration, Obama decided to carry forward the Bush position.

Obama's belief in a strong executive shouldn't come as a surprise. He and Bush are both statists, though they come to their abiding beliefs in the power of the state from different

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*Our Constitution requires the protection of individuals from the tyranny of consensus, which is the tyranny that Obama represents.*

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starting points along the American political spectrum. The Founders believed strongly and surely in a balance of power among the branches of government. The strong executive theory that Obama and W share is an aberration from that balanced approach. It's un-American, in the strict constitutional sense; and it's fascist at its logical extension.

Because of the proposed Census Bureau heist, Republican Sen. Gregg — who as commerce secretary was supposed to be a sign of bipartisanship in the Obama cabinet — declined nomination. He was replaced by Gary Locke, a Democratic hack with a long record of ethics issues, including allegations of arranging illegal campaign contributions and no-show government jobs for dim-witted family members. And recall that Locke is Obama's third choice for commerce secretary. Before Gregg came on the scene, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson had withdrawn his name because of ethics problems. Obama's commerce secretaries begin to resemble the drummers for Spinal Tap — a series of unremarkable guys who spontaneously combust.

The Census Bureau power grab fits with Obama's general desire for "czars" to rule over government functions. Characteristically, the imperial president doesn't trust his

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*Obama's appointees begin to resemble the drummers for Spinal Tap — a series of unremarkable guys who spontaneously combust.*

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own appointments to traditional posts. Criticism of this dubious practice has come from an unexpected source. West Virginia Sen. Robert Byrd, who is no one's libertarian, wrote an open letter to Obama complaining about the decision to create White House offices on health reform, urban affairs policy, and energy and climate change, taking important policy decisions away traditional cabinet departments. Byrd observed that

White House staffers are not accountable for their actions to the Congress, to cabinet officials, [or] to virtually anyone but the president. They rarely testify before congressional committees, and often shield the information and decision-making process behind the assertion of executive privilege. In too many instances, White House staff have been allowed to inhibit openness and transparency, and reduce accountability.

This may be the first time you've read a favorable reference to Robert Byrd in *Liberty*. The creep of statism has that effect on traditional political lines.

##### 5. Obama encourages a cult of personality.

This point may say more about Obama's supporters than the man himself. His fans — and "fans" is certainly the right word — don't look on him as a manager they've hired to make sure the Department of Housing and Urban Development keeps its graft to a minimum. They regard him as spiritual leader.

Reaching back to my first point, if Obama is a sort of human Rorschach Test whose meaning is whatever the viewer projects, his election says more about the electorate than it does about the president.

Some voters wanted to elect a black man president to repay some karmic burden of debt. The justification goes something like this: American blacks won't get the financial reparations that some of their leaders have sought, but they will get one

of their own in the White House. People who believe this are likely to natter nonsense about Obama being a "transitional figure."

Other voters wanted to wave a white flag to world opinion. They wanted to send a signal to the world that America doesn't want to be the global policeman any longer. Or a global leader any longer. Or the object of stone-throwing hatred any longer.

Still others — and I know you may have trouble believing this — were actually inspired by Obama's rhetoric.

Well, politics has always been a kind of cultural shorthand: citizens care as much about the social meaning of their vote as they do about its philosophical grounding. But Obama's supporters take this shallowness to an extreme. The best-known example: the television talk show host Chris Matthews, who made a fool of himself, talking about the sight of Obama sending chills down his legs. It's hard to find amusement, even schadenfreude, in this. Before Obama came along, Matthews was pleasant to watch; he had a keen knowledge of the political process and took a happy warrior's joy in hashing out the details of this bill or that campaign. But servitude to the Obama cult dashed all of that.

Clarity again comes from an unexpected place. Roman Catholic Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver has warned that Americans should be wary of

a spirit of adulation bordering on servility. . . . Modern life, including life in the Church, suffers from a phony unwillingness to offend that poses as prudence and good manners, but too often turns out to be cowardice. Human beings owe each other respect and appropriate courtesy. But we also owe each other the truth. . . . President Obama is a man of intelligence and some remarkable gifts. . . . But, whatever his strengths, there's no way to reinvent his record . . . with rosy marketing about unity, hope, and change.

The shallowness of Obama's hopey "change" marketing plan has been borne out by his move from hope to fear as the principal *topos* of his rhetoric. Stumping for his stimulus plan, he gave up the sunny platitudes of his campaign speeches for statements like "A failure to act, and act now, will turn crisis into a catastrophe."

Political cults of personality are bad for another reason, besides their intellectual shallowness. They blur the proper distinctions between public and private life. Although you'd never know this from recent history and popular culture, America (like most functioning republics) assumes clearly-drawn distinctions between public and private lives. These distinctions apply to all citizens, not just public office holders. The blurring of public and private realms, such as we see in the idolatry of public figures as if they were revered family members or respected religious leaders, is a troubling sign for liberty.

Obama didn't start this blur. He's carrying forward a Clinton program. Among his many betrayals, Bill Clinton beguiled his feminist supporters into hypocrisy by making his private affairs part of his public life and getting feminists to endorse his sordid conduct. As a result, Gloria Steinem now spends her days muttering to her cats that politicians' sex lives don't matter.

*continued on page 40*

# Iraq: Now and In the Future

*by Jon Harrison*

The Surge was a short-term success. But the long-term prospects for our engagement in Iraq aren't good.

Iraq held provincial elections on January 31. The results were encouraging. The voting took place without significant violence. Religious parties for the most part suffered setbacks, while secular candidates prospered.

The elections highlighted the vast improvement that has occurred on the ground over the past ten months. As recently as March 2008, Iraqi forces were thrown out of Basra by sectarian militiamen. At that time, close to 1,000 Iraqi civilians were still dying every month. In January 2009, civilian deaths totaled 138, the lowest figure since the U.S. invasion began in 2003. As for the militias, they have lost public support and practically vanished from view. The Iraqi people, thankful for their government's restoration of relative calm in the streets, seem to have embraced a new national consciousness. "We are witnessing the revival of Iraqi nationalism," an analyst for the Gulf Research Center, a thinktank based in Dubai, told The New York Times (Feb. 3).

The government of Nouri al-Maliki, which had to be prodded by the United States to hold these elections, can only be pleased by the results. Maliki's Dawa Party was the leading vote getter, though it did not achieve an absolute majority. Its biggest rival, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, an Islamist party that favors an autonomous Shiite state in the south, suf-

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fered a major defeat. Its vote in Baghdad fell from 55% in the elections of 2005 to a mere 5%. It lost ground in the south as well, failing to carry even the Shiite holy city of Najaf, home of the ISC's leader, the cleric Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.

The other major Shiite faction, led by the cleric Moktada al-Sadr, fared better than the ISC. It supported parties whose message was Islamist but also nationalist. However, while it has benefited from the eclipse of the ISC, it now finds itself overshadowed by Maliki and Dawa. This is a turn of events that no one would have predicted as recently as a year ago.

Al-Sadr is now a diminished figure. He is young and indifferently educated, and his missteps have cost him stature and influence. He removed himself to Iran two years ago, weakening his hold on his movement and opening the way to factionalism. He attempted to remedy the situation by having the armed wing of his movement, the Mahdi Army, stand down unilaterally in August 2007. This allowed U.S. and Iraqi forces to arrest many of his key people. There followed the setbacks

suffered by the Sadists in Basra and Baghdad in April and May 2008. (On this see my "The Next President and the Next War," *Liberty*, October 2008.)

Unquestionably, Maliki's show of strength in Basra and Baghdad was a turning point. The tenor of Iraqi politics and the attitude of the average Iraqi changed because of Maliki's successes against the Sadists and criminal elements in both cities. The Islamist balloon was popped. It was revealed that

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*Despite the public relations glow surrounding the Iraq elections, major difficulties remain on the road to long-term stability.*

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the Iraqi people, tired of the Islamists' fanaticism and mindless violence, not to mention their unfulfilled promises to provide jobs and services, were longing for a leader who could reduce violence and oppression and create a semblance of stability. Maliki achieved this, and Iraqi voters rewarded him at the polls.

Maliki's growing strength has led to a reduction in Iranian influence, which of course pleases Washington, not to mention Riyadh, Cairo, and Tel Aviv. Combined with the outcome of the November election in the United States, the Iraqi vote well may represent a decisive turn away from war in the Persian Gulf. At least for the moment, neither a U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran nor a general Sunni-Shiite conflagration seems at all likely.

The U.S. role in Iraq is now almost a watching brief. U.S. forces played a part in providing security for the elections, but stayed very much in the background. The main U.S. combat role is in the north, particularly in Mosul, Iraq's third largest city, where al Qaeda remains strong. Only 16 U.S. soldiers died in Iraq during January 2009 — continuing a four-month trend of very low losses. Only 13 U.S. troops were killed in October 2008, 16 in November, and 13 in December.

The good news, then, appears to be substantial and real. However, there is bad news as well. Despite the public relations glow surrounding the elections, major difficulties remain on the road to long-term stability and the creation of an effective democracy.

Nationally, only 51% of eligible voters bothered to vote. In Sunni Anbar province, where it was expected that voters would turn out in big numbers, only 40% cast ballots. This was a big improvement over Anbar's boycott of the 2005 election, but hardly a ringing endorsement by Sunnis of the current political dispensation.

In the north, Sunnis echoed al-Maliki's nationalist sentiments, preferring to present a united Arab front against the Kurds, who have been angling to add Mosul to their three autonomous provinces. Kurdistan proper is an independent state in all but name. How the Arab-Kurd dynamic will play out is difficult to judge. It seems certain that the Kurds will never agree to submit to the central government's authority.

It seems almost as certain that a revived Iraqi state will refuse to let Kurdistan go its own way. With the struggle over Mosul as a flashpoint, a future war between the two ethnic groups cannot be ruled out.

Within the Arab community, Sunni-Shiite tensions remain high. Fighting between the sects largely ended once sectarian cleansing was completed in 2007, although al Qaeda in Mesopotamia has repeatedly tried to provoke renewed conflict by means of assassinations and suicide bombings. Sectarian violence flared up again after the elections. Suicide bombers killed dozens of Shiite pilgrims traveling to and from the holy city of Karbala. Clearly, these were attempts to reignite sectarian warfare. Particularly worrisome is the fact that insurgent forces can still operate in Baghdad and beyond, despite coalition claims to the contrary.

Sunni-on-Sunni violence is growing. Jockeying for power among various Sunni groups in Sunni majority provinces has led to violence. Several prominent Sunnis were assassinated in the run-up to the elections, and others have died since.

The truth is that the vast problems created by the American invasion and subsequent civil war have yet to be dealt with. Millions of Iraqis are without jobs. Much of the country's infrastructure is in ruins. Millions lack electricity in one the world's most energy-rich countries. Corruption is still pervasive. Nearly one million Iraqis are displaced persons waiting to return to homes that in many cases are occupied by others, or are simply gone, destroyed.

When the Obama administration took office, it began a review of Iraq policy. Secretary of Defense Gates, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. Odierno, the commander on the ground, have given the president their views on the situation, focusing on the risks involved in speeding up the troop withdrawals outlined in the U.S.-Iraq security agreement signed in late 2008. Under that agreement, all U.S. troops are to be withdrawn from Iraq by December 31, 2011.

It should be a no-brainer for the new administration simply to adhere to the terms negotiated by its predecessor. Iraq is relatively peaceful, U.S. casualties are low, and the war is being virtually ignored by a U.S. public obsessed with economic difficulties. Politically, Obama can't lose if he sticks to Bush's policy. If the agreement proves a success, he will share some of the credit. If it collapses, Bush will get the blame.

Smart as he is, Obama must realize this. There is absolutely no reason, given the current situation, for him to honor his campaign promise to pull out all combat forces by June 2010. Where do leftwing Democrats go if he sticks with the Bush program? Nowhere. It's hard to imagine them staying home in 2012 because Obama decided to stretch out our withdrawal until 2011. The betting is that Obama, acting like the politician he is, will choose a compromise timetable for withdrawal, splitting the difference between June 2010 and December 2011: see the February 21 Associated Press report, "Obama faces split opinion on Iraq future." According to another AP report of the same date, U.S. forces are already testing the routes for a withdrawal through Jordan and Kuwait.

Yet the outlook for Iraq remains murky. The improvements of the last ten months are real, but are they sustainable?

The obstacles to a united, peaceful, and democratic Iraq are formidable indeed. It is still this writer's opinion that Iraq is more likely to become another Lebanon than the model

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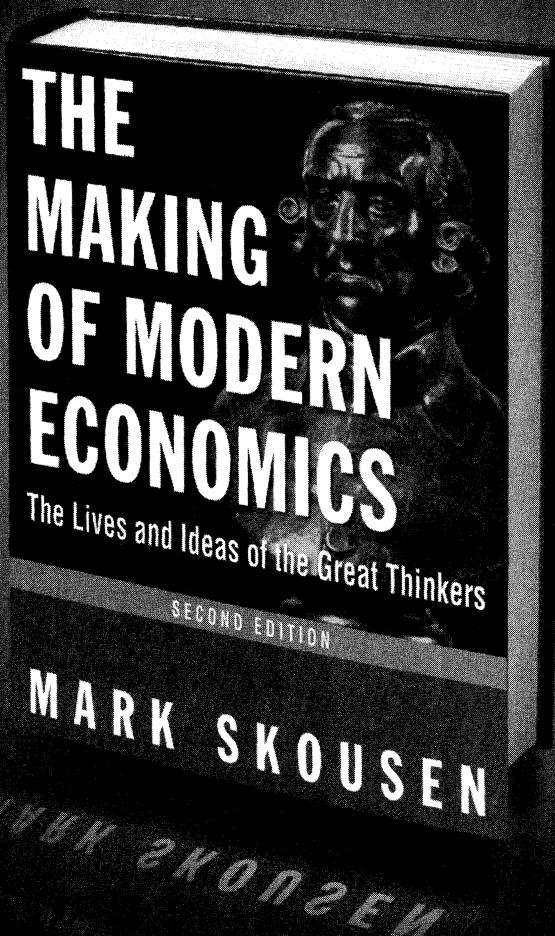
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democracy for the Arab world that Bush, Cheney, and the neoconservatives envisioned.

Nevertheless, one can almost hear the collective sigh of relief emitted by the neocons as they contemplate the recent turn of events in Iraq. In the words of that sage of Alexandria, the *Weekly Standard*'s Fred Barnes, "Iraq is a victory, thanks to the surge." Given how bad these people looked only a year ago, one understands their desire to crow. But are they right?

The surge, strictly as a military operation, did not get us to where we are today. As I have said in these pages ("A Successful Surge?", March 2008), General Petraeus deserves credit for the introduction of new tactics, and for instilling a renewed will to victory in the forces he commanded. His success stands in stark contrast to the performance of his predecessors, generals Ricardo Sanchez and George Casey, officers best described as mediocrities. Casey's reward for lack of success was promotion to Army Chief of Staff. Like the award of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Paul Bremer, our incompetent viceroy in Baghdad, it was a classic Bushism — incongruous, inexplicable.

Nevertheless, the combat operations of Petraeus' forces, though deserving of praise, played only a part, and a relatively small one at that, in the stabilization we have witnessed on the ground.

We should remember that 100,000 guns opposing us were removed from the battlefield by the Sunni Awakening. This development was utterly unexpected and had absolutely nothing to do with the surge. Members of the Awakening decided independently to end their insurgency and join the fight against al Qaeda. It was the first stroke of luck to come Petraeus' way.

The second was Moktada al-Sadr's unexpected decision, in August 2007, to stop fighting. Whatever may have caused his stand down, it wasn't pressure from the U.S. and Iraqi militaries, which up to then were treating him gingerly. But the result was that U.S. forces were able to arrest hundreds of Sadrist leaders almost without firing a shot.

The Iraqi civil war that began with the destruction of the Golden Mosque in Samarra on Feb. 22, 2006 ran its course over about 18 months. Nothing done by Petraeus hastened its end or moderated its effects. Sectarian cleansing stopped when there was no more cleansing to be done. The Sunni-Shiite conflict burned down to embers, embers that still smolder today, and may flare up in the future.

"Give me lucky generals," Napoleon said. I don't mean to imply that Petraeus lacks skill. But fortune unquestionably smiled on him, and blessed the surge. Petraeus Felix.

In the March 2008 issue of *Liberty*, I wrote:

Perhaps the surge itself was a prerequisite for at least some of these developments. That is to say, without more U.S. troops on the ground, the local actors (Sunnis, Shiites, al Qaeda, and the Iranians) might have behaved differently (i.e., worse). If the purpose of the surge is defined simply as the creation of a more peaceful environment — one that would permit Iraqi political factions to reach some sort of compromise concerning their country's future — then, obviously, this much has been achieved.

That statement is as accurate now as it was then. Without the surge, al-Maliki's campaigns in Basra and Baghdad (April–May 2008) probably could not have succeeded. Today

those successes look like a turning point, in the sense that they created the conditions for an honorable and relatively speedy U.S. withdrawal. That is no small thing.

But it remains to assess George W. Bush's January 2007 decision to undertake the surge. Was he right to increase our involvement when events appeared to be spiraling out of control? The answer, it now seems to me, is yes.

Once the United States began the war, Bush was essentially trapped. There were two, and only two, opportunities for withdrawal in 2003. After the fall of Baghdad, we could have handed the country over to one of "our" Iraqis and pulled out. The other opportunity came with the capture of Saddam Hussein. Withdrawal at that point would have been a messier affair, but a case could have been made to "declare victory and go home."

But from the beginning of 2004 to the end of 2006, there was no realistic possibility of leaving. To invade a country and then abandon it in a state of anarchy and civil war would have been deeply irresponsible and dishonorable. As the frenzy of violence reached its peak in late 2006, Bush could perhaps have thrown up his hands and ordered a retreat. It would have made the United States look like a "pitiful, helpless giant," but a majority of the American people would have supported such a decision.

Bush, whatever his motives may have been, chose a more difficult path. Though confronted with the outright skepticism of many of his supporters, and the hostility and even hatred of millions of people at home and abroad, he still went forward. In doing so, we can now see, he laid the groundwork

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*There is absolutely no reason, given the current situation, for Obama to honor his promise to pull out all combat forces by June 2010.*

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for an orderly U.S. exit. He also preserved the honor of the Army and Marine Corps. An evacuation of Iraq in early 2007 would have been a humiliation for the U.S. military.

Bush, then, though terribly wrong in starting the Iraq war, was right (indeed, courageous) in ordering the surge. Of course, one action does not a great president make. Bush remains a disastrous figure in our history.

The war in Iraq that began with the U.S. invasion in 2003 is not over. Episodes such as the march on Baghdad, or the civil war of 2006–07, or the surge, fade into history, while peace remains elusive. We will never celebrate a V-I day. We will leave, perhaps fairly soon, but it will be years at least before we know whether the mission to create a stable, democratic, pro-Western Iraq has succeeded.

Was it worth the cost? Over 4,000 Americans dead, tens of thousands wounded, a trillion or so dollars added to the national debt. Perhaps 100,000 Iraqi civilians killed, some of them by our own forces. Whoever gives this cause a resounding yea must reckon with a multitude of ghosts. □

# What Your Doctor's Not Telling You

*by Bill Merritt*

It's easier to manage other people's lives than just to tell them the truth. At least, that's what some physicians believe.

The other day I was driving in the African bush and came across a pickup truck smashed against a tree. And three guys who had been seriously rattled around. It was 45 minutes until dark, nobody else was likely to come along before morning, and I had a first-aid kit in the car. So I pulled over and bandaged the guys up.

What I did not have was surgical gloves. The first-aid kit was left over from when my wife and I used to hike in Oregon, and I wasn't worried about coming into contact with her blood. Whatever she might have coursing through her veins was already coursing through mine. It's not the same down here. In Botswana, there's stuff in 37% of young adult veins that I would just as soon keep out of mine and my wife's, both. Botswana has the second-highest HIV infection rate on the planet. And, since I had been camping for more than a week, I had open cuts on my hands.

There was a lot of blood on the guys I patched up, but I was careful and I don't think I got any on my cuts. Still, you never know, so once I had the last bandage on, I pulled out a bottle of whiskey and gave my hands a thorough J&B disinfecting. I'm no doctor, but it sure stung like it was disinfecting something.

One of the reasons I didn't worry too much about the blood was because I was in on one of the unpublicized secrets of the HIV industry. Post-exposure prophylaxis, a course of

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pills waggishly referred to as "PEP," cuts your chances of actually catching the virus by 80%. The day after the accident I drove into a town, called the embassy nurse and, two days later, met the shipment of pills at an airport.

The following week I was in a doctor's office discussing what had happened when she let me in on some other not-widely-publicized HIV facts. To start with, I had assumed that blood-to-blood contact was the primo way to transmit the virus — get a single drop of infected blood into a cut and you have an almost 100% chance of becoming HIV positive.

Not so, she said. The chances of becoming infected from blood-to-blood contact are lower than the chances of becoming infected from a needle-stick, and needle-sticks are, well . . . the chance of becoming infected if you are stuck by a hypodermic needle that has previously been used on a person with full-blown AIDS (in other words, a needle that's been dipped into blood with the highest possible viral load) is 0.3%. Three

in a thousand. And, as the doctor said, the infection rate from blood-to-blood isn't even that high.

The chances of becoming infected drop even more if the HIV-laced blood came from somebody being treated with anti-retrovirals. In that case, the blood carries fewer viruses and the odds of contracting anything go down proportionally.

The rate is lower still, if you wash your hands afterwards. Whiskey, as it turns out, is an especially good disinfectant, HIVwise.

The odds are even lower if you have a healthy immune system, because, contrary to what you would expect, since HIV is a virus that eats the immune system, your body really can fight it off.

By the time you multiply the less-than-100% chance that any of the three gentlemen I patched up had the virus, by the what-seemed-to-me remote chance that I had actually gotten any of their blood into a cut, by the less-than-three-in-a-thousand chance of becoming infected if I had, reduce again by the less-than-full-blown viral load that the blood would have been carrying since it was obvious that none of the guys had full-blown AIDS, reduce again by however much good the whiskey did, take a fifth of what's left and reduce some more by the ability of my own body to fight off whatever viruses managed to get through . . . and the chances of actually contracting something must be in the order of millionths. Maybe hundredths of millionths.

Now, I don't want to belittle the dangers of HIV. And I certainly don't want to catch it. But I would like somebody to explain to me why I didn't already know that the risk of getting HIV from helping out at a traffic accident was so low. I consider myself a reasonably well informed layman. My wife is better informed than I am. She works in HIV prevention and she didn't know the numbers. Why is this? Wouldn't we all be better off not scaring people away from lending a hand when somebody gets hurt? For that matter, why don't more people know about PEP?

My doctor said it's because the medical profession doesn't want people taking unnecessary risks, and, I suppose, that makes a perverse kind of sense . . . if the people are children. But they aren't always. In fact, the world seems to be flooded

with people who aren't children. Besides, once somebody, child or not, takes the risk, wouldn't the risks to the people who might deal with him in the future be cut by 80% if he took the pills?

Why aren't we told about simple self-help prophylaxis, such as washing your hands with whiskey? I blundered into that one because I had whiskey in the car, and washing my hands seemed like a good idea. The reason I had whiskey in the car is that I have been forcing myself to choke down the stuff, which brings up another sore point between me and the medical profession.

Fifteen or so years ago, I started hearing rumors about Frenchmen with unhealthy lifestyles who were living much longer than they should. All the red wine they swilled seemed to dissolve the cholesterol off the insides of their arteries and prevent heart attacks. And not just by a little, but by a whopping 40%. I asked my doctor about this and got a very evasive answer. "Maybe," he said, "it's the grapes. Try drinking grape juice."

What I didn't know, but my doctor did because he got his information from actual peer-reviewed medical journals instead of rumors, is that I had heard right. Drinking alcohol does make you live longer. Not just red wine, *alcohol*. Articles about the beneficial affects of drink on ischaemic heart disease have been appearing in the medical literature since, at least, 1958. Only the medical profession in general, and my doctor in particular, stonewalled the fact well up into the '90s.

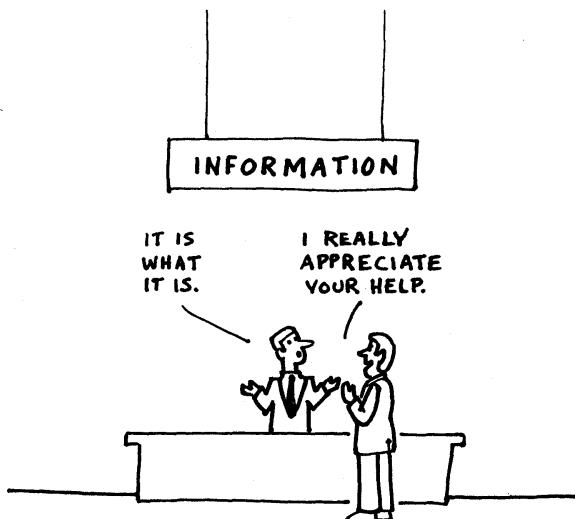
It came out, of course. Probably from aging doctors with high cholesterol counts blabbing their hearts out in taverns but, however it came out, in their sober moments those same doctors were more worried that the rest of us might find an excuse to drink too much than that we would stay alive.

I say this in all seriousness: the doctor who fogged the alcohol question with me was very likely the single best doctor I have ever had. He was compassionate, slipped me drug samples because he knew money was an issue, and was probably the most skilled diagnostician who has ever treated me. But at some basic level he would rather I had died than that I learned the truth about alcohol and heart disease.

So if you are like me and find that red wine keeps you up at night, but that a couple of shots of bourbon are soothing and restful, you are in luck. And if you didn't know this already, you are still being stonewalled — or, at least, firewalled — by a medical establishment that's afraid to decant too much of that particular genie out of the bottle and into your bloodstream.

Come on, guys! All of us would have been better off knowing back in the '50s about a fun, nonprescription way to grab a 40% across the board reduction in clogged-artery-related heart attacks.

And we would all be better off knowing right now that, horrible as AIDS is, we're probably not going to catch it from putting bandages on somebody on the side of the road. As my doctor down here said, everybody in southern Africa knows that. Not because the medical establishment in Botswana is more forthcoming than it is in the States, but because everybody here has nursed a relative through AIDS. Eaten from the same plates. Gotten their sweat on their bodies. Dabbed up their blood. And they know that you really don't catch it that way. □



# The Day They Closed Outside

*by Robert A. Kelly*

*From Central  
Park to man-  
aged care,  
from bell-  
bottoms to  
track suits:  
the story of  
the Woodstock  
generation.*

Peter and Paula met at a peace rally in Central Park in the summer of 1969. Peter liked her as soon as he saw her tossing a frisbee on the great lawn in the park. She nicely filled her bellbottom jeans, and her round face had a wholesome openness that beguiled him. She liked him too when she saw him retrieve an errant throw. His bellbottom jeans were well worn but clean, and a flaming red bandana kept his flowing curls in place. He threw the frisbee with practiced authority.

They laughed at the alliteration of their names when a mutual friend introduced them. After the rally broke up with a huge circle dance they went out for some wine and cheese at a cafe on 59th Street. They were delighted to find that they shared a common political philosophy. They both believed people have to be free, unless they behaved inappropriately. They both knew war was wrong, and that we simply had to give peace a chance. They agreed that money was the root of all evil, but they knew it was a temporary necessity, and they were both glad that their parents had enough. Astounded by their common worldview, they soon became inseparable, spending long nights in discussion groups, desperately searching for ways to save America.

Years later they both still clearly remembered the night they'd become radicalized. They had been to the peace rally in the park that afternoon, and they had lingered behind long after the final group dance. The trees in the park gave them a sense of freedom.

Evening turned to night; they had brought a blanket and some wine and cheese. They smoked a joint and dreamed of one day moving to Amsterdam. Shortly after midnight the revolving red light of a police cruiser blew away their buzz.

"The park is closed," an officer announced without leaving the car.

Peter and Paula were astonished and disturbed. The park was outside. How could they close outside?

"What?" Peter asked, walking towards the squad car.

"I said the park is closed. It closes at midnight."

"Why?" Peter asked the question of his generation.

"It's for your own good," the officer patiently explained.

"The park is dangerous at night."

"We'll take the risk," Peter replied when Paula appeared at his side.

"Don't smart mouth me, preppy," the officer snapped. "Now get out of the park."

Peter knew when he was being threatened, and although he was outraged by the cop's Gestapo tactics, they promptly left the park and returned to his downtown dormitory. They stayed up half the night, finishing their wine and cheese, and discussing their brush with the emerging police state. Something had to be done, they agreed.

Twenty-five years later life was a lot more complicated. They had both found success in their jobs. Peter had graduated at the top of his training class and was now a high level securities dealer with clients all over the city. He'd traded in his bellbottoms for a finely tailored suit, and his hair was stylishly shorn, but he felt that he still held the convictions of his youth.

Paula had pursued a career in sociology and was now working with victims of alcoholism at a local rehabilitation center. Most of her clients had been sentenced to her services so they tended to be thankless and unruly, but Paula never gave up. She knew there was good in everyone, and she desperately wanted to save those who had lost their way.

Their three-bedroom condo on East 84th Street was comfortable but not opulent. The mortgage took a good chunk out of their sizeable income. Add to that the cost of garaging their BMW, and clearly they both had to work to make ends meet. But they had not forgotten the dreams of their youth. Peter still wrote now and then, and often thought of novel plots in his spare time. Paula still sang regularly, and sometimes strummed her guitar late into the night.

They had no children, at least not yet. Paula was only a little over 40, and she still talked of maybe having a baby someday. In the mean time they bought a poogle to fill the void. The poogle is a designer dog, a cross between a poodle and a beagle. The distinctive looking animal often drew praise and

admiration from their neighbors. They named her Mary and signed their photo Christmas cards with Peter, Paula, and Mary. They still remembered the night they'd been thrown out of the park, and they often walked Mary there after midnight as a sort of civil disobedience.

Religiously they attended the monthly wine and cheese parties hosted by the NYU alumni association. Peter particularly enjoyed himself there. He liked the way Paula looked at him with respect and admiration when people sought his opinion on the course of current events, or the quality of the wine and cheese spreads.

On the night of their 25th anniversary the party was particularly interesting. In accordance with current trends the wine was mostly local, but the cheese was excellent, as was the quality and variety of the shellfish. Billy Brannigan, the current chief of police, was running for mayor on a law and order platform that would curl the toes of any self-respecting member of the ACLU. Brannigan was an NYU graduate, but almost all the alumni were ACLU members, so it surprised Peter and Paula when many supported him.

"If Brannigan wins they'll be a cop on every corner," Peter said to a particularly avid supporter of the chief. Peter made a mental note to pick up some brie and winked at Paula.

"Maybe that's just what we need," his fellow alum replied. Peter knew his friend had recently been mugged, and was understandably upset.

"Eventually you wouldn't be able to walk out of your house," Peter countered. Paula thrilled at how deftly he predicted the dire results of wrongheaded policy.

"Can't go outside today without taking your life in your hands," the victim replied. A murmur of assent rippled through their circle of friends; Peter and Paula drifted away. And so it went; everywhere they stopped to chat they found the same disturbing level of support for policies they'd have marched against not so long ago. They were glad to get out into the cold and drizzly night, even though it took them ten minutes to find a cab. By the time the taxi dropped them off at 84th Street it had stopped raining and their spirits had lifted a bit. Upstairs Paula prepared a platter of cheese while Peter popped a bottle of chardonnay and rolled a joint. They changed into jeans and curled up on the sofa in front of the gas fueled fire. Soon they felt better. Once again they talked of going to Amsterdam, but this time with a sense of urgency. At 11:45 their poogle Mary barked at the door. They looked at each other and shared the thought: time for a walk in the park.

At midnight pools of light dotted the deserted tree-lined street. They stopped for the light at Park Avenue, gazing with wonder at the massive cathedral bathed in soft white light. As they approached Fifth Avenue a vague sense of fear seemed to hover over the park, and Peter had an urge to turn back and head to the safety of their home. Paula felt the same way, but neither knew what the other was thinking, so they crossed the broad, well lit avenue and plunged into the park.

Fifty yards into the winding, lamplit path, they were sorry they ever had. It started when a boy-man on a bicycle appeared from the darkness and almost knocked Paula over as he sped by and lunged at her bag. "Here chick, here chick," he seemed to growl. As soon as he'd swooped by a second rider appeared and attacked in the same fashion, yapping



"I hate to tell you this, but there was a hole in my pocket, and I lost the budget surplus."

like a wolf as he roared by. Soon they were encircled by eight or more yelping assailants who took turns buzzing by them. Peter, Paula, and Mary stood in the middle of the circling riders, frozen in fear. The leader almost knocked Peter over as he skidded to a halt and got right up into his face. "Give me the money, asshole," he said. Peter reached for his cash, hoping to save the charge cards, but the leader just snatched the wallet from his hands. Paula handed him her wallet and kept her eyes on the ground.

"Drop your pants, asshole," the leader barked. Peter was dumbfounded but dropped his trousers. "The undies too," his assailant ordered, while the pack howled with laughter. Peter complied.

"You too, bitch," he said. Paula rapidly complied, never looking up. Peter and Paula heard the whooping laughter of the pack as it disappeared into the darkness. Tears of shame welled up in their eyes as they gazed at each other's nakedness. They knew that laughter would long echo in the corridors of their minds.

On the way back home they decided not to report the crime; it would be useless and embarrassing. Both were silently bitter over the lack of adequate police protection. They hadn't gotten a good look at their assailants; they all wore hooded sweatshirts. They noted that the description, young men in hooded sweatshirts, would narrow the suspect pool to a million or so, and they laughed. At least they still had their sense of humor.

They woke the next morning and dressed for work as if nothing had happened, but they knew they were kidding themselves. Paula had left the cheese out on the coffee table last night, and it had clearly spoiled. They shared a sense of emptiness, as though they had lost a dream, or an only child. When Peter took Mary out for her morning walk he avoided the park; the magic was gone.

Twenty-five years later they still looked back on that night as a milestone in the evolution of their political thinking. Both had voted for Brannigan that day, without any prior consultation. It was a no-brainer. People have a right to be protected; it was right there in the Declaration of Independence: Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. After their night of terror in the park, they both knew why Life was the primary right, the *sine qua non*. The electorate agreed with them and Brannigan won in a landslide. Crime did go down as the jails and prisons filled up. Peter, Paula, and many others happily paid additional taxes earmarked for prison expansion. When rumors of police improprieties surfaced, they looked the other way. Urban guerrillas were just as dangerous as Middle Eastern terrorists, and none of the people they knew were affected yet.

They had retired, down to a pleasant gated community 20 minutes north of Miami. The city was a cesspool, but Secure Horizons was like heaven on earth. Security guards manned the checkpoints 24 hours a day, and one hardly ever had to leave the grounds, so comprehensive were the community services. Every two-bedroom unit had a manmade lakefront view. The entertainment options seemed endless: an 18-hole on-site golf course, 12 tennis courts, a well equipped gym with indoor and outdoor pools, whirlpools and saunas, and the latest in exercise equipment. The adjacent fruit bar sold light lunches and a wide variety of health drinks. For those

less athletically inclined there was a 250-seat movie theater with nightly showings and a well stocked book and video store with all the latest titles, and a cozy coffee shop tucked away inside. Of course, there was a beauty salon that offered the latest in spa services. For the shoppers there was a store in the clubhouse that offered a wide variety of sporting wear, and two upscale shops adjacent to the beauty salon, for those interested in more formal wear.

There were several dining options. A bewildering variety of gourmet food was available for home delivery. Happily a dietitian was on staff to help the residents plan their menus. Several wine and cheese clubs were popular with the residents. The dining room offered an a la carte menu and was open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. It also offered monthly plans, the best value for those who planned to eat all their meals there. Peter and Paula first feared that the dining room crowd would make them uneasy, but they soon felt perfectly at home. The others weren't so old after all; most were about their age. Some nights it almost felt like a Woodstock reunion there in the dining room.

Mary the poogle had passed on, of course, but Secure Horizons allowed residents to keep dogs under 50 pounds, with some breed restrictions, so they adopted a beagle from the local shelter. They named her "Mary Too," and signed their Christmas cards Peter, Paula, and Mary Too.

All was well on the surface, but something seemed missing to Peter, and slowly a plan formed in his mind. For weeks before their 50th anniversary Peter furtively made plans for the trip to Amsterdam they had dreamed of all these years. He booked the best hotels and made flight plans for the three of them, a daunting task with a dog involved. Peter worked the chores with relish as he knew Paula would be deeply moved. Finally the day drew near.

Peter had planned for some candlelight romance on the night before their scheduled departure. He had saved the best cheese from his last three shipments, and carefully matched it with light fruits and crackers. But while checking the temperature of the vintage chardonnay he realized they were out of smoke. His regular supplier, a fellow resident, was away on vacation, so Peter decided to drive into town to pick up a bag or two. It had been a while since he'd been there, but he thought he could still find his way around, so he hopped into their BMW and drove up to the entrance. The wrought iron gate was locked shut. When he tapped his horn the guard pointed to a large sign attached to the gate.

#### OUTSIDE WILL BE CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

People have a right to a safe environment. Due to ongoing and escalating criminal activity, outside will be closed until order can be restored. We regret any inconvenience this may cause. If accessing outside is absolutely necessary please contact your local sheriff's office to make the necessary arrangements.

Peter took it well, all things considered. He knew he could get some smoke in Amsterdam, although he was somewhat concerned as he drove back to his townhouse. He contacted the local sheriff's office and was informed that vacations were not considered an absolute necessity and his petition was therefore denied. Naturally he was despondent, but he took solace in the fact that he hadn't told Paula of his plans. He felt better when his neighbor knocked on his door, just back

from Mexico and flush with product. Peter bought a quarter pound. After his first joint he felt even better, and after his second, a plan began to hatch in his mind. Perhaps they could have their adventure after all, he mused. He got on the phone to facilitate his change in plans.

The next day was Paula's busy day and she left right after breakfast. First she went to her swim class, then an hour with her personal trainer, followed by lunch with the girls from her weight-loss team. After lunch they played a round of golf, stopping twice for drinks, once at the turn and again back at the clubhouse.

She was stunned when she returned to their unit. A huge flat screen HDTV hung on their living room wall. Peter sat on the sofa across from the big screen, dressed in his faded jeans, and sporting his bright red bandana. A splendid array of cheese and crackers sat beside the wine bucket beneath the glow of two candles. The room faintly smelled of incense, and a gas fire glowed in the corner fireplace. Paula couldn't resist. She ran into the back and came out in her jeans, then snuggled up next to Peter on the couch. They shared a joint, the brie was excellent, and the wine was chilled to perfection. "Are you ready for some adventure?" he asked, and she murmured her assent while nibbling at his ear.

He flipped on the TV and an aerial view of a city appeared, so large and lifelike as to make the viewer dizzy. As the camera zoomed in they could see the canals come into focus, the endless tulip stalls and the famous red light district. "Welcome to Amsterdam," a soothing voice intoned. "If it's your first time in Amsterdam, hold onto your hats. You're in for a heck of a ride."

Peter and Paula smoked another joint and snuggled together, mesmerized by the sights of the city of their dreams. The pictures were so large and lifelike that they almost felt they were there. In a way it was better than being there. Certainly the wine and cheese were better than airline fare, and they didn't have to fear the large concentration of Muslims in Amsterdam, as they were largely left out of the film.

And so it was that Peter, Paula, and Mary Too found peace and happiness in their new arrangement. Peter still wrote now and then, and Paula kept up with her singing. Most importantly they had each other, and they were safe and secure. On occasion they got an urge to see the sunrise on the beach, but they soon got over it. They had a view of the sunset from their balcony. In fact they had everything they needed at Secure Horizons, and at times they even forgot that there was a place called outside. □

## Letters, from page 8

it was in a used bookstore in Vientiane, Laos during the Vietnam War. The millions of used copies sit in their various locations like intellectual bombs waiting to go off. The looters and anti-men still fear it. A recent YouTube video was posted showing a copy being burned

by some unseen chuckling thugs, probably from Evergreen State College. I recently gave an extra copy to a young friend who is now sleep-deprived from excessive reading. A bit dated? Sure. So is the code of Hammurabi or the Canterbury Tales. But as I listen to

Obama or Harry Reid spout their insincere bromides, they sound ever more like Wesley Mouch or Tinky Holloway. Eternal truths still ring loud from faded pages.

David Roberts  
Tacoma, WA

## Obama: The Hollow Man, from page 30

Obama is apparently much less sordid but he also injects the private and personal into the public domain. His more wholesome personality only makes the erosion between public and private worse. Citizens don't need and shouldn't care to know the intimate family details of the executive they've hired to oversee the federal bureaucracy. Private affection (or a media-fueled illusion of affection) doesn't equal efficacy in public affairs.

The erosion of the boundary between private and public realms is not accidental. Statists encourage personality cults

because they want to concentrate political power in a single person, rather than spreading it across a system of checks and balances, in which people are judged by what they legitimately accomplish, not by what they or their followers claim that they existentially are.

A strong sense of privacy is essential to individual liberty. So here's to staying confident that America's innate sense of privacy survives Barack Obama. I believe that it — and the other first things, basic principles — will do so. He's not transitional enough to change those things. □

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# Brother, Can You Spare a Decade?

*by Mark Skousen*

Few things other than a New Deal can be more painful than an economic depression. But few eras were more vital and enjoyable than the private side of the last depression.

One of the rare books in my financial library is "I Like the Depression," by Henry Ansley, the "Jackass of the Plains." This amusing little volume was published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1932, and the price was a buck fifty.

Ansley, a newspaperman from Amarillo, Texas, described a prosperity in the 1920s that wasn't that great. He burned candles at both ends, became a financial hotshot, and ultimately overextended himself. Then the depression hit: "Good-bye twin beds, frozen salads, indigestion, credit and swelled head. Hail to the old-fashioned nightgown, buttermilk, sow bosom [a kind of food], comfort and cash." He lost his job but found happiness by rediscovering leisure, friends, and neighborliness. Hard times taught him the value of a dollar and not to take things for granted: "My dog is my pal again; my wife my lover and my Dad my advisor."

Ansley's book was never a bestseller, but it started me thinking. Can the worst of times also be the best of times? The history books are replete with the evils of the 1930s — soup lines, bank closings, Hoovervilles, dustbowls, bear markets, demoralizing despair. It's all been retold countless times, in such books as Milton Meltzer's "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," and most recently Amity Shlaes's "The Forgotten Man." The

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Great Depression brought us Nazi Germany, the New Deal, Keynesianism, and, some say, World War II.

Not surprisingly, everyone from Wall Street to the halls of Congress is worried that the current recession will turn into the dreaded D, and has seized on desperate rescue measures. But was the Great Depression all bad? Did anything good come out of the 1930s? I started doing some research and was amazed to find a bright side to the gloomy '30s — a lower cost of living, great new inventions and other technological advances, new forms of entertainment, more sports and reading, and a return to sober social behavior.

Start with leisure. Henry Ansley describes the free time he had during the depression. Indeed, millions of Americans had a lot more leisure time. Before the depression, almost everyone worked a six-day week. In the 1930s, the five-day work week became commonplace. "Spread the work!" was the rally cry. By 1937, wage earners in 57% of all manufacturing companies enjoyed a five-day week. Saturday was now a free day,

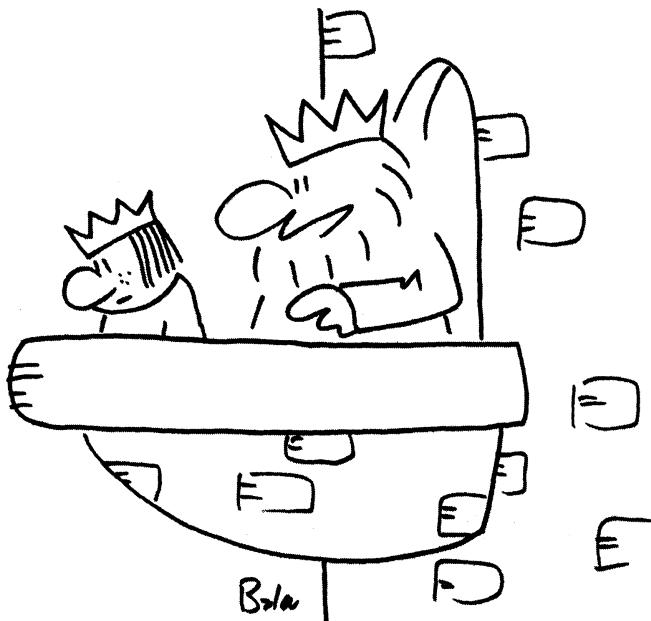
and the Saturday rush hour was replaced by the Friday rush hour.

As a result, there was a tremendous increase in sports and leisure-oriented jobs. People began getting out into the sun and open air and taking a greater interest in golf, tennis, skiing, roller skating, and bicycling. Softball became a national pastime; by 1939, there were nearly half a million teams and 5 million players of all ages throughout the country. Expensive private club golf courses withered, but inexpensive public courses grew. Miniature golf was all the rage in the early '30s. Bobby Jones became the first and only person to win the Grand Slam of golf in 1930. And black athletes became national idols for the first time, Joe Louis in boxing and Jesse Owens in track and field.

Americans traveled more. House trailers became a very big business. Camping, canoeing, and other inexpensive outdoor activities increased in popularity. People took their cameras with them, and photography became a craze of remarkable dimensions. Americans took tons of pictures with their small German cameras. Life and Look — big, glossy picture magazines — became popular.

Dancing, all the rage in the '20s, continued to rage in the '30s. Americans would dance their way out of the depression! Young people everywhere danced the swing, the jitterbug, and the boogie woogie to the music of Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Louie Armstrong.

Indoors, parlor games such as bridge and the ingenious "Monopoly" were popular. People read more, and circulation at local public libraries increased. Kids loved comic books, especially "Superman," the world's first comic book superhero. Books "condensed" by Reader's Digest saved time and money. There was an intense interest in epic novels — Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth," A.J. Cronin's "The Citadel," Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" — as well as such how-to books as Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People." (1937, with 17 printings right away).



"When more than half of them are lying down like that, it's called a 'recession'."

In the same year, Lin Yutang, the Chinese-American Taoist, published "The Importance of Living," which was to become especially popular among libertarians. It encouraged Americans to stop worrying and start "letting go." One chapter was entitled "The Art of Loafing." "I am quite sure," Lin wrote, "that amidst the hustle and bustle of American life, there is a great deal of wistfulness, of the divine desire to lie on a plot of grass under tall beautiful trees of an idle afternoon and just do nothing." Whether fortunately or unfortunately, in their own opinion, millions of Americans got to live Lin's upbeat message of idleness.

## New Entertainments

Idleness — and its companion, entertainment. People wanted to forget their troubles, and radio and motion pictures provided an escape. Radio really came of age during this period, with up to 80 million listeners on some evenings. There was a lot more to radio than FDR's fireside chats. It was the way to hear worldwide news bulletins, good music, and such half-hour comedies as "Amos 'n' Andy," the first syndicated program, and "The Jack Benny Show." In the late 1930s, NBC was carrying broadcasts of symphony orchestras, especially its own orchestra, conducted by the immortal Arturo Toscanini, to 10 million listeners every week. And who can forget the night of Sunday, October 30, 1938, when Orson Welles broadcast his version of H.G. Wells' "The War of the Worlds"?

Hollywood blossomed during the '30s. In one decade, the motion picture industry went from silent films to talkies in Technicolor. Films brought the American public together as never before. Gary Cooper, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, John Wayne, Mickey Rooney, and Clark Gable were welcome alternatives to Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, and other demagogues of the era. Many considered Shirley Temple a gift from God during the gloomy depression. The motion picture event of 1938 was the first full-length animated cartoon, Walt Disney's "Snow White." The same year saw one of the first films in Technicolor, the blockbuster "The Adventures of Robin Hood," starring Errol Flynn. A burst of classic award-winning films came out the next year, including "The Wizard of Oz," "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," and the greatest of all epic films, "Gone With the Wind."

The '30s was the era of the first great horror films, "Frankenstein," "Dracula," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," and "King Kong." For a dime, Americans could go to the Saturday matinee and see double features of cowboys, adventurers, and gangsters. The silver screen brought us science fiction, serial thrillers and the Singing Cowboy (Gene Autry). The theater was filled with humor — Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, the Three Stooges. Americans would laugh their way out of the depression! There were reasons why Chicago economist Robert Lucas, Jr., called the 1930s "one long vacation."

## New Technology

Alvin Hansen and other Keynesian economists developed their "stagnation thesis" in the late 1930s, arguing that the United States was indefinitely stuck in an economic rut. They claimed that there was no new technology, no new frontier to drive the American economy. They ignored the tremendous economic progress that took place throughout the

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depression — the invention of plastics, artificial fibers, plywood, the 2-cycle diesel engine, and lighter, tougher steels.

Ernst Ruska and Max Knoll invented the electron microscope in 1932. Howard Armstrong created FM radio in 1933. Wallace Carothers manufactured nylon, and Robert A. Watson-Watt discovered radar in 1935. Hans Pabst von Ohain developed the jet engine in 1937 and the first jet airplane in

*Few bull markets have ever equaled the summer of 1932, when the rails tripled and the utility averages doubled. Wall Street went on a rampage for the next four years.*

1939. Chester Carlson originated xerography in 1938. Igor Sikorsky made the first practical helicopter in 1939. Several people, including Philo T. Farnsworth and Isaac Shoenberg, developed television in the 1930s. CBS and NBC began broadcasting TV during this decade.

Manufacturers weren't idle in getting new technology to market. New household products included electric mixers, pop-up toasters, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, and irons. For the first time, consumers enjoyed sliced bread and packaged frozen foods. Union Pacific came out with fancy new streamlined, air-conditioned trains. Mass-market automobiles could now accelerate to 60 mph, carrying passengers along new highways with underpasses and cloverleafs. The dirigible, a new form of air transportation, appeared in 1936 (but disappeared with the fiery destruction of the Hindenberg a year later). The Douglas DC3 came out in 1936, traveling at 200 mph, compared to the 1932 passenger airplane speed of 110 mph. Coast-to-coast travel in overnight air sleepers was now possible. New ocean liners, such as the *Queen Mary*, appeared in a crowded New York harbor. Everyone came to witness the building of the 102-story Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Center (the only skyscraper group to rise in the 1930s). And who could not marvel at the Golden Gate Bridge, opened to traffic on May 28, 1937?

Social historian Frederick Lewis Allen, author of "Only Yesterday" (1931), a bestselling history of the 1920s, summed it up best when he wrote in a sequel, "Since Yesterday" (1940), "the American imagination was beginning to break loose again." At the end of the decade, the New York World's Fair had as its theme "The World of Tomorrow."

### Society and Economics

The depression brought about a change in American social trends. People attended church more. Many retreated from the sexual revolution of the roaring '20s. The mood was more somber and prudent, even after Prohibition was repealed in December 1933. (By the end of the decade, Alcoholics Anonymous was founded.) There was greater approval of marriage and family life. The divorce rate dropped sharply, by 23% from 1929 to 1932, though so did the marriage rate and the birth rate — possibly because marriage and children cost money.

Not all economic news was bad. The most favorable statistic was the decline in the cost of living. During the period 1929-32, retail prices dropped by an average 24%, wholesale prices by 31%, farm prices by 51%, and raw commodity prices by 42%. Of course, wages, salaries, dividends, and other forms of income declined as well, but for those who kept their jobs and held onto their assets, the loss of nominal income was offset by sharply lower prices for all consumer products. "Everything was all right in those years," said a woman quoted in Amity Shlaes' book, "but only if you had a job."

Unemployment reached 25% and higher in some regions at the depths of the depression, causing enormous hardship for millions of Americans. But see it in another light: three out of every four people were employed in the worst parts of the depression. Total employment rose after 1932, reaching 90% by the end of the decade. In a sense, the Democrats were right: happy days were here again!

Businesses adjusted to the new deflation by downsizing, cutting costs, and implementing labor-saving devices. Even the farming industry mechanized. By 1936, despite persistent unemployment, real national output had nearly recovered to predepression levels. Auto sales exceeded all previous years except 1928-29. The steel industry was operating at close to capacity. Even the building industry was climbing briskly. Miami was having its best season since the collapse of the Florida land boom. The race tracks were crowded, lavish debutante parties flourished in the big cities, and the night clubs were full.

For bulls and bears alike, the 1930s was the most fantastic period in stock market history. Stock prices collapsed between 1929 and 1932, losing an average 88%, but industrial, rail, and utility stocks all shot up from their lows in the summer of 1932, anticipating the end of hard times. Few bull markets have ever equaled the rocket performance of the summer of 1932, when the rails tripled within eight weeks and the utility averages doubled. Wall Street went on a rampage for the next four years. The Dow rose 67% in 1933, 4% in 1934, 38% in 1935, and 25% in 1936. After a sharp 32% correction in 1937, the market resumed its upward trend until war broke out in Europe in September, 1939. There were also plenty of speculative opportunities on the long side of gold and other natural resource stocks during the '30s. In sum, the bulls, not just the bears, had plenty of chances to make money in the 1930s.

There's an old saying, "It is the irritation in the oyster that forms the pearl." The Great Depression was an irritation that most people didn't expect. A few people couldn't take the hard times and jumped out of windows, but most responded to the challenge. Adversity often demonstrates the virtue and creativity of humankind. Bad news often creates good news and opportunities to learn and advance. The 1930s were no exception. □

**Where will you be July 9-11?  
It could be Las Vegas, at the  
2009 Liberty Editors  
Conference. Shouldn't it be?  
Conference details are on page 2.**

# Reviews

**"Little Pink House,"** by Jeff Benedict. Grand Central Publishing, 2009, 389 pages.

## *Not So Eminent Domain*

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Bruce Ramsey

On June 23, 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court said that New London, Connecticut, could force the sale of Susette Kelo's house. The question before the court had been whether the city's plan for her neighborhood — private condos, a privately owned hotel, and laboratories for a private-sector corporation, Pfizer Inc. — was a "public use" under the 5th Amendment of the Constitution. The city said it was, because it would generate taxes and jobs. Five of the nine members of the court swallowed that argument. By one vote, Susette Kelo lost.

The firm representing her, the Institute for Justice, a libertarian public-interest firm, also lost. It was aiming to establish a new rule in law, and it ended up with the court's establishment of a rule even worse than the previous one. Because Susette Kelo could not appeal to a higher legal authority, the case looked like a disaster for the Institute and its libertarian donors. But

it wasn't. In America, you can appeal to public opinion — and the Institute did.

The result has not been as decisive as the Supreme Court victory it wanted, but it is a remarkable story of how, in a battle of law, one may lose the war, yet win much of the peace.

In 2007, I was in a discussion with land-use thinktank intellectuals in New England. They were not sympathetic to the property-rights movement. In their view, public redevelopment of old cities like New London was necessary, and without property takings you couldn't do it. It was altogether proper, they thought, that Kelo had lost her case. And it was outrageous and exasperating that the right-wing, antigovernment Institute for Justice had convinced the media that everyone's home was in danger. Look what had happened: Americans had been made afraid of their own government and were backing a movement to take away some of its socially legitimate power.

Terrible.

The story of all this — Susette Kelo and New London and the Institute

for Justice — is told in "Little Pink House." Its author, Jeff Benedict, went to law school, then decided he could make more of a difference as a writer. He made a name for himself covering the Kobe Bryant rape case for Sports Illustrated, and with the book, "Out of Bounds: Inside the NBA's Culture of Rape, Violence, and Crime." He wrote "No Bone Unturned," a work about the legal fight between anthropologists and Indian tribes over ancient remains. These aren't libertarian books particularly, nor does "Little Pink House" aim specifically at that audience. Its target audience is general. Benedict tries to be fair to both sides. But he starts and ends with Kelo, and his sympathies are clearly with her.

The key to a marketable book of journalism is a story that has conflict and human character. "Little Pink House" has both. In choosing a story to write about, Benedict told me, "I'm looking for characters — characters who evolve over time." In Kelo he found a woman who began by being afraid to talk to a newspaper reporter. By the end,

however, she was standing on the steps of the Supreme Court and meeting the national press. She also testified before the U.S. Senate.

Benedict was living just two towns away from her when he approached her by making a cold call at her house. As he introduced himself, she said, "I know who you are. What took you so long?"

That's Susette Kelo. I met her in early 2009, when she was accompanying Benedict on his book tour. She insists she's just "ordinary folks," and in many ways she is exactly that. She is not highly educated, not wealthy, and not otherwise prominent. She answers questions with simple, blunt statements of fact and will. She is extraordinary in one respect: determination. When it comes to her rights, this Yankee red-headed woman is like the snake on the flag that says "Don't tread on me." She is the sort of person who could stand up in a public meeting and yell, "This is bullshit!"

For the Institute for Justice, Susette Kelo was the perfect defendant. Donor-financed, it demands no money of its clients. But it demands other things, principally that its clients not give up and settle, but fight — publicly, passionately, and persistently — for matters of principle. In New London, IJ's aim was not to get Kelo a better price for her land, though in the end it did. Its aim was to beat the government, and thereby stop the use of eminent domain for "economic development" in New London and everywhere. To do that, it needed a champion who would have the public's sympathy.

Kelo had been pregnant at 16, had married young, had borne five kids, had been twice divorced, and in middle age had become a nurse. Never in her life had she been to New York City, 100 miles away. She had no wealth other than her house, a cottage more than a century old on a postage-stamp lot. It had cost her just \$53,500 in the late '90s, because it was in the wrong part of a depressed town, within sniffing range of a sewage plant. She didn't care about that. It was her house, she had put her sweat into it, she loved it, and she didn't want to give it up at any price.

"It was never about the money," she told me.

Of course libertarians and genuine

conservatives would be on her side. Government-connected progressives, including the entire leftwing bloc on the Supreme Court (Stephen Breyer, David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and John Paul Stevens) would be against her, because they understood that her case was against state power. But many ordinary left-liberal would not see it that way. Here was a woman standing up against a pharmaceutical company. Would a liberal side with Pfizer?

The general public, which is neither conservative nor liberal, would of course be on her side. And it was. She received mail from all over America, saying, "Good for you!"

*Kelo v. City of New London* put the

issue of eminent domain in the spotlight, and put government on the defensive. The result has been a movement that has restricted the power of eminent domain in more than 40 states, and that still continues. In some states the gains are marginal and may wash away; in others they make a real difference. America still falls short of the rule which Justice Clarence Thomas wanted, "that the government may take property only if it actually uses or gives the public a legal right to use the property." But *Kelo* allowed Thomas to make an historic argument for that position, and for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to end her career with a strong dissent that will be quoted for decades. It includes

## Notes on Contributors

*Baloo* is a *nom de plume* of Rex F. May.

*David T. Beito* is an associate professor of history at the University of Alabama, and author of *Taxpayers in Revolt* and *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State*.

*David Boaz* is the author of *Libertarianism: A Primer* and *The Politics of Freedom*, and is the editor of *The Libertarian Reader* and the *Cato Handbook for Policymakers*.

*Alan Bock* is senior editorial writer for the Orange County Register and author of *Waiting to Inhale*, a book on medical marijuana.

*Barbara Branden* is the author of the biography *The Passion of Ayn Rand*.

*Scott Chambers* is a cartoonist living in California.

*Stephen Cox* is a professor at UC San Diego. His most recent book is *The New Testament and Literature*.

*Lanny Ebenstein* teaches economics at UC Santa Barbara and is the author of biographies of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman.

*Andrew Ferguson* is a contributing editor of *Liberty*. At present he is working on a biography of science-fiction writer R.A. Lafferty.

*Jon Harrison* lives and writes in Vermont.

*Gary Jason* is a contributing editor of *Liberty*.

*Robert A. Kelly* is a retired health actuary living in Virginia Beach, working on a novel and his tan.

*Eric Kenning* is the pen name of a writer in New York.

*Richard Kostelanetz*'s books include *Toward Secession; 156 More Political Essays from an Orthodox Anarchist-Libertarian*.

*Ross Levatter* is a physician living in Phoenix.

*Bob Marcus* is a long time reader of *Liberty*, an entrepreneur, CEO, world traveller, and libertarian living in San Francisco.

*Bill Merritt* is a sometimes-novelist living in Gaborone, Botswana. If you are offended at what he has to say, you are welcome to try to pursue him through the Botswana legal system.

*Randal O'Toole* is a contributing editor of *Liberty* and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute.

*Larry Penner* lives and writes in Great Neck, New York.

*Patrick Qualey* may be found in his natural habitat, a Seattle coffee shop.

*Bruce Ramsey* is a journalist in Seattle.

*Ted Roberts'* humor appears in newspapers around the United States and is heard on NPR.

*Jane S. Shaw* is executive vice president of the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy.

*Jo Ann Skousen* is entertainment editor of *Liberty*. She lives in New York.

*Mark Skousen* is the author of *Economic Logic*, now available in its second edition.

*Tim Slagle* is a standup comedian living in Chicago. His website is [timsagle.com](http://timsagle.com).

*Laurence M. Vance* is the author of *Christianity and War and Other Essays Against the Warfare State*.

*Jim Walsh* is an assistant editor of *Liberty*.

*Leland B. Yeager* is Ludwig von Mises Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Economics at Auburn University.

these memorable lines:

The specter of condemnation hangs over all property. Nothing is to prevent the State from replacing any Motel 6 with a Ritz-Carlton, any home with a shopping mall, or any farm with a factory.

"Little Pink House" tells the story of the case in a straightforward, chronological way. It starts with two threads, Kelo leaving her second husband and buying a house, and the organizers of the New London Development Corp. concocting their project to redevelop part of the city for Pfizer. The stories start at the same time and are like two satellites whose orbits are destined to intersect.

The reader sees Kelo knowing nothing as the fight begins, reaching almost blindly for allies, and slowly feeling strength. "Fighting's a hard job," she told me. "I had a lot of support from my neighbors." But not all of them: in the book you meet neighbors who want to fight, but are too old. You meet the ones who give up and decide to sell. You also meet the ones who say they'll give up but are inspired to hold out. You meet the neighbor who dives into the New London Development Corp.'s garbage in the middle of the night, looking for evidence, and finding it. You meet the only local politico who sides with Kelo — the elected mayor of New London, who has no support on his city council and at one point is dragged away from a demolition site by his own cops. You meet the local newspaper editor, the first of many newspaper people on Kelo's side.

The other fetching figure in "Little Pink House" is Claire Gaudiani. She is bright, articulate, and self-driven — the high-energy president of the local private college who, after being challenged by a minority student to help the poor, takes upon herself the mission of bringing an economic future to the depressed city of New London. With persistence, charm, and an un-PC dash of sex appeal — "She was the closest thing New London had to a diva," Benedict writes — Gaudiani sets out to create something new and good by clearing the ground of everything and everybody in her way.

Gaudiani is far more entrepreneurial than the typical bureaucrat. She clashes with the old-line Democrats of

New London and with the professors of Connecticut College. In another story she herself would have been the heroine. But in this story she was the user of state money and state power, forcing real people to sacrifice for a planner's vision.

That vision has only partly come to pass. Pfizer did build a research institute at New London, but the company is now cutting back, and Kelo says that everyone in town expects the company to leave. The rest of the property taken, including the site of Kelo's house and

the houses of the neighbors who joined her lawsuit, was supposed to be developed by another private company. But the company couldn't get financing, and the land remains vacant.

Kelo moved her "little pink house," which is now a museum in New London, took the money, and bought a house in the next town. She still has a job as a nurse — ironically, a job with the city she sued. On the day I interviewed her, she had to take a transcontinental flight back to New London, so she wouldn't miss any more days of work. □

**"Future Imperfect: Technology and Freedom in an Uncertain World," by David D. Friedman. Cambridge University Press, 2008, 357 pages.**

# Things to Come?

Ross Levatter

What can you do with a doctorate in physics and a job teaching economics in a law school?

If you're David Friedman, you can generate 22 very interesting chapters on various futures we might (or might not) live through in the next three decades or so. What will technology bring us? Will it make life better or worse? What are the economic implications? How will these various futures affect our legal system? Friedman explains, clarifies, enlightens, and entertains.

Consider copyright. There are laws on the books. But how effective can they be when you can burn a disk in the privacy of your home? Back when it was expensive to copy and pirate material, legal penalties argued against pursuing a course of action that was difficult and not terribly profitable to begin

with. Now the actions that can violate a copyright (to a program, a movie, a piece of music, an online text) are cheap to perform and usually very difficult to detect and prosecute. What follows? Should the law become more draconian, to stabilize the deterrence while the likelihood of capture is decreasing? Or should intellectual property owners develop technological methods of defending their property since they can no longer count on the state to do so?

And then there's encryption, which, combined with "e-cash," can make internet transactions both very safe and impossible to link to specific individuals. With public-private key encryption, you can develop a reputation online for quality and service, be paid with e-cash (computer monetary equivalents that can be transferred from one encrypted account to another), and run a business (legal or illegal) without ever having to know exactly whom (in "meat space")

you are dealing with, and without those people ever having to know who you really are and where you're really located. As a result, it may become hard to collect taxes.

And just in time, too, because technology is rapidly developing to the point where many guards against privacy will disappear. Everything done in the public sphere, and perhaps even the private sphere, will be so subject to videocapture, download, and computer analysis that venturing anywhere in public will imply that you don't have an expectation of privacy. We'll see "1984" in 2020, or sooner.

If you're networked into the internet, your computer can be "broken into." But from a legal perspective, what does it mean to "break into" a computer? It's different from a real-world burglary. Your home or office wasn't physically entered. Your computer is still there. And because data can be copied without being erased, it's probable that none of your property (in the form of computer data) was taken. It's still there on your computer; it's merely been duplicated. Figuring out whether it is best to analogize computer break-ins to housebreaking, fraud, or perhaps even an unwanted (but not necessarily illegal) communication is, Friedman argues, something that courts will have to get better at answering.

Friedman's book provides an introduction to these problems. And it covers much more than computer technology. There's also biotechnology. Even today, clear and previously unchallenged legal rules can no longer be easily applied. Friedman tells of the baby with five parents. A married couple is infertile. The man is sterile. His wife cannot produce a fertile egg; nor is her uterus capable of carrying a fetus to term. But modern medicine is not stymied. A sperm donor provides sperm. An egg donor provides an egg. The fertilized egg is implanted in a gestational donor who is willing to carry the fetus to term for a fee — a rent-a-womb situation. All goes well until, in the third trimester, the original couple divorces. Who has the legal rights and obligations of parenthood?

Standard law in California (where this case occurred in 1998) had been that the mother is the woman who delivered the baby, and the father is her husband.

This is an example, Friedman thinks, of the law not keeping up. The court actually decided the case in question by finding that the parents were the infertile couple without whom the situation would not have developed. The case made new law.

Technology affects death as well as birth. What are the legal implications of freezing yourself? Now, in many states, you cannot do this until you die — not much help for a person with a disease that cripples and debilitates before it ultimately kills. You'd rather freeze yourself now, when you're relatively healthy, so you might be awakened when medicine knows how to cure your disease. But the company that freezes you is illegally assisting in suicide if it follows your preferences and your request. And what if a prisoner with a life sentence freezes himself? What is his legal status when unfrozen in 100 years?

When medical technology allows

women to choose just when they wish to have babies, and select the babies' characteristics, while preventing sex from leading to unwanted births, the choice of sex and the choice of parenting are divorced. What will be the ultimate effects on marriage, legally and culturally?

And what of nanotechnology, mood-altering drugs, and drugs that improve intelligence and physical abilities? What happens when people can become near-immortal? What does planetary travel imply? What about deep virtual reality (simulated reality you not only see and hear, but feel, smell, and touch)? Friedman discusses them all.

This is a delightful book, written by a creative mind. A character in Alan Moore's novel "Watchmen" once suggested that the future is a race between the Four Horsemen and the Seventh Cavalry. Friedman helps us to bet on the spread. □

**"Advice to War Presidents: A Remedial Course in Statecraft," by Angelo Codevilla. Basic Books, 2009, 300 pages.**

# Simple Advice

Bruce Ramsey

War on terror. Weapons of mass destruction. Islamofascism.

Nation-building. Exit strategy. Peace process.

In foreign affairs, real names were long ago replaced by hucksterism and magic. A nation that once was usually at peace but occasionally had *enemies* and *made war* now spends billions "advising, aiding or just hectoring inconclusively in all the world's quarrels."

The key word is inconclusively. Modern America is incompetent about

war, says Angelo Codevilla in "Advice to War Presidents."

Codevilla is a former Foreign Service officer. He is a professor of international relations at Boston University and vice chairman of the U.S. Army War College Board of Visitors. He has a warrior streak that some libertarians would like and some would not. He wrote in another place that libertarians are part of a "noble American tradition" and that they make good points about America minding its own business. But of "The Empire Has No Clothes" (2004), written by Ivan Eland

of the Independent Institute, Codevilla wrote, "His answer for every actual or possible controversy with foreigners is to blame America, and then advise us to give in."

I think of Codevilla as a foreign-affairs classicist. He readily quotes the Greek historian Thucydides and once prepared a translation of Niccolò Machiavelli's "The Prince." Anyway, I like him. He is blunt. He is realistic without being a Kissinger-and-Nixon type of "realist." Codevilla wrote a fascinating book about how the Swiss kept out the Germans in World War II: "Between the Alps and a Hard Place," which I reviewed in *Liberty* (April 2001).

And he does aphorisms. His new book has such fine one-liners as these:

A war on terror is "a war on nobody in particular."

Phony war fools only the phonies who wage it.

"Disarmament" disarmed those who believed in it.

Power is likelier to compel money than money is to buy power.

Seldom will economics alone accomplish political ends.

War's most important front is at home.

Losing the peace means you lost the war.

If you can't celebrate [victory] in peace and safety, with flags flying, bands blaring and enemies dead or cringing, chances are it's not the real thing.

Codevilla says that the three main schools of foreign-policy thought — the internationalist, the realist, and the neo-conservative — all use the "language and assumptions of early 20th century's Progressive movement." All favor technocratic fixes to conflicts of blood and belief. The liberal internationalists "want to put America's muscle at the service of international institutions" that can be trusted to vote for law and justice. The neocons want to barge into foreign lands and make the people "more and more like us." Codevilla might be called a realist, except that the self-professed "realists" believe that beliefs don't matter and that allegiance is based on material interests. It's an assumption, Codevilla writes, that "offends foreigners by telling them not to care about things they care about." To assume that money makes the world go 'round, and that sophisticates should

"follow the money," is to be a kind of capitalist rube. What starts wars usually isn't greed, but fear.

To be successful in foreign affairs, you have to try "understanding foreigners as they understand themselves." That's not "multiculturalism," which Codevilla sees as siding with the other guy rather than yourself, as long as he's "moderate." It means understanding him — because you can get what you want more often if you understand what he wants, how much he wants it, and what he'll do to get it.

All three foreign-policy schools, Codevilla writes, "want to reform, to teach, to stabilize — somehow to better — the world, to remake it in their image of America: secular, peaceful, orderly, emancipated, and cosmopolitan." The three schools are three flavors of international do-goodism.

Codevilla writes:

Our statesmen have assumed that if we don't try to resolve others' quarrels, tell them how to live, mind their business by force to some extent, then we are shirking our duty. That is because supposedly our government has a duty not just to the American people, but to all mankind. That duty erases the difference between our business and other peoples' business.

But there is a difference. "On planet Earth," he writes, "other people resent you for presuming to tell them how to live — for minding their business instead of your own."

Codevilla's principle is the classic one: American independence. The primary objective of the U.S. government abroad should be "to make sure people leave us alone." Terrorists are more likely to leave us alone if we leave their own societies alone. But if they don't, the American government needs to respond with violence toward them or the governments that harbor them. "Doing this," he writes, "requires a military force conceived to dismay and defeat enemies."

Our enemies. "We should enlist only in our own cause," he writes.

Codevilla does not call for withdrawing from all alliances, as many libertarians do. But he suggests that "the bottom-line question about alliances must be 'who's willing to do what, and why?'" Most purported allies of America are actually protectorates.



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Call things by their right names. Don't be so clever that you end up believing your own fantasies.

These themes appear over and over in this short, blunt book.

Do you believe in diplomacy? Good. Diplomacy is essential. But always know what you want to say, and have a good answer for the classic question: "Why should anything you say lead anyone to accommodate you?"

Beware the fuzzy label — or the

clear label slapped on the fuzzy reality.

Victory, for example. We all remember George W. Bush landing on the carrier, declaring it. Five years later, supporters of the Iraq occupation were declaring it again. "You should subject any claims of an American victory," Codevilla writes, "to the question: Who precisely won what?"

This is a clarifying book. Like the little lines in a car's rear window, it makes the fog go away. I recommend it. □

**"Un Lun Dun," by China Miéville. Del Rey, 2007, 474 pages.**

# Shattering the Looking Glass

Andrew Ferguson

"Un Lun Dun" is a young-adult novel written by a British Marxist. And, for those of you who are still with me, it is also a testament to a political truth that every day becomes more important for lovers of liberty: take your allies where you find them.

Miéville built his reputation as a writer on his created world of Bas-Lag, settings for the steampunk fantasies "Perdido Street Station," "The Scar," and "Iron Council." In the first, a plot that is frankly nonsensical is compensated for by the richness of invention displayed in his city New Crobuzon, a megalopolis as richly textured as (and slightly less fanciful than) London. In the second, Miéville took the bold step of leaving this city behind, forgoing the many stories that could be set in it for a larger epic set on that old libertarian favorite, the floating anarchic pirate-town. Miéville overcomes his plotting problems here through the expedient of, point-by-point, subverting the structure of the sea-shanty adventure tale. In

"Iron Council," he tried to do the same for the ensemble-cast Western, but got bogged down in labor politics, much like today's unions.

Miéville, then, as readers of this magazine might expect, is effective to the degree that his politics stay in the background of his stories. (There are many libertarian novelists of whom this is also true.) And since "Un Lun Dun" is pervaded with, but never dominated by, a healthy distrust of government, it is accordingly very effective — so effective, in fact, that it not only joins Cory Doctorow's "Little Brother" and "The Order of the Phoenix" from the Harry Potter series in the recent wave of great antiauthoritarian YA fiction, but also aspires to the higher canon of wonderfully imaginative fiction ostensibly written for a young-adult audience, alongside such classics as Lewis Carroll's Alice stories and Norton Juster's "Phantom Tollbooth."

Having said that, the book does start slow, and the fact that it's on purpose doesn't mitigate much. Zanna is a young blonde poor-but-proud coun-

cil-housing girl, which is to say, prime YA heroine material. More to the point, after she is referred to by several societal misfits as the "Shwazzy" — a bastardization of the French *choisi*, or "chosen one" — it is clear, by the standards of the genre, that a quest is in order, one that will probably involve some sort of grand fetch-errand through a grungy but lovable underworld in order to secure the one item that can defeat the all-encompassing enemy threatening that underworld and through it, the mundane world above. And so it seems to be, as Zanna and her best friend Deeba journey into UnLondon ("Un lun dun," we find out later, is a battle-cry version) in order to take on the Smog, a particulate pollutant cloud-mind that "learns" by burning and absorbing everything around it. After a series of getting-to-know-you encounters in the "abcity" (one of the better puns in a book bristling with them), Zanna prepares herself and her newly acquired motley following for their first confrontation with the Smog's minions — a confrontation that lasts exactly as long as it takes her to get whacked over the head by one of them.

Zanna's fall is accompanied by the collapse of the prophetic structure whose step-by-step fulfillment would pass for plot in most YA fare. This assembly-line narrative is represented within "Un Lun Dun" by the Book (a speaking character) that had predicted the coming of the Shwazzy, and outlined the steps her journey would take. As it becomes clear that Zanna will not be taking any steps for a while, the battle appears lost at its very beginning — until a master of umbrellas (broken umbrellas — don't ask) comes along with a plan to ward off the Smog.

With UnLondon seemingly safe, it is left to Deeba to convey the Shwazzy back to London; as weeks go by, the memories of the place, as is so often true of childhood places, begin to fade. But Deeba worries about those she left behind: how are they faring in their fight? How can she even find out what's happening in a place that only tenuously exists? Curious, she heads to the internet for answers, and what she finds shows her not only that the fight is going badly, but that the plan to save UnLondon has been a sham from the start.

So Deeba — mentioned in the official prophetic Book only as “The Funny One” in the entry on “Sidekicks of the Shwazzy” — steps into the spotlight. Making her way back to the uncity, she finds it in a state of all-out war: a war, moreover, that she knows is unwinnable. To save the place, she must fight not only the assorted forces mustered by enemy, but also the established hierarchs of UnLondon, who, following the plan of the umbrella maven as blindly as they once followed prophecy, obstinately insist that nothing can go wrong.

Thus Deeba is caught between two evils: the egalitarian nihilism of the Smog, and the technocratic statism of the supposed resistance — evils that are, with or without the knowledge of the “good guys,” working in concert.\* Trying to stay a step ahead of both leads to entanglements with a third: brutal opportunistic pragmatism, in the form of British security forces threatening Deeba with the deportation of her parents. This intrusion of real consequences, so much more imminent than any fairy-tale peril could ever be, shatters the divide traditionally separating the real world from make-believe, raising the horrific possibility of the government tunneling even into the imagination in order to impose its version of events.

But “Un Lun Dun” resists the government’s narrative as much as it does the worn-out archetypal quest pattern: Miéville shows at every turn the power the unfettered autarchic mind has over preordained structures. Deeba becomes an antiheroine, not in the presently debased sense of a purposefully unlikeable lead character, but rather as someone who persistently refuses to do what is expected of her. In a time when so much of our culture seems to revolve around Shwazzy-types about whom so much is promised and so little delivered — and I don’t mean here just the president and those courtiers jostling for

position around him, hoping one day to be invited to the modern equivalent of the toilette — Deeba represents a type that we could use a lot more of: those who, whether through native ingenuity or sheer desperation, figure out how to do what needs to be done.

Miéville deserves credit for introducing such a character, and such an

imaginative setting, to this generation of YA readers. If he can combine the consistency he displays in “Un Lun Dun” with the greater complexity of his Bas-Lag books, then perhaps in the next few years we’ll be treated to the sight of an avowed Marxist accepting the award for Best Novel from the Libertarian Futurist Society. □

**“Doubt,” directed by John Patrick Shanley. Miramax Films, 2008, 104 minutes.**

# No Easy Answers

Jo Ann Skousen

Innocent until proven guilty. This is the principle upon which our legal system is based, and it has served us well for over 200 years. Yes, it means that occasionally a guilty person goes free for lack of sufficient evidence, but we would rather see ten guilty men go free than one innocent man incarcerated. That has been our creed, and it is one of the founding principles that has made our nation great.

But what if the suspected crime is so heinous that further incidents must be prevented at all costs? What happens when we simply can’t afford the risk of letting a suspect remain free? This is a question we have had to face since the beginning of the war on terror, when we started sending suspected terrorists to holding cells in Guantanamo. It is echoed forcefully in the opening line of John Patrick Shanley’s timely and thought-provoking film, “Doubt”: “What do you do when you’re not sure?”

The film is set in a Catholic school in 1964, one year after the assassination of President Kennedy and two years after the Bay of Pigs invasion, a time

that not so coincidentally mirrors our current heightened state of alert. Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), the headmistress, is a strict, no-nonsense nun who keeps an eye on everyone, students and teachers alike, to make sure no one crosses the line. She imposes the same strict standard of obedience on herself. When she suspects that Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the gregarious new priest, may be making improper advances toward an altar boy, she watches them both closely, enlisting the aid of a young teacher, Sister James (Amy Adams), as her classroom eyes. Despite her obedient nature, Sister Aloysius crosses the line to become “the cat that catches the mouse.” As Father Flynn warns in his sermon, “In the pursuit of wrongdoing one steps away from God.”

The film is more than a crime investigation, however; it is a film about authority and culture, teaching and discipline, certainty and doubt. As a woman lacking official authority, Sister Aloysius must work in the shadows to bring her suspicions to light. Shanley uses awkward camera angles to demonstrate the awkward imbalance of authority, and darkness and light as

\*Beneath the obvious contemporary relevance to our present “terrorists vs. forces of enlightenment and democracy” fight is the Hitler-Stalin pact: perhaps the sole moment of the 20th century that makes perfect sense, and hence the moment that most often eludes the memory of those trying to explain that century.

powerful metaphors. Sister Aloysius's light bulb keeps going out in her office; a gale-force wind screams around the school as she conducts her investigation; the women's dark bonnets shield their faces and create the appearance of witch-like crones.

Through artful juxtaposition, Shanley reveals the difference between the life of a nun and the life of a priest: during dinner the women sit somberly around an austere kitchen table, silently shoveling food into their mouths, nervously aware of Sister Aloysius' watchful glare. Meanwhile, the priests dine in a well-lit, nicely appointed room, laughing jovially at Father Flynn's stories and smoking cigars. The life of a nun is obviously much harder than the life of a priest.

In addition, the three main characters represent three different approaches to teaching and discipline: Sister Aloysius is the strict disciplinarian who believes that instilling fear is the only way to build strong moral character; Sister James is the nurturing, enthusiastic, idealistic new teacher who sweetens her lessons with bright smiles; and Father Flynn is the guidance counselor who considers developing a student's wellbeing and social skills as more important than teaching multiplication tables and grammar. They have the same profession, but decidedly conflicting personalities.

All three major actors provide masterly performances, but Streep stands out as the unyielding headmistress. Sharp-nosed, firm-lipped, black-garbed, she glides down the aisle during Father Flynn's opening sermon, her hand darting out to slap an inattentive boy on the back of the head. She bends to the posture of a sleeping boy who is resting his head on the bench in front of him, draws her face to within an inch of his, and spits imperiously in his ear, "Straighten!" He jumps to attention.

But she also brings softness to her character. During dinner, she gently pushes a fork into the reach of a nun who is trying to hide her growing blindness. And watch for the way she cradles her crumpled shawl to her chest during her confrontation with Father Flynn. She wraps both arms around the bundle of wool and unconsciously leans her cheek against its softness as he claims his attention to the boy is merely friendship. Without a word, she asserts her higher authority as a woman with maternal instincts.

The big question, of course, is "Did he do it?" Has the boy indeed been molested? Writer-director Shanley doesn't reveal the answer. He told it privately to Hoffman and to the actors who played Flynn onstage to help them understand and present the character, but no one else involved in the production knew. This kept the actresses who play Sister James, Sister Aloysius, and the boy's mother, Mrs. Miller (Viola Davis in the film) off balance, torn between certainty and doubt.

Clues abound on both sides. "You have the right to ask a girl to dance," Father Flynn tells a young boy preparing for a social evening at the school, "but she has the right to turn you down." Does this imply that he believes he has the right to make advances toward a boy, as long as he can say "No"? On the other hand, the boy is an outsider in need of a friend, the only black boy in the school. The gregarious Father Flynn might simply be offering an arm of fellowship to a lonely student.

Streep's performance is so strong that it almost creates a flaw in the film. The story is intended to remain ambiguous to the end, the audience unsure and thus uncomfortable with either outcome. In the stage play Cherry Jones (who won a Tony for her role) created a more sympathetic headmistress, strict but caring. But Streep's Sister Aloysius

is so unlikable, her sharp nose so firmly in everyone else's business, that we instinctively side against her, in favor of the more inviting Father Flynn. Like the sweet Sister James, we want him to be innocent. And yet, there is something in his eyes. . . . Perhaps this was Shanley's intent: to demonstrate the idea that molesters often get away with their crime, because they are so likable. Or maybe he's innocent.

More important: if he did it, will he do it again? This threat of continued wrongdoing, the film suggests, may be a weakness of our judicial presumption of innocence. "You have no proof!" Father Flynn reminds Sister Aloysius when she finally confronts him. "But I have my certainty!" she roars back. If she's right, then action needs to be taken. But judging by the many trials-by-journalism we see in the news today, "certainty" seems to trump proof with chilling regularity. Recently a friend said to me in all earnestness, "I'd like to move to Florida just so I could get on the Caylee Anthony jury and convict that awful woman." So much for a fair trial. Certainty is all that matters.

So what should we do? Take a priest off the streets and away from the altar boys while we are investigating, at the cost of losing a fine teacher if he is innocent? By extension, should we remove potential terrorists from our communities while we are deciding what to do with them, at the cost of turning innocent immigrants into lifelong enemies? This film is particularly timely as President Obama prepares to close down the holding cells at Guantanamo and release hundreds of prisoners who have been incarcerated without trial.

It's about time. When the mere possibility of crime, the mere suspicion of terrorism, threatens to negate our fundamental political protections, then perhaps, after all, we have more to fear than fear itself. □

## Rewarding Craftsmanship

This month, *Liberty* reviews three films with seven acting nominees among them, including the winner of the award for Best Actress in a Leading Role. But one thing about this year's Oscar nominations is of particular interest. They proved that a film does not need a big budget to earn recognition from the Academy

of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Many of the nominations went to independent films with modest budgets. In fact, "Slumdog Millionaire," my favorite film of 2008, was so low-budget that it almost went straight to video for lack of a distribution company — until Fox Searchlight decided to pick it up. Yet it won eight

Oscars, including Best Director and Best Picture. Clearly, while exploding helicopters, high-speed chases and complicated visual effects are impressive and exciting, they aren't necessary for a great film. All that's really needed is a compelling story presented by believable actors.

— Jo Ann Skousen

**"The Reader," directed by Stephen Daldry. The Weinstein Co., 2008, 123 minutes.**

# No Excuse

Jo Ann Skousen

From its title and its nomination for Best Picture, one might expect "The Reader" to be an erudite, intellectual film about a shy, retiring man or a prim and proper spinster. "The reader" probably spends his or her life in the company of books rather than in the company of people. To a certain extent, that turns out to be true. But not as expected.

In actuality, "The Reader" could as easily have been titled "The Bather," since the first third of the film takes place in a bathtub. Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet) is a middle-aged tram conductor with a penchant for cleanliness and a secret to hide. When 15-year-old Michael Berg (David Kross) becomes ill on her tram and then vomits in the street near her flat, she washes the paving stones vigorously with buckets of water and firmly escorts him home.

When young Michael returns to her flat to thank her for her help, he finds her in the middle of doing her washing. Specifically, she is carefully ironing her bra, sneaking sideways glances at him but otherwise ignoring him as she touches her underclothing. What an eyeful for a young boy! Later, when he returns to thank her, she asks him to bring up a bucket of coal and orders him to strip down and bathe to get rid of the coal dust. Cowed by her orders, Michael nervously obeys, becoming even more nervous when a naked Hanna begins toweling him off.

But the nervousness doesn't last for long. Hanna does a lot of scrubbing and toweling as the two spend a "summer

of '42" in the bathtub, Hanna teaching "Kid" the Kama Sutra while he reads to her from dozens of books — "The Odyssey," "Huck Finn," Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog," even "Tintin" comics and "Lady Chatterley's Lover." Then suddenly, one day, Hanna disappears. Simply packs up her apartment and leaves. No strings, no attachments, no pregnancy. Cozy, romantic, and sexy, right? Every young boy's dream come true.

But wait a minute. He's 15. And she's 38.

And he never gets over it.

The adult Berg (Ralph Fiennes) is unable to sustain a relationship. Divorced, he is estranged from his daughter, scarcely visits his family, and has sex with women but doesn't sleep with them. In short, he has been traumatized by a sexual predator who is nevertheless portrayed as a victim. Am I the only reviewer who has noticed this fact?

At times I felt as if I had walked into one of those peep shows on 8th Avenue rather than a highly acclaimed, Oscar-nominated film. The Weinsteins must have known there was something wrong with all the nudity; after all, they waited until David Kross turned 18 to film the nude scenes, to avoid any problem with statutory rape or child porn laws.

Nevertheless, we are expected to feel sorry for Hanna because, poor thing, she has a secret to hide, one that limits her employment opportunities. Several years after his summer with Hanna, Berg is a law student attending the trial of Nazi war criminals. To his amazement, Hanna is one of the defendants,

accused of sending dozens of women to their deaths in the concentration camps and, more brutally, of not allowing 300 women out of a burning building. "It was our job to guard them," she explains to the judge, adding, when he seems unmoved by that defense, "Well? What would you have done?"

This is perhaps the most important line of the film, one worth pondering. What would you or I do, if faced with a similar dilemma? What moral crimes might we commit at work or at war, simply because it is our job? How many of Madoff's employees suspected what was going on, but signed off on audits and reports because the benefits were good? Is it more heroic to obey "my country, right or wrong," or to act and think for ourselves? As jobs become scarcer in our shrinking economy, standing on moral ground may become more difficult — and more lonely.

But Hanna's question is quickly lost as Berg discovers her seemingly more shameful secret: Hanna is illiterate. She cannot read, and therefore could not have written her offending report. If Berg reveals this fact to the judge, Hanna will not be given the more severe punishment as the ringleader of the guards. But Berg cannot bring himself to betray this shameful secret. Being an SS guard is one thing. But illiteracy? It's not her fault that she decided to become an SS guard, he thinks; it was the economy. He decides to keep her secret.

I don't mean to downplay the hardship of illiteracy. As a teacher, I work with semiliterate students regularly. But to suggest that illiteracy is a more shameful secret than sending innocent women to their deaths? More shameful than sexually preying on a 15-year-old boy? I don't buy it.

And I didn't buy this film as a Best Picture nominee. Yes, Winslet's performance is haunting as Hanna; she does amazing things with the snap of her dark, sorrowing eyes. Kross is brilliant as the young, besotted, confused Michael. But a film must be carried by the story, not by the actors alone. Winslet, winner of the award for Best Actress in a Leading Role, demonstrates admirable ability to ignore her nudity in front of the cameras and remains intensely in character. (Sadly for Winslet, pregnancy and motherhood have not been kind to her breasts.) But

nudity is no excuse for an Oscar. And when the nudity is so flagrant that the producers have to postpone production until the actor's 18th birthday, and the imdb website discusses his circumcision as a "goof," I consider that over the top. Someone needs to wash their brains out with soap.

Contrasted with the bathtub lovemaking are scenes of what Michael's

life could have been: carefree scenes of his friends swimming at the local lake — as he runs off to spend the afternoon in Hanna's bathtub. Michael thinks he's the luckiest guy in the world; he's having a much better time than his inexperienced and innocent friends. But Hanna is a lifelong victimizer, not a victim. Illiteracy is no excuse for murder. □

**"The Wrestler," directed by Darren Aronofsky. Fox Searchlight, 2008, 115 minutes.**

# Hard Knocks

Jo Ann Skousen

If any lesson is to be learned from "The Wrestler" it is this one: dreams don't pay.

Randy "The Ram" Robinson (Mickey Rourke) is a pro wrestler on the down-hill side of success. He was once the best on the circuit. Nintendo made a video game about him; Mattel made an action figure; success was sweet. Now he's living in a broken-down trailer, driving a broken-down van, hanging out in a broken-down strip joint, and working part-time as a stock clerk in a broken-down store. He makes phone calls from broken-down pay phones because he can't afford a phone. He attends autograph events in broken-down rec centers with other Hall of Famers where, for \$8, fans can purchase a signed Polaroid of themselves with their favorite former wrestlers — several of them arriving in wheelchairs and walkers.

As the film opens, a wrestling match has ended and The Ram is preparing to go home. His body is a mass of protective wraps and ices. For the first ten minutes of the film, the camera follows his back from the arena to his car to his trailer — locked because he hasn't paid his rent. Metaphorically, the back-

side of his life is all that is left. We see only hints of his face through the shadows until his aged and battered countenance, pumped up on steroids, is finally revealed. The effect is stunning.

No, life isn't easy for the dreamer. The Ram's body is still ripped and muscular, and he's still performing in the ring. He loves what he does, and he loves the people he does it with. The backstage camaraderie among the wrestlers as they choreograph their match for maximum thrills and minimum injuries is impressive. But with his hearing aid, his reading glasses, his thinning hair, his pharmaceuticals, and his battle scars, it's clear that this wrestler has become a broken-down echo of a man who once dreamed of being a star.

Juxtaposed with the wrestler is Cassidy (Marisa Tomei), a close-to-broken-down stripper living the life Thoreau characterized as "quiet desperation." Exotic dancing isn't her dream; it's just the way she makes a living. It puts food on the table and a shelter overhead for herself and her young son. She doesn't like what she does, but it pays the bills. Now that her body and face are aging, it doesn't pay as much. She is shy and almost embar-

rassed about her own dream: a condo in Trenton, where the schools are better and the cost of living is lower. She probably won't ever get it.

Rourke and Tomei, both nominated for Oscars, give masterly, heart-breaking performances as the dreamer and the cynic in this character study of a film. It's not a pretty setting and it's not a pretty film, but it's a pretty wonderful piece of acting from them both.

The day after I watched "The Wrestler," Whole Foods founder John Mackey addressed the MBA students at Yale University. "Follow your dreams," he told them when asked what fields they should enter. "You have to do something, so you may as well do what you love." Good advice, especially for Yale MBA students. But the contrast between the idealistic dreamer's anticipated lifestyle and the one portrayed by Rourke in "The Wrestler" is profound.

The sad reality is, few dreamers are successful enough to make a decent living doing what they love. For every George Lucas, Julia Roberts, Michael Phelps, or Kelly Clarkson there are hundreds of John and Jane Does, living in substandard housing, typing the Great American Novel, rehearsing in a garage, pitching inventions, practicing free throws, and going to auditions. It costs a lot to be an artist, a performer, an athlete. Lessons and equipment are expensive. Part-time jobs pay part-time wages. Traveling with a performing group often means living in cheap hotels, cooking on a hot plate, and doing laundry in the sink. Lovers, family, and friends eventually tire of the dream always coming first.

So go ahead and pursue that dream, but don't expect the house with the white picket fence to go with it. Isadora Duncan, the famous dancer, discovered this truth early on in her career. "I need a millionaire," she wrote with all seriousness. She found one in sewing machine mogul Paris Singer, who funded her passion for dancing and teaching. But finding a Sugar Daddy isn't as easy today as it was then. The rest of us may have to accept this truth: dreams don't pay.

But for the true dreamers, it isn't about the money, or the white picket fence. It's about passion. For them, the pursuit is worth any sacrifice, no matter what the cost. □

### South Jordan, Utah

Misjudgment in situational friendliness, reported in the *Deseret News*:

Some Utahns attending the weekend opening of Disney's biggest movie of the year were exposed to a little more than they were expecting.

Managers at the Megaplex Theatre switched one of the showings of "High School Musical 3: Senior Year" to a larger auditorium to accommodate more people. They forgot, however, to switch the movie that had previously been scheduled for the room.

So rather than the family-friendly, G-rated "High School Musical 3," the beginning of the very nonfamily-friendly R-rated "Sex Drive" came on the screen. The opening minutes of the movie include nudity.

### Ottawa

Solomonic division of the morbidly from the merely obese, in the *Toronto Star*:

Canada's two largest airlines must give disabled and morbidly obese passengers an extra free seat on domestic flights, beginning in January, after the Supreme Court refused to consider the carriers' appeal of a federal order.

A possible sticking point is how to decide when obesity is a disability. The free seats need not be provided to obese people who are just uncomfortable in their seats or are not disabled by their size, said the ruling. The agency has recommended the airlines adopt a policy used by Southwest Airlines, which gives a free seat to people who are too big to lower their armrest.

### Seattle

Fourfold source of civic pride, from the newsletter of the King County Equity and Social Justice Initiative:

King County has joined partner agencies to launch a new program with the mission to create a multicultural bicycling community where teenagers have equal opportunity to spend time outdoors and on a bicycle.

In its first year, four bicycle clubs will introduce seventy 13-to-17-year olds in targeted south King County neighborhoods to different types of bicycling. King County is excited to support such a visionary project that responds to mobility, health, climate change, and equity concerns.

### Santiago, Chile

Most sensible response yet to the financial crisis, snagged from the Reuters wire:

For those trying to drown their sorrows in drink, a bar in Chile's capital is promoting a "Crisis Menu" of discount-priced cocktails. Drinks at the Catedral bar near Santiago's financial center include The Subprime, In Recession, Pyramid (scheme), Bailout, and The Madoff Nectar. "The crisis names grab your attention straight away . . . and the price is good too," said bank executive Angelica Quezada, 38, sipping a "Down Jones" — a mix of peach and orange ice cream and vodka.

### New York

Next stage in the fight against eugenics, from the sports section of *USA Today*:

The animal rights group PETA, which every year stages a protest at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, had two of its members dress in Ku Klux Klan garb outside Madison Square Garden.

"Obviously it's an uncomfortable comparison," said PETA spokesman Michael McGraw. But the American Kennel Club is trying to create a "master race" when it comes to purebred dogs, he added. "It's a very apt comparison."

The group passed out brochures implying the Klan and AKC have the goal of "pure bloodlines" in common.

### Blaine, Wash.

Cultural misunderstanding, reported in the *Bellingham Herald*:

A Canadian says he got a face full of pepper spray after repeatedly asking a U.S. border inspector to say please.

Desiderio Fortunato says he thought the inspector who told him to turn off his engine was rude and asked him to say please.

The British Columbian said that the inspector repeatedly ordered him to turn the car off and then said he would spray him if he didn't. Fortunato was stunned and blinded by the pepper spray and was pulled out of the car and handcuffed. He was detained about three hours.

### Washington, D.C.

Experience as the harshest teacher, from the pages of the *Washington Post*:

For 5 1/2 years, a basement room in the Shaw neighborhood has been part store, part resource center for radical activists in Washington — a nonprofit cooperative run by volunteers, following anarchist principles.

For the past two weekends the Brian MacKenzie Infoshop has held a going-out-of-business sale, to help pay off its remaining bills. Everything must go: buttons, patches, books, and records.

"Just because we are anarchist doesn't mean we don't exist within a capitalist structure," said David Combs, as he worked the store's cash register. "If we want to have a social space, we have to pay rent."

### Battle Creek, Mich.

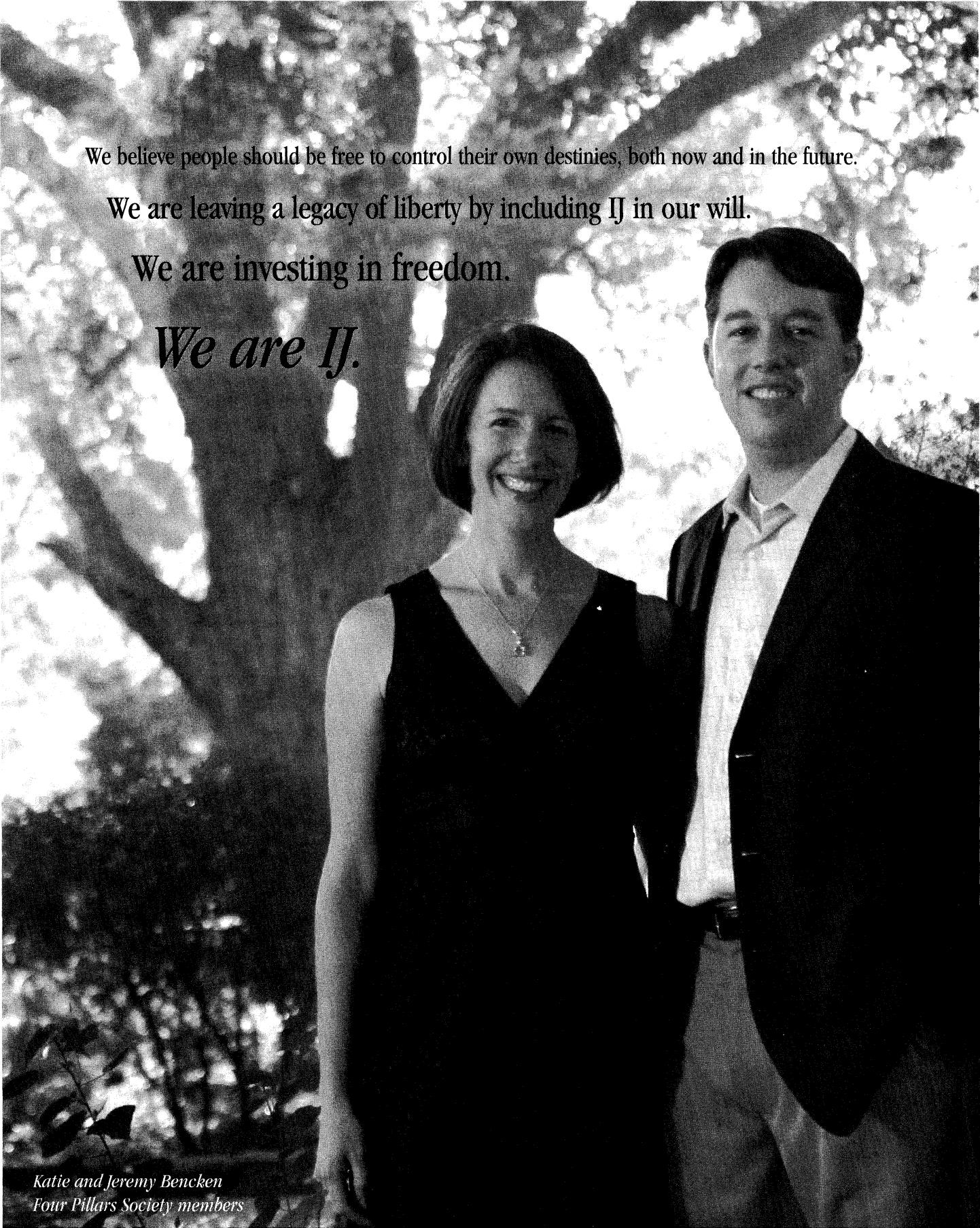
Romance in the Wolverine State, from the Binder Park Zoo website:

Tired of the same old dinner and a movie on Valentine's Day? Do you want to surprise your special someone with a unique, exciting and educational experience that neither of you will ever forget? Then join Binder Park Zoo on February 14th for a special "ZOOROTICA" tour.

Experienced and unabashed staff will lead you on a tour exploring the sexual lives of animals. Biting, clawing, scratching and mid-air acrobatics, animals have a way of reproducing that can be beautiful and brutal at the same time!

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(Readers are invited to forward news clippings or other items for publication in *Terra Incognita*, or email to [terraincognita@libertyunbound.com](mailto:terraincognita@libertyunbound.com).)



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