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# Letters

## A Door, Once Opened

Alex Binz's "Liberté and Egalité Against Fraternité" (July) does a nice job of summarizing Bastiat's ideas, but he may have misinterpreted Bastiat. Citing "Economic Harmonies," Binz attempts to justify taxes so long as they are used to protect persons and properties. He states governments must compensate for the injustice of taxation by reducing injustices that might occur elsewhere in society, such as crime.

I think Binz's arguments for limited government would be strengthened if he realized that taxation is a forced transaction in which neither party is a volunteer. If Bastiat were here today, I believe he would not condone any coercive transaction. When you open the door to force, then you open the door to unlimited coercion.

I agree that governments can be useful, and if they have any services that are useful, persons will voluntarily pay for those services. Services such as police protection, which some think are indispensable, are available from many sources. I am not trying to change the world, but only to reiterate the idea that Bastiat states in "The Law": organized force has only the legitimate right to substitute for the individual force, no more, no less.

Norman Gorback  
Plantation, Fla.

**Binz responds:** Mr. Gorback raises an issue which I could only treat cursorily in my essay. There is a temptation among libertarians to treat Bastiat as a kind of anarchist, or at least an anarcho-capitalist like his successor Molinari. However, I think he would be better described as a minarchist, and the difference is crucial. An anarcho-capitalist would argue — as you seem to — that the protective functions of the state would be best served by a private en-

terprise, subject to markets and prices. I lack the space to treat the proposition in its entirety, but I would raise several points.

First, a government run as a private enterprise would clearly be subject to the "free-rider" problem. Would the police first check with accounting to make sure your payments were in order before arresting a burglar in your house? Those who do not pay taxes still receive benefits; without a positive incentive to pay, and a strong incentive to keep one's own money, a private state does not seem sustainable. I would also mention a second point: in a society governed by a private state, individuals would be under no obligation at all to delegate their right of self-defense to a government; since, as you say, it would be a purely voluntary agreement. But the very nature of government — in confronting force with force, in preventing violation of liberty by violating the "liberty" of criminals — excludes individual action. Pure self-defense — a man comes at you with a gun, you bring out your own — should be accepted even in societies with a state. However, the functions of a state occasionally require action before the criminal act, and certainly afterwards. Neither of these should be trusted to individual action, due to the danger of vigilantism and revenge.

I believe in a minarchist state. The state ought to limit itself strictly to its proper sphere, of defending individual rights. But I recognize its right to exist as a state, as an agent of force. We opt for government as the lesser of two evils — we submit to its partial violation of rights, so that it can prevent the ordinary violation of rights that would exist without it. The power of taxation is intrinsic to government: we grant it the power to tax, to partially violate

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our property rights, in order that it can protect the remainder of our property. I would disagree that admitting any use of force into our ideal "opens the door to unlimited coercion." The minarchist mindset necessarily implies limitation — for taxation is illegitimate if it does not protect property. But the power to tax remains.

I intended the Bastiat quote to mean this: taxation may not be an exchange (that is, a voluntary market transaction), but is certainly like an exchange, for it calculates the subjective utility of the two goods (perfect freedom vs. protected liberty) and forces us to compare and choose. The important point is that we choose taxes only so far as they protect us, and that this provides a natural limit to government.

### Okay, Maybe a Few

No Jewish mountaineers?! Murray Rothbard (bless his everlasting legacy) should have checked his premises. ("Me and the Eiger," September.)

In "Two Lucky People," Milton and Rose Friedman recount an ascent of Ben Nevis, Scotland's highest mountain, with their son David. Although Ben Nevis is not the Eiger (via its easiest route it's only a "walk up"), the peak is a challenging climb. It has good, clear weather perhaps only 15 days out of a typical year.

Some of my best friends are Jews, and some are quite accomplished rock

climbers and mountaineers, including my wife and brother-in-law. Rothbard's observation, however, brings to mind a broader question: how athletic are Libertarians? I suspect there's a perception that most Libertarians (like most Jews) are couch potatoes; they're too busy arguing to engage in athletics.

I know it's not true. Hans Florine, holder of many speed ascent records on El Capitan in Yosemite, is an outspoken disciple of Ayn Rand who labels himself an Objectivist. Kathy Bradford, once a competitive swimmer, still looks like she could tackle the English Channel. Perhaps the next Liberty Poll could inquire about libertarians' athletic and fitness orientation (as it now does about sexual orientation). At least I would find it interesting.

Robert H. Miller  
Prescott, Ariz.

### A Happy Camper

I always enjoy Stephen Cox's Word Watch, but the one in the August issue really resonated with me.

I'm senior copy editor for a daily newspaper and have had to tolerate many of Cox's examples. I too am heartily annoyed by *proactive*. Other crotchets that I live with, and cringe at, include: *ramp up, footprint, boots on the ground, slap on the wrist*, anything that *sends a message* or *sends a signal*, and that darned *road map for Israel*.

And then there's *for free*. The first

time I saw that (at least 70 years ago) I thought it was cute. Some events were for 20 cents, or for five cents, or for free. It's no longer cute. I get a special pleasure in deleting *for*.

And the misuse of *begging the question* brings out the savage in me. Not to mention the total misunderstanding of *axioms*. Too often it's said *that's the proof of the pudding*, completing forgetting that *the proof of the pudding is in the eating*; or, "I'm going to be out of pocket for the next few days." Since she will probably be spending the company's money, I seriously doubt that she will personally be *out of pocket*. *Out of touch* or *unavailable*, perhaps.

Another thing that's come to my attention: when anyone mentions that *the emperor has no clothes*, she usually is just implying exposure. Few seem to know the complete story, and so haven't a clue to the real point.

I trust Cox does know it, but for those who don't: two con men were selling magic cloth that was invisible to anyone who was not worthy of the position he held. There was no cloth, but no one except the innocent child was honest enough to admit that they couldn't see it. Heaven forbid anyone should admit they weren't worthy of their position.

Obviously clichés are used to save time (particularly by reporters) and to avoid thinking. It is, unfortunately, a trap in which we all find ourselves occasionally snared.

Word Watch is the first thing I read every issue. Mr. Cox, *keep up the good work*. (See what I mean? Sometimes I hate myself.)

Margaret E. Mathers  
Farmington, N.M.

#### Letters to the editor

Liberty invites readers to comment on articles that have appeared in our pages. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity. All letters are assumed to be intended for publication unless otherwise stated. Succinct letters are preferred. Please include your address and phone number so that we can verify your identity. Send email to [letters@libertyunbound.com](mailto:letters@libertyunbound.com), or mail to:

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People say that if you want to keep your friends, there are two things you should never bring up: politics and religion.

I'm not sure whether that advice is true. This journal violates the ban on political discussion all the time, and in every way it can; yet it still has a few friends left. More than a few. And it has often violated the ban on religion-talk.

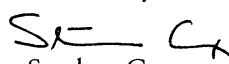
For this issue, however, Leland Yeager and I decided to turn the frequent offense into a systematic violation. We decided to *settle this religion problem, once and for all*.

Well, actually . . . neither of us ever dreamed of doing that. But we do have a few things to say

about religion, things we've been thinking about for a long time. If you believe that you'll resent us for doing that . . . just pass us by. There are plenty of other things to read in Liberty.

There always are. When R.W. Bradford founded this journal, twenty years ago, he didn't design it as a church, pointing at an altar. He designed it as an open forum — or, better yet, a marketplace with every kind of goods on sale. You don't have to buy, but you will certainly have fun sauntering around and looking.

For Liberty,

  
Stephen Cox



# Reflections

**First things whenever** — Too bad we are so busy x-raying luggage on planes that we don't have time to x-ray rivets on bridges.  
— Paul Rako

**Up from councillorship** — Word from New York is that, following their successful effort to completely expunge the word "nigger" from the vocabularies of the citizenry, the New York City Council has now moved to strike "bitch" and "ho" as well.

May I suggest that, as long as they're banning offensive and derogatory labels for human beings, the august members should next ban "New York City Councilperson"?  
— Andrew Ferguson

**Late and soon** — The Federal Reserve now finds itself in the position of locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen. For years — according to The Wall Street Journal (Aug. 8) — Alan Greenspan's "alleged predisposition to cut [interest] rates whenever markets got in trouble" induced lenders to risk providing funds to subprime and lower-quality borrowers. And now the chickens are coming home to roost.

Should the Fed raise interest rates, making borrowing more costly in the hope of keeping prices from rising still more? Or should it do nothing and force holders of loans to subprime and lower-quality borrowers into bankruptcy when their loans cannot be repaid?

Some years ago Ludwig von Mises was asked a somewhat similar question in his NYU seminar. He answered it. The student was aghast: "Do you mean to say that if prices are going down, borrowers cannot repay their loans to the banks, and there is widespread unemployment, you would do nothing?"

Mises answered, "Yes. But I would start doing nothing much sooner!"  
— Bettina Bien Greaves

**It needed only this** — The headline on Aug. 11 was, "Bush War Adviser Says Draft Worth a Look."

After looting the treasury, abjectly failing to control our borders, attacking the Republican base as traitors to America

for objecting to illegal immigration, expanding federal control over education and everything else within reach, and bogging us down in a war between gangs of religious bigots in Mesopotamia, the Bush administration now threatens to enslave the nation's young men.

The adviser in question, General Douglas Lute, made the suggestion in his first interview after being confirmed for his job. He maundered on as follows: "And I can tell you, this

has always been an option on the table. But ultimately, this is a policy matter between meeting the demands for the nation's security by one means or another." Pardon his grammar. What he's saying, in other words, is that there's no principle involved, whether conservative or libertarian, or just plain American. If we need the bodies, well, we'll just send the slave-catchers out to git 'em.

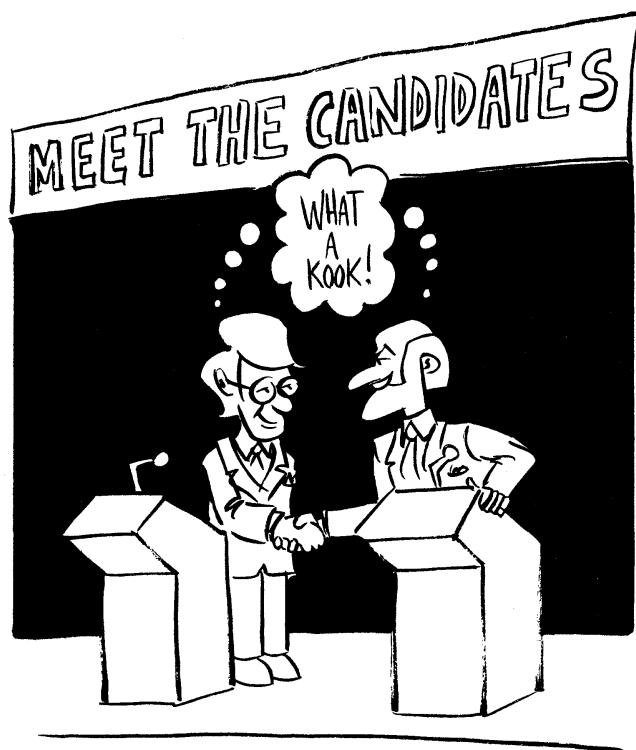
Bush's flak-catchers tried to mute the implications of his adviser's remarks. Right now, they said, Bush himself isn't talking about a draft . . . But Peggy Noonan was right. It's time for traditional Republicans to abandon ship.  
— Stephen Cox

**Not alone** — The Aug. 5 New York Times Magazine contains a wonderful essay, "Getting Iraq Wrong," by the Canadian MP and former

Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff. In it, Ignatieff picks apart his own misconceptions about Iraq — misconceptions that led him to support the invasion in 2003. His self-criticism is so unvarnished, and so patently sincere, that one can only applaud the man. I'd love to see a neocon or two follow his example.

Ignatieff discusses the arts of practical politics and decision-making with real wisdom. On the decision to invade Iraq, he makes two points worth remembering.

Writing of the people who opposed the Iraq War from the beginning, he distinguishes those who showed true insight from those who reflexively opposed intervention on ideological grounds, that is, the "Blame America First" crowd, and the "It's a War for Oil" types. The lesson is that we should be wary of those who were right about Iraq, but for the wrong



SHCHAMBERS

reasons. Their future policy prognostications may very well be off the mark.

Writing of the war's *proponents*, he chastises those who "believe that America's foreign policy serves God's plan to expand human freedom." A well-deserved slap for President Bush and parts of the evangelical community. The lesson here, obviously, is that religious belief or superstition must not form the basis of your country's foreign policy.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll mention that I was a supporter of the war when it began. I bought the weapons of mass destruction argument hook, line, and sinker.

Considering how much Saddam hated us, I could see him passing WMD on to terrorists at some point. Despite my well-developed cynicism, I never dreamed the U.S. government would lie (or be mistaken, as the case may be) about such a thing.

I never bought into nation-building, and I was concerned about the occupation and the likelihood of guerrilla warfare. But like a fool, I assumed the Bush administration had plans to deal with those things.

Immediately after the fall of Baghdad, when I saw the Iraqis looting their national museum while U.S. forces stood

# Word Watch

by Stephen Cox

On July 6, the AFP news agency trumpeted the announcement that "It's a Small World After All." Scientists, it proclaimed, had discovered that "the world is smaller than first thought." A new measurement of the earth's diameter indicated that it was fully five millimeters smaller than it was previously thought to be.

This, I submit, is a very sad way of promoting an interest in science. Five millimeters is the size of something that gets stuck between your teeth. Dude! Why get so pompous about it?

An even sadder news item was July's Live Earth "concerts," which offered a lot of has-been or never-were singers and guitar twangers a chance to get some free publicity, and a lot of supposedly-are celebrities yet another chance to make absolute fools of themselves. But how much free publicity, and how many fools?

Once again, AFP was the authority. On the morning of July 7, the news service said that the shows "are predicted to attract an audience of two billion people." In earlier, cooler eras of the earth's history, some source for this prediction would have been mentioned. If it had been, readers could have seen that it was the same source that alleged that the Million Man March would attract a million men, and that Al Gore would attract a sufficient number of voters to become president of the United States, instead of becoming the world's largest endangered whale. I refer, of course, to the organizers of the campaigns in question. If the *organizers* don't know, who does?

In cooler eras, some effort might also have been made to define "an audience." That word seems to point at people who actually go someplace and listen to something. But of course, 2 billion people couldn't possibly turn up physically at Live Earth shows. So maybe "an audience" means something like "a TV audience." You remember how many billions of people in China, India, and the Central African Republic are always said to be watching the Academy Awards presentation. They're just that much in love with the Best Supporting Actresses in American films.

I've never believed those "statistics," and I didn't believe the "statistics" about Live Earth, either. The only way you could even think about a total of 2 billion people is to add guys like me into the figure — humanoids who had heard about the event, *maybe*,

but would never be caught dead having anything more to do with it.

As it turned out, the humanoids were in the ascendant. By the afternoon of July 7, Live Earth had vanished from the internet headlines. By July 8, no worldwide audience estimates seemed to be available, although the LA Times conceded the following about the concert in Brazil: "Original projections put the draw at 1 million; on Saturday, concert organizers estimated the crowd at 200,000, and the military police reckoned it was about 100,000." In other words, the crowd was 50,000. But lest anyone believe that Al Gore could ever become a failure, the Times added, "It was a dramatic turnaround from earlier in the week, when fears arose that the show might not go on." Fears on the part of the LA Times, I suppose. And as a statistic, 100,000 or 200,000 is so much better than zero, isn't it? Would that the Times could find that many faithful readers — readers who would go right out and grab other people and say, *Read the LA Times! The fate of Al Gore depends on your decision!* — instead of going broke, as it is right now, because of its modern-liberal propaganda.

By July 10, Reuters was reporting that Live Earth was a tremendous flop on American, British, and German TV, which together could not register even 7 million viewers. (Imaginary headline: "Live Earth a Failure!" But no, that would be ridiculous.) Nevertheless, former Vice President Gore, whose mastery of the hard, statistical "facts" of global warming was responsible for the whole event, had not hesitated to announce, according to a Newsday report, "Today, more than 2 billion of us have come together . . ." Talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Well, so much for the number 2 (plus a few zeroes). What do you think about the number 7? Too many, too few, or just about right? On July 10, another AFP report blared: "Seven Elephants Killed in Kenyan Sanctuary." I like elephants as well as the next person, but I'm not sure that this particular elephant news can compete with a cure for cancer — especially considering the factoid, mentioned later in the article, that "up to 20,000 elephants per year" are taken by poachers. Or maybe "up to" has its usual meaning: "We don't know, and we don't care."

But back to the "7" issue. This summer, there was an idiotic

by, I got a cold feeling. I knew then, without thinking it through rationally, that something was terribly wrong. By summer 2003, as the insurgency grew, I realized that my pre-invasion doubts were in fact flashes of insight. The war, or rather the occupation, was going downhill fast.

I thought the capture of Saddam in December 2003 presented an opportunity to disengage — to declare victory and get out, as the late Vermont Sen. George Aiken once said about Vietnam.

It didn't happen, and by spring 2004 I had definitely turned against the war. But I am haunted to this day by the

internet and telephone fete, organized by some European foundation, to choose seven new Wonders of the World, to replace or supplement or otherwise harass the seven ancient Wonders of the World. "Voters" selected some predictable attractions: the Great Wall of China, the Colosseum, etc. Then UNESCO (who asked them?) denounced the project. Its "press officer" opined that the contest sent a "negative message to countries whose sites have not been retained."

What can you say to that, except to observe that "negative" is best left in the photographic lab, and "have not been retained" is a default expression for "were destroyed by their own ridiculous political disputes"? But I like the image of whole regions of the globe bursting into tears over the fact that their prospective "wonders" no longer exist. Mourn, O Indiana: the Wabash and Erie Canal no longer exists. Lie in ashes, O Belfast: the *Titanic* is no more. Hit the sauce, O Manhattan: Penn Station was demolished in 1964.

Let's get back to the numbers. "All of these wonders obviously deserve a place on the list," said the sniffy UNESCO spokesthing, as reported by AFP, "but what disturbs us is that the list is limited to just seven . . . Seven were adequate in Antiquity because the Antique world was much smaller than today, only comprising the area surrounding the Mediterranean."

Oh God, yet another quarrel about how large the "world" is! UNESCO's idea seems to be that the tiny "Antique" (actually Hellenistic) world didn't have room, somehow, for the Parthenon at Athens. Its omission from the ancient list wasn't a matter of taste, whether good or bad; it was only a matter of elbow room. The world was too small, and so was the list. It was a small world, after all — so much smaller than our current world, in which, as AFP insists, the ceremony honoring the seven new Wonders was "broadcast in more than 170 countries to an estimated 1.6 billion viewers."

I don't know. Maybe there are billions of the earth's inhabitants who do nothing but sit in front of their televisions and watch the results of contests about asserted Wonders of the World, or observe the latest antics of Al Gore. Maybe they're sitting there now, waiting for the meteor, 0.9 kilometers in diameter, that is predicted to "knock out" the "entire Eastern seaboard of North America," "kill hundreds of millions of people," and "set civilization back by three thousand years." I think that's what the Discovery Channel keeps saying. Or maybe it's the History Channel. Or the LA Times. And maybe I'm wrong. Let's see . . . maybe it was "0.9 meters in diameter," "a liquor store in Reading," "handfuls of people," and "set civilization back by three minutes?"

I don't know. Ask the media.

fact that I made some false assumptions about my government and its leaders. The realization that a guy like Ignatieff made mistakes too is a bit of a salve for one's conscience.

— Jon Harrison

***The last hyperidiot?*** — Governments cause high inflation: their thieving and redistribution get out of whack, so they print too much money.

High inflation is bad; it brings all sorts of discomforts: you can't use money to store wealth; credit is all but impossible to give or get; fears of financial insecurity cause popular upheavals.

But the governments that cause inflation can, and usually do, make it worse. They try to impose price controls and currency controls. When they do, goods flee the country and the markets go empty. It happens fast, and I'm going to tell you exactly how.

In 1983, Benin in West Africa had high inflation, price controls, and currency controls. I lived next door in Togo. It had the same currency but no price controls, and it had an unregulated black market for money changing. In the "street of banks," the money changers walked around with fat rolls of banknotes and were proud to call Togo "Africa's Little Switzerland."

The markets of Togo's big, coastal city, Lomé, were overflowing — meat; fish; vegetables; a little girl selling only shoestrings, another selling only chocolate bars; eggs; live animals; pharmaceuticals sold on a platter in the open air next to hand axes and coconuts; secondhand clothes from Europe and the United States that the locals called "dead yoyo clothes," because they couldn't imagine live white people giving such precious things away; batteries; bolts of cloth; furniture; spices; palm butter; Chinese mosquito repellent; electric fans; and charcoal. You could buy anything, really.

I visited Cotonou in the neighboring Marxist El Dorado of Benin (formerly the Kingdom of Dahomey). Benin should be the same as Togo. It has the same tribes, languages, colonial history, geography (including approximate size and topography), and weather. But in Cotonou, the market was pitifully empty. There was just nothing to buy. I, being used to Togo, assumed that there was a holiday, or a *coup d'état*, or a plague that emptied the market. I began to ask questions of the bereft market people and ended up conducting a little investigation on both sides of the border between Togo and Benin.

I learned about the Marxist government in Benin and the inflation and weak currency and price controls. But why would that empty the markets?

The market people knew why. The key to prosperity and wealth (until everything ran out and the government abandoned Marxism in the late '80s) was to buy goods in Benin at the official prices and smuggle them out of the country. If you bought goods, you smuggled them to Togo to sell at market rates. Then you went back to Benin where you might buy more goods at the official prices to smuggle out of the country and, if you were well-connected, you might change the West African currency (CFA) for U.S. dollars or French francs at the official rate. And back to Togo you went with goods for the market and hard currency for the street of banks.

Some people got rich this way. Eventually they had to risk their skins to do it, after the government of Benin closed the

borders. But not before there was almost no more hard currency or goods in Benin.

Variants of this story have played out all over the world at various times, famously in Germany and Brazil. Now in Zimbabwe, where inflation is “illegal,” the government is printing Z\$200,000 notes, and the people are suffering severe shortages of food, fuel, and medicine.

Let’s hope (against hope) that Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe is the last hyperidiot of hyperinflation.

— Michael Christian

**Raising vs. increasing** — In the YouTube debate between Democratic presidential candidates, Joe Biden was asked what could be done about taxes that are too high. Biden replied that there’s “only one way” to increase government revenue: “You either raise taxes or take tax cuts away from people who don’t need them.” I can forgive his evident inability to count to two under pressure, but I am bothered that restraint in spending was not one of the options he saw fit to consider.

— Patrick Quealy

**The bottom line** — I have reflected before on the immense value of pro-free-market thinktanks and independent scholars in providing a necessary counter-balance to the monolithically leftist academy. Yet another good example is the recently released report by the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) on the overall cost of federal regulation to the American economy.

The report,\* cheerfully entitled “Ten Thousand Commandments: An Annual Snapshot of the Federal Regulatory State,” was written by CEI scholar Clyde Wayne Crews, Jr. Crews’ idea was to attempt an honest determination of the full economic cost of the multitude of government regulations placed on American business. This is a research project that the statist-minded scholars who now overwhelmingly dominate the American university have notably neglected. But Crews has done a good job, with some eye-popping results.

He reckons the total cost of federal regulation at over a trillion dollars in 2006 — \$1.142 trillion, to be specific. To put this in perspective, it amounts to roughly 40% the size of the total federal budget. It amounts to 10% of the entire American GDP. And it amounts to more than four times the current budget deficit. The costs of regulation exceed the total estimated personal income taxes collected in 2006, and are quadruple the total amount collected in corporate income taxes that year. Indeed, they exceed the total corporate pretax profits for 2006!

One source of new regulations is Congress, of course; but another is regulatory agencies. Bodies such as the FTC, FCC, FDA, SEC and a host of others keep busy during the year, issuing rulings. In fact, in 2006, federal agencies issued over 3,700 final rules, while Congress passed only(!) 321 bills that got signed into law. The report covers the cost of *federal* regulations — what the total would be with state and municipal government regulations included, God only knows.

The report makes a few modest suggestions for mitigating these enormous regulatory costs. It suggests that Congress be required to vote on all new agency rules before they become binding. It also recommends that Congress be required to

commission independent cost-benefit analyses for all new proposed regulations. And it suggests making those cost estimates publicly available in a yearly report.

I would go much farther. I would like to see Congress enact a law — indeed, make it a constitutional amendment — that sunsets any regulation after a decade. Require Congress to vote to renew any regulation every decade after its initial passage, and to commission a new third-party cost-benefit analysis each time before voting to renew it.

— Gary Jason

**We are all capitalists now** — The Chinese slave labor scandal has two fascinating aspects. One is illustrated by this quotation: “The scandal surfaced last month after about 400 distraught parents posted a plea on the internet about their children who had been sold into slavery in China’s northern Shanxi province and neighbouring Henan” (AFP).

This, of course, shows the leveling power of public communication like the internet. Another interesting aspect appears in a second quotation: “Clearly there is one law for ordinary citizens and another for entrepreneurs and party officials” (Robin Munro, China Labour Bulletin via AFP).

Huh, just like in America. Well, I guess they are real capitalists, finally.

— Paul Rako

**Second life** — John P. Mackey, cofounder and CEO of Whole Foods Market, is in trouble with both the Securities and Exchange Commission and his own company’s board. It seems the billionaire libertarian, whose writings have appeared in this magazine’s pages, spent years online anonymously running down his chief competitor, Wild Oats Markets.

According to Mackey’s own admission, from 1999 to 2006 he used the alias “Rahodeb” to post commentary on Yahoo Finance’s bulletin board. Among his postings were numerous criticisms of Wild Oats, Whole Foods’ chief competitor among natural and organic groceries. Seems like a dishonorable way to battle for market share. And there’s more.

Whole Foods, it turns out, is looking to acquire Wild Oats. In this context, Mackey’s postings could easily be seen as attempts to drive down the price of his competitor’s stock, making the acquisition a lot cheaper for Whole Foods. This type of activity can lead to big problems with federal regulators.

Adding a comic touch to the affair is the revelation that Mackey, as Rahodeb, occasionally praised John Mackey’s sharp wardrobe and good looks. No danger of prison time over that, but the snickering Mackey has exposed himself to is unlikely to abate anytime soon.

John Mackey used to be a poster boy for libertarianism. Now he looks like a slightly creepy eccentric. Not a pleasing picture for those who support libertarian ideas.

— Jon Harrison

**Buzzed riding is drunk riding** — A recent promotion by Amtrak offers free booze to overnight passengers on certain routes. A \$100 voucher will be given to first-class passengers on coast to coast trips. In response (according to AP) Misty Moyse, of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, questioned whether \$100 in free alcohol was too much. “This sounds like a lot of credit toward possible overindulging,” she said.

I am a frequent Amtrak passenger. I’ve learned that on a

\*<http://www.cei.org/pdf/6018.pdf>



couple of routes, the train costs roughly the same as gas for the car, and takes roughly the same amount of time. I can also do certain things on a train that are discouraged when driving. Things like reading, napping, or drinking beer.

Misty's comment causes me to question the true motives of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. They aren't supposed to be against drinking, only drinking and driving. Free drinks on a train should be applauded, since they have the potential to attract alcoholics onto the train and off of the road. If we wanted to get all the drunks off the road, an offer of free liquor on all public transit would certainly help.

I've often suspected that the Mothers won't stop being MADD, short of complete prohibition; that their eventual goal is zero tolerance for any blood alcohol level, after which they will start closing bars; that in the future, they will become simply the Mothers Against Drinking. With this comment, it seems that Misty might have tipped her hand a little bit.

— Tim Slagle

**Mr. Smith goes to North Korea** — Two important stories about Asia have gone virtually unnoticed in the media, so are worth a moment's reflection.

First, as noted in The Wall Street Journal (July 16), China is on track to surpass Germany as the world's third largest economy (after the U.S. and Japan), and much earlier than expected.

In current dollars, the U.S. has a GDP of \$13.2 trillion, Japan \$4.4 trillion, Germany \$2.9 trillion, and China \$2.8 trillion. But Germany's annual growth rate is only 3%, at best, while China is growing at an 11% annual rate. Of course, in *per capita* income, China has a long way to go to catch up with Germany, because Germany's population is 82 million, which is minuscule compared to China's 1.3 billion. Still, score one for Adam Smith: China has moved to embrace free-market economics, and it has reaped the rewards; Germany has embraced the welfare state and become stagnant.

Second, the AP reported on July 17 that North Korea, in exchange for the release of seized funds and a bribe of 50,000 tons of oil, has closed its nuclear reactor, and the U.S. has agreed to start the process of removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terror. North Korea dragged out the process but finally carried through with its part of the agreement negotiated by the six powers (the U.S., Japan, Russia, China, South Korea, and North Korea).

Diplomats are moving on to the issue of disabling North Korea's nuclear facilities. There is now the hope that this will lead to a completely nuke-free Korean Peninsula, and the replacement of the present cease-fire (agreed to at the end of the Korean War) with a permanent peace treaty. That might even open up the possibility of the reunification of the two Koreas someday in the future.

This represents a substantial step away from war, which was a real possibility given North Korea's nasty habits, such as firing missiles toward Japan, kidnapping Japanese, testing nuclear warheads, and sharing that technology with other rogue nations. Score one for diplomacy.

— Gary Jason

**Partially hydrogenated, fully nannied** — The county that contains Seattle — King County, Washington — has pioneered a new level in government regulation: the

county board of health has voted to require restaurants in a chain of ten or more to disclose health metrics on menus. Each permanent menu item will be required to advertise the number of calories, and the amount of trans-fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, and salt. The disclosure has to be in the same typeface as the words describing the menu item.

Strict libertarians oppose mandatory disclosure in principle, though I do not. My view is that buyers need information to make good choices. That the government requires packagers of processed foods or underwriters of corporate shares to disclose the ingredients is, in my view, a good thing. You can argue that if people want information the sellers will provide it, but that works only if buyers are willing to forego the product without the information, or if the information is the product. I like disclosure. It makes the market work better, and if the market works better, there will be fewer attacks upon it. So I am not a zealot about this menu thing. I like the idea that I can find out how much salt is in a Whopper, and how many calories.

But this rule that I am to live under, beginning Aug. 1, 2008, is more than that. Putting the information about calories, trans-fats, etc., in the same typeface, and with each menu item, is an effort not just to make the information available, but to gag me with it.

To a restaurant, a menu is a marketing item. My government's rule changes the flavor of the menu into a kind of nutritional prospectus, a 10-K for the gastrointestinal tract. I oppose it not on principle, but because it spoils my dinner.

— Bruce Ramsey

**Mad dogs and Americans** — I need to call Mayor Bloomberg. There's a way to make New York's air pure, its traffic problems negligible, its sidewalks uncrowded and uncluttered. Manhattan can be instantly transformed into the orderly, sedate, regulated, franchised, homogenized, and rather dull place the mayor and his corporate allies so desperately want it to be. Visit Bangkok.

I was there while bouncing around Asia last summer. By



"Your refund? — Oh, we spent that money months ago!"

comparison, New York in August is a country picnic. To be in Bangkok is to experience life deeply as obstacle course combined with oven. Breathing in the fresh fumes, you contemplate the sea — the vast sea of trucks, buses, taxis, cars, and 5 million motorbikes, which you hope will by some biblical miracle part just long enough for you to get to the other side of the road. Sweating freely in the dense, spongelike humid air, you navigate the narrow sidewalks, which are disputed territory. Throngs of slow-moving pedestrians compete with booths selling everything under the relentless sun, hawkers of dubious DVDs, demure hookers, a few Arabs with retinues of burqa-clad women, clusters of youths straddling their motorbikes, emaciated stray dogs, and sidewalk restaurants that are more sidewalk than restaurant. A pot or grill for cooking, a pot for washing, a rickety table or two lined at all hours with hungry patrons. The street food is actually delicious, if sometimes mysterious. You might wonder what's cooking, and what happens to all those stray dogs.

Solicitous Thais constantly express their willingness to relieve you of any excess *bahts* you might be burdened with (30 *bahts* = one dollar). Touts ("Yes hello sir what you looking for?"), *tuk-tuk* (three-wheeled motorcycle taxi) drivers ready to take you anywhere you don't want to go, tailors who practically start measuring you as you walk by their shops, beggars (but fewer than you might expect), and the female health-care professionals sitting in front of their therapeutic establishments ("Massaaage sir massage . . . Welcome sir massage!"). You can take long, thoughtful walks in Bangkok. But your thoughts are all going to be along the lines of "How do I dodge this without getting flattened by that?"

I liked it. It's chaos, but it's self-regulating chaos, Thai chaos, spicy curried chaos. They manage it better over there. Despite all the crowding and jostling, Thais are good at avoiding confrontations and almost never raise their voices (it's very bad form to talk loudly, let alone shout). The irreducible chaotic element in New York and other American cities is nasty, brutish, and short-tempered. In Bangkok you get polite and eerily calm anarchy. The traffic is hopelessly snarled, but no one is snarling or honking or exchanging gunfire. Once you give up your daft Western notions of going at things in a straight line and in a hurry, once you begin to develop a self-image more closely resembling that of a cork borne along on a slow-moving stream, you can enjoy it, especially when you know that there's always a shower and air-conditioning and a cold Singha beer in your immediate future. Thais aren't theatrical (or stark raving mad) like New Yorkers, but the motley, cosmopolitan street life is very watchable, the entrepreneurial anarchy supplies a sense of breathtaking adventure akin to high-stakes gambling, the seafood is excellent, the cheap fresh fruit purchased on the street has flavor and texture, unlike our own factory-farmed wax fruit, there's gracious architecture hidden behind the choked roads and prevalent modernized mediocrity, there are strange temples and even stranger nightclubs, and Thai women are often fetching, almost never fat, and tend to have a quick-witted, playful sense of humor.

Maybe it has something to do with the ubiquitous yet unobtrusive and tolerant Buddhism, but Thais seem to be good at balancing outward accommodation and inward calm. Or inward something — it's hard to know what they're really thinking, and they will often tell you what they assume you

want to hear. The leading manufacturing industry seems to be appearances, keeping them up, saving face (this includes all the heavily advertised skin-whitening lotions — there's a traditional Thai prejudice, long preceding Western influence, in favor of relatively pale skin). Thais themselves can speak of their country as a land of illusions. But at a time when Americans have spent six-plus years consuming (and now upchucking) the illusions churned out by the Washington fantasy factories known as thinktanks and cabinet departments and the Office of the Vice President, there's no urgent need to congratulate ourselves on our own clear-eyed view of things.

In fact a lot of *farangs* (as Thais call all foreigners of Western provenance) are in Thailand to pursue their own phantoms. Shopping bargains that look too good to be true, and are, women who are imagined to be as complaisant and sensual and innocent and submissive as any feverish Western wet dream could wish, and aren't (they're quite independent and tough-minded), a country sometimes pictured as a tolerant tropical paradise where anything goes, which anything doesn't (as some drug-carrying Americans and Brits and Australians festering for eight to ten years in the notorious "Bangkok Hilton," or Bang Kwang prison, have found out).

Noel Coward's well-known line about mad dogs and Englishmen was written with Bangkok in mind. The full couplet goes: "In Bangkok at twelve o'clock they foam at the mouth and they run, / But mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun." All the Bangkok dogs I saw were admirably sane. They spend the middle of the day motionless, usually asleep, in the shade. When they open their eyes for a moment, they probably wonder what stick or bone could be so important that all those foaming and running *farangs* are out in the sadistic sun chasing it.

— Eric Kenning

***A trillion here, a trillion there*** — By now the official Democrat strategy for the 2008 presidential race is clear. Bash Bush ceaselessly for corruption and a failed war, then waltz into power. To this end the Democrats are already declaring the surge a failure, and are conducting an enormous number of simultaneous investigations into various aspects of the Bush administration — by one count, several hundred such investigations, with a blizzard of subpoenas flying out, hoping to uncover dirt of any kind.

Their immediate agenda, should they win, is also clear: completely socialize the American healthcare industry, once and for all. (Whether they will withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq is at this point doubtful, since they have not used their control of Congress to achieve that end, and they seem to fear getting the blame for what would happen after such a withdrawal.) All the Democrat candidates for the presidency have made universal healthcare their central issue, and Michael Moore — the Leni Riefenstahl of the Democratic Party — has just released a documentary praising the British, Canadian, and even Cuban(!) national health services.

It seems likely that their electoral strategy will succeed, and they will take over the executive branch of government. Far less clear is whether they will be in any fiscal position to nationalize America's health care system.

The Office of Management and Budget has released new estimates about the unfunded liabilities of the two federal entitlement behemoths, Social Security and Medicare, and the

results are staggering. The unfunded liabilities — that is, the amounts projected to be paid out that are not covered by projected revenues from payroll taxes and premium payments — are even higher than was earlier thought.

Social Security has a 75-year unfunded liability of \$4.7 trillion, but with the \$2 trillion in existing Social Security trust fund bonds, the real unfunded liability is \$6.7 trillion. (The trust fund bonds are the IOUs that the U.S. government has issued to itself to cover the Social Security taxes it has diverted to other purposes. These notes will sooner or later have to be covered.) Looking at what economists call the “very long run” or “infinite horizon,” the total unfunded liability is upwards of \$15.6 trillion — *trillion*, with a capital T, which stands for Trouble.

Medicare is even more gravely indebted. Again, on the 75-year time line, the unfunded obligation for Part A is \$11.6 trillion, for Part B \$13.9 trillion, and for Part D \$8.4 trillion — for a tidy total of \$33.9 trillion. On the infinite horizon, the total Medicare unfunded liability is \$74.3 trillion.

In sum, the two major federal entitlement programs together have an unfunded liability of \$40.6 trillion over the next 75 years, and \$89 trillion over the indefinite long run. Remember, our total GDP last year was about \$13.2 trillion, so we owe about *seven times* our entire yearly collective production on these two entitlements, over and above whatever taxes we will collect on their behalf.

The picture is even bleaker when you remember that local and state governments have huge unfunded pension and healthcare liabilities, the immensity of which is only now becoming known, as these governments are now being forced to give an accounting. Also potentially huge is the unfunded liability of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, the government-backed company that takes on the pensions of private corporations that go belly-up. Companies like Ford and General Motors would break the bank, were they ever to fail.

Where, then, do the Democrats think they will find the vastly greater sums required to socialize the American medical system? That is a mystery none of them seems willing to discuss.

— Gary Jason

**Urban planned obsolescence** — The collapse of the

I-35W bridge in Minneapolis has led a stampede of journalists to local transportation agencies searching for records of local bridges in a similarly poor condition. This is already stimulating proposals for huge tax increases for infrastructure.

The real problem is not money, however, but an onerous planning process that delays road improvements literally for decades. Actual construction of a new bridge might take only a year or two, but urban planners typically spend as much as 20 years deciding how the bridge should be built.

*News You May Have Missed*

## Something Terrible Happening to NY Times, Says NY Times

NEW YORK — The New York Times, which raised its price by 25% in July, from one dollar to \$1.25, narrowed its perspective by 12% on August 6, when it cut the width of the paper by an inch and a half to 12 inches, according to a brief, apparently truncated story that ended in the middle of a sentence in The NwYrk Times, as the paper now calls itself. The Times also revealed that it would be changing its venerable masthead slogan as well, from “All the News That’s Fit to Print” to “All the News That Fits We’ll Print.”

“At a time of rising costs and vanishing advertisers and plummeting readership, we had to do someth,” said publisher Arthur (“Pinched”) Sulzb, formerly known as Arthur (“Pinch”) Sulzberger, Jr. Sulzb, who claims to have drastically cut his own width as well, shedding 20 pounds of fat, mostly from his head, added, “Admittedly, when it comes time for the Times to funnel fake intelligence provided by anonymous government officials in order to start unnecessary wars in the Middle East, we may have less space to do it in,” referring to the fabricated WMD-in-Iraq stories by his close friend Judith Miller that ran prominently on the front page in 2002–03. “But,” he continued, “from now on we’re only going to be buying little subcompact wars, which should fit our new format nicely.” Sulzb also said that if the Bush administration starts a war with Iran without the paper’s help,

the Times would not have any room to oppose it but it was prepared to cover both the war and the subsequent worldwide economic meltdown and total political chaos in the Sunday “Styles” section.

In a related move, the Times published a lead editorial calling upon world leaders to agree on a global plan for reducing the amount of bad weather, riots, insurgencies, epidemics, elections, summit meetings, trends, forecasts, stock market plunges and rallies, and alarming new studies about the irreversibly harmful effects of ordinary foods and beverages by 60% by the year 2009. It also called for comparable reductions in the number of tediously similar upcoming New York neighborhoods and upscale restaurants and Broadway shows, and strict quotas on the number of boring yet newsworthy new fashion designers, artists, dancers, filmmakers, and rich people who have transformed old abandoned canning factories into cute country homes. That would make it possible, the editorial pointed out, for the Times to reduce its width even more, to about five inches, and to switch to thinner, softer paper, so that the daily edition of the paper could then be sold in handy, fluffy rolls around a cardboard cylinder, which would allow it to serve another household purpose aside from providing questionable news, and the price could be increased accordingly.

— Eric Kenning

Since 1991 this planning process has been mandated by federal law. On top of this, an antiautomobile minority takes advantage of the process to halt road improvements and divert billions of dollars of highway user fees to expensive rail transit projects.

The American Society of Civil Engineers says the U.S. has a \$1.5 trillion backlog of infrastructure needs. But this number should be taken with a grain of salt as it merely sums the wish lists of more than a dozen different interest groups.

Raising taxes to fund such wish lists will turn infrastructure programs into pork fests that provide absolutely no assurance that money will be spent where it is really needed. Instead, as a matter of principle, infrastructure spending should be based on markets and user fees. If users are not willing to pay the cost (e.g., light rail), then we simply don't need that kind of infrastructure.

— Randal O'Toole

**Natural law** — Chicago economist George Stigler must be rolling over in his grave to see his name being abused in the Federal Trade Commission case against Whole Foods Market's merger with Wild Oats. (Whole Foods' CEO is libertarian John Mackey.) The FTC engaged "antitrust expert" Kevin Murphy to make the bizarre case that the merger would somehow hurt competition in the natural foods business. Never mind that practically every major grocery store now sells natural foods.

It turns out that Professor Murphy is a former student of Stigler's and since 2005 the George J. Stigler Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. Undoubtedly Murphy has forgotten the advice of his old professor, who said a year before he died: "More recently, and at the risk of being called fickle, many economists (I among them) have lost both our enthusiasm for antitrust policy and much of our fear of oligopolies." Apparently Murphy has reignited his own enthusiasm for antitrust.

— Mark Skousen

**No roads lead to Juneau** — I write this from a cruise ship docked in Juneau, Alaska. On my tour of Juneau today, I learned there are only two ways into the city: by plane and by ship. No roads lead to Juneau, the state capital of Alaska. It is therefore difficult and expensive to get in and out of this city, where 65% of the populace works for the government.

I like this concept, and encourage its adoption in the "lower 48." Isolating and restricting the government from the rest of the populace is a novel approach, and may perhaps account for the fact that Alaska was able to hold out against joining the union longer than any other state except Hawaii — a state, I note in passing, the entirety of which cannot be approached by road and which is very expensive and difficult to reach.

But back to Juneau . . . I recommend we try and get Senator Stevens to drive up here for a visit.

— Ross Levatter

**Insufficient postage** — Last year, the guy who used to perform the annual maintenance on my home's slate roof told me that his son had gotten hired by the U.S. Postal Service at a starting pay of \$22 per hour. That's well over \$40,000 a year (plus benefits) if my math is correct. Just for sorting mail.

The post office in my village closes at 4:45 p.m. That's what

the sign says, anyway. I stopped by at 4:30 one day recently to mail a package. The minute I stepped out the door (it was 4:33 according to both my watch and the clock on the post office wall) the employees shut and locked the entrance. Anybody needing a book of stamps during the last 12 minutes of business was out of luck.

A few days later, I stopped in again. A young lady with several large packages was strumming her fingers on the counter. She had, it turned out, been trying for some time to get said packages mailed. The postal clerk turned to me: "I'm afraid you'll have to wait, sir." Seems the clerk had made an error of some sort in processing the packages, and then found that she was unable to correct it on her computer. Whether it was a systems problem or lack of knowledge on the clerk's part, I never found out.

After five minutes of watching this exercise in futility, I asked if there was anyone else in the office. "Should be," the clerk replied, as she took a look out back. She returned alone. "He should've been here 20 minutes ago," she informed me, "but he's not back." She returned to her package-processing problem.

After another few minutes, the clerk threw up her hands in despair. She informed the young lady (who by now was sitting on the floor under the counter) that she would have to rip the postage labels off the packages, refund her money, and start all over again. My ten-minute wait was at an end. The clerk left her unfinished work to attend to my business, which required all of 30 seconds.

I departed with the clerk and the young lady still bound together by the unmailed packages. What resolution was achieved, if any, I know not. My heart goes out to the customer, stuck for God knows how long in a rural post office, when all she wanted to do was to mail some packages. Could she still be there, I wonder?

The U.S. Post Office was okay, from the days of Ben Franklin to those of Larry O'Brien, as a strictly government entity. Now, as a public-private hybrid, it displays all the worst traits of both sectors, and none of the best. It is bloated, inefficient, and unresponsive. That's what happens when the discipline of the market is absent. Any "private" company whose losses are automatically made up by the government will thrive, in the sense that disease thrives in an unhealthy environment. It will perpetuate and aggrandize itself, to the benefit of no one but itself.

I suppose I could live with a starting pay of \$22 an hour for people basically unfit to babysit my dog, if the service was top-notch. But it ain't. So I say, write to your congressperson urging the passage of legislation to open up the delivery of postal services to competitive bidding. Let FedEx and UPS have a crack at it. Leave the USPS to live or (as it would certainly do, were its monopoly broken) die in the real world.

— Jon Harrison

**Lewis dives off a Russian submarine**

— Russian submarines planted a flag on the seabed above the North Pole and claimed it for Russia. According to news reports, the submarines had to be extremely careful not to wander too far from the ice hole they went into, because the ice is so thick that they wouldn't be able to break through on surfacing.



This seems strange to me, because just a couple of weeks previous, a guy from England took a swim at the North Pole to raise awareness about global warming. Lewis Gordon Pugh actually jumped into arctic waters wearing nothing more than a bathing cap and a Speedo. (What is it with Europeans and the Speedo?) The illusion he created was that there wasn't any ice at the North Pole.

Pugh actually rode up to the Pole aboard a Russian ice breaker. I have to believe this was not coincidental. It is my guess that the Russians used Pugh's swim as an excuse to clear a route. (Nice to know that the Russian government hasn't abandoned the concept of the "useful idiot.")

The climate change camp wants us all to believe that the ice has melted. Certainly the image of a man taking a swim at the North Pole gives the image of a world turned upside down. But the reason the Russians took him up there was as an excuse to lay claim to all the carbon-rich fossil fuels lying underneath the ocean. While the rest of the world sees a reason to stop burning carbon, the Russians have no intention of even slowing down.

Here's the question nobody seems to be able to answer: was there actually a hole at the North Pole already, or did the ice breakers have to punch one through for him to swim in?

According to the Daily Mail, Pugh was the first man to swim at the South Pole as well. That's impossible. The South Pole is on land, and covered with an icecap two miles thick. So my speculation is that Pugh isn't beyond exaggerating.

It would not surprise me to learn that a couple more tons of CO<sub>2</sub> were put into the atmosphere as an icebreaker ground up the thick ice cap, clearing a hole for him to take his historic swim. It also made a convenient place to drop the submarines.

Pugh claims he trained for his swim by dumping a half ton of ice into his swimming pool at home every single day. One can only imagine how much the energy required for that ritual contributed to his carbon footprint. Coming just a month after the orgy of energy consumption that was the Live Earth shows, this stunt certainly wins the prize. I'm beginning to wonder just how much energy will be exhausted convincing the world that too much energy is being exhausted.

— Tim Slagle

***Is there a doctor in the Senate?*** — On Aug. 4 The New York Times ran a story headlined "Lawmaker Calls for Registry of Drug Firms Paying Doctors," by Gardiner Harris. It seems Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) is concerned that drug manufacturers are trying to convince physicians to use their products, in part, by paying them. For example, Dr. Melissa DelBello, a child psychiatrist at the University of Cincinnati, received \$100,000 from AstraZeneca, a pharmaceutical company that manufactures Seroquel, which Dr. DelBello claims is helpful in some cases of childhood psychosis, though others feel the evidence is inconclusive.

Drug manufacturers, Harris notes, feel mandated registration would be misinterpreted. She quotes Washington lawyer John Bentivoglio, who represents these companies, as saying "One of the concerns is that these payments are seen as bribes. That's not the case. The vast majority are lawful payments for services." One would think Senator Grassley, and all Congressmen, would be receptive to this point of view, see-

ing how they raise reelection funds and provide constituent services.

Harris quotes Grassley as saying that voters can easily look up the contributions made to elected officials before asking "Shouldn't we hold doctors to similar standards?"

Ignoring for the moment just how challenging it really is to look up financial contributions made to elected officials (how easily can one access this particular register? Does it count in-kind contributions, like being made CEO of Halliburton?), let's consider Senator Grassley's comparison: if you don't like what your doctor is doing, you don't have to wait six years to replace him. If you stop seeing him, you don't have to continue to pay him just because he takes care of a majority of your neighbors. Your doctor can't force you to follow his advice. If your doctor lies to you in order to get your business you can sue him. If following his plan of action leads to bad results, especially if in retrospect these results were easily anticipated by those knowledgeable in the field, you can sue him.

In all of this, congressmen differ from doctors. That suggests standards need not be similar.

Another difference: more often than not, doctors are not lying to you.

— Ross Levatter

***Phase 3*** — Leftists in my neighborhood occasionally hang hand-painted banners on a pedestrian overpass over the highway and wave to the people driving to work. In late July their banner said, "The Only People Who Gain from War Are Those Who Profit." Though I am against the war on Iraq as vehemently as they are, and hate the whole business, the sign annoyed me: I am not against profit.

It also occurred to me that the sign was taking advantage of a double meaning of the term. In a financial sense, it is not true that the only people who gain from war are those who profit. An inventor with an idea but no sponsor may gain from war — and not just financially. A kid stuck in a rural town in a dead-end job may gain from war (and, of course, may lose). People in the military may gain from war, by advancing in rank, gaining new skills, etc. Most of all, politicians may gain from war. The Republicans did, in 2002 and in 2004, and it is the politicians who start wars.

To save the slogan, one can argue that all these are ways of "profiting" from war — but then we are using "profit" in a general sense of gain, and the slogan on the banner is reduced to, "The Only People Who Gain from War Are Those Who Gain." And I wonder how long it took my neighborhood propagandists to paint their banner, and how long they stood there waving at people going to work, and how they make a living.

— Bruce Ramsey

***Going Dutch with Mexico*** — I have a gentleman come by my house several times a week. He vacuums, he launders, he cleans the pool, he is helpful in many, many ways. And not terribly expensive. His name is Francisco. I have not asked his nationality, his citizenship, or his legal status. It is not necessary. I don't employ him. He does all this for free. Admittedly, every Friday an amount of cash I leave lying around disappears. So far, I have not troubled the police about this.

Francisco came to me last week and indicated he would be taking two months off to visit relatives in Mexico. I asked if

he anticipated any difficulty in returning to my employ. "I've done it four times in the past, so probably not," he replied. "Have you ever run into INS patrols?" I asked. "Once," he said, "but I have an advantage. I speak English. When I was picked up, they simply sent me back the other way, but I asked, and the officer told me I'd have better luck trying again at the same place the next day."

Get it? Just like a growing number of cops on the beat "fighting" the war on drugs, the actual grunts doing the work of rounding up people who threaten this country by offering to do menial work for small amounts of money know they cannot succeed. They don't kill themselves to round up people who they know will just try again tomorrow. Instead, they play the game, build up their quota, and — while politicians in Washington raise funds by throwing red meat to red states — tell the illegals, "Try again tomorrow; you'll have a better chance then." What else do you really need to know about this farcical opposition to "illegal" immigration, of this mercantilist throwback effort to stop the law of supply and demand from crossing a line in the Sonoran desert.

The little Dutch boy could more easily stop the sea.

— Ross Levatter

**Good morning, Vietnam** — While I was vacationing in Vietnam recently I read a story in the June 16 issue of the Saigon Times that was left in my hotel room. The story was entitled: "Neat, more effective government apparatus in the pipeline."

The article talked about the Vietnamese government's progress in reducing its size from 79 bodies in 2002 to 38 today. The goal is to have 12 ministries like the most successful European countries. In a remark that might have come from Reason Public Policy Institute's Privatization Watch, Deputy Minister of the Interior Thang Van Phuc said the Vietnamese government will no longer be both "players and referees." Quoting Phuc, the article said: "In other words, the government cannot be at the same time policy-makers and organizers of the implementation of these policies. The Government will focus only on macroeconomic issues. Other functions will be transferred to societal and corporate organizations. Therefore, the administrative apparatus will be much more compact."

I wish our government and the Republican administration

were so committed to reducing the size of government. The Vietnamese deputy minister also understood the dynamics of power. "Phuc said although the cabinet reshuffle is necessary, it will not be easy because many people will lose power. 'The biggest stumbling block to reform is that it affects organizations and individuals. It relates not only to power but also interest.'"

I don't know whether I am more astonished by the libertarianism of the Vietnamese government or the candor of the Vietnamese media.

— Paul Rako

**Our men in Washington** — Charles Murray wrote a piece for the Sydney Morning Herald, Aug. 6, on the cultural responsibilities of the elite. At the end, he reminded readers that the elite is not just made up of elected officials. They are the only members of the elite chosen by general voters. "In all other areas, the government, economy and culture are run by a cognitive elite that we do not choose," Murray wrote. And I thought: Yes, that's so. And it is not one of the better arguments for democracy.

— Bruce Ramsey

**Taxes for the Maul of America** — A bridge collapses in Minneapolis, and immediately the Minnesota Democrats blame the lack of taxation. (Complaining that Minnesota taxes are too low is a lot like telling Michael Moore that he isn't eating enough.) The truck fire was barely put out before Minnesota politicians started clamoring for an increase in the gas tax to fund infrastructure repair. What they forget is they just spent \$700 million of state and federal gasoline tax revenue on a light-rail line to run twelve short miles from downtown Minneapolis out to the Mall of America. The project ran a full \$400 million over budget.

Slated for construction is a second line to connect Minneapolis to St. Paul, costing an additional \$1.2 billion. If projections are as reliable as those for the Hiawatha, expect it to cost close to \$3 billion before it is done.

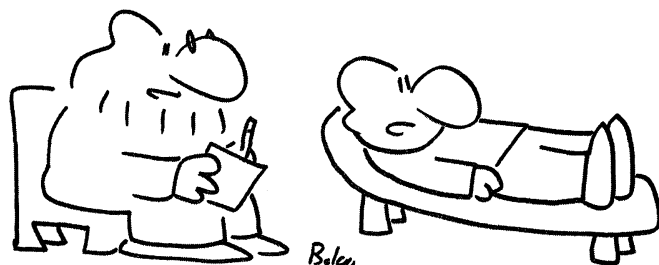
Strangely enough, I believe the bridge that collapsed carried more vehicles every single day than the entire light rail carries in a week. The money is already there. They just need to straighten out their priorities.

— Tim Slagle

**JFK, Mk. II** — Life occasionally offers us wonderful moments to savor: the quiet anniversary dinner my wife and I spend at a delightful restaurant; the piano recital my daughter gives at the end of the school year; or the feeling of accomplishment I get when I finish what I think is a polished article.

Such a moment to savor occurred as I read a Wall Street Journal op-ed (Aug. 3) mildly praising Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) for showing some realism about the war on terror as it concerns Pakistan. Obama had earlier announced that our troops shouldn't be in Iraq; instead, they should be invading the Waziristan region of Pakistan, where Osama bin Laden is thought to be hiding.

What a bold and frisky plan! If Pakistani president Musharraf doesn't get the bad guys, by jingo, we will. It is frisky indeed to attack a nation of 160 million, which just happens to be an ally, albeit a feckless one. Oh, and a nation that has nuclear weapons — no guessing here, since Pakistan has already set off more than a few. Obama has thus staked a position to the right of Rumsfeld, who nixed a proposed



"You have a condition called 'extreme gullibility.'"

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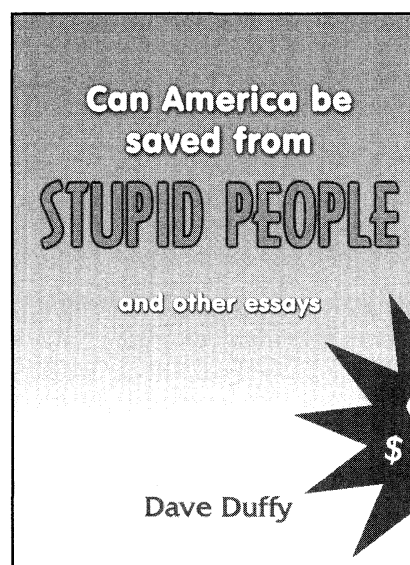
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"...As it has always done, somehow Government, like some monster from the past, has again outwitted the freedom-loving masses and has convinced them that they don't need protection from Government, but from everything else. And so the age-old beast our founding fathers had tamed is once more banging at our door." — page 145

"...Burglars, and all criminals whose deeds risk violence, destroy parts of society. They are like arsonists, setting little fires all over the place, burning down what the rest of us try to build up. We build hope for the future, and they burn it down." — page 233



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commando raid into Waziristan in 2005. With that degree of macho, Obama is now truly MachObama, Rambo of Illinois.

Of course, MachObama spent the day waffling about the little detail of whether to use tactical nukes in his attack. First he said he would never use nukes under any circumstances — which presumably would include the scenario in which the Pakistanis, pissed off at us for the invasion, overthrew Musharraf and installed a Taliban-flavored leader, who then dropped a nuke on our troops. After that he said, yeah, sure, of course he would use nukes. Then he just gave up answering the question. Seeing a guy like Obama make a complete horse's ass of himself is simply delightful.

MachObama has been compared to young JFK. In both cases you have a handsome, articulate, callow young senator driven by extreme ambition to make it to the top. In both cases, the callow politician tries to run to the right of even his Republican opponent in his zeal to prosecute a "cold" war. And in both cases you have someone apparently jacked up on male hormones (one wonders whether Obama is on steroids, too). Kennedy gave us Vietnam, and Obama may give us Pakistan.

— Gary Jason

**Cui bono?** — On July 27, in the skies over Phoenix, two news helicopters covering a high-speed police chase collided and crashed to the ground. All four people in the two choppers died. Fortunately, no one on the ground was injured, though it could easily have been otherwise.

Isn't it time that news outlets stopped doing this sort of thing? Why is a car chase important enough to cover in this way, anyway? Because it provides exciting visuals, of course. Exciting visuals supposedly keep people watching, which improves ratings, which means that the station can charge more for the commercial time it sells. Pretty tawdry, isn't it?

Making a profit in any business enterprise is a wonderful thing. It keeps the economic wheels turning. But there's something dirty about TV and tabloid journalism's propensity to profit from tragedy and suffering. I once saw a local news correspondent confess on television that questioning a 10-year-old boy whose parents had just died in an accident was very hard, "but I had to do it." This attitude is sick. This is why almost everyone despises journalists.

When I turn on Fox or CNN and see that of all the stories in the world they might be covering, they have chosen to feature an apartment fire in Tuscaloosa or the crash of a Piper Cub in Walla Walla — that is, an event of purely local significance — I almost want to shout at the TV. Such events are not newsworthy beyond the immediate local area, yet the coverage goes on and on because there is video available of burning buildings or wreckage.

In the last analysis, it's the hypocrisy that gets to me. If people want to watch such things on TV, who am I to deny them? But the CNNs of this world, and little local news outlets too, like to pretend they are "informing the public" by "covering the news." In fact, they're strictly in the business of selling commercials for profit. Four people in Phoenix are dead as a result. How many more must die before the so-called profession of journalism smartens up? — Jon Harrison

**Czech your premises** — I have reflected before on the bittersweet feeling one gets from seeing free-market

ideas adopted in other countries, while the same set of ideas is spurned here in this country, in what historically has been viewed as the freest economy. One has conflicting emotions, watching other countries privatizing their Social Security systems, voucherizing their public school systems, eliminating their farm subsidies, adopting flat tax schemes, and selling off their state-run industries, while we steadily march toward statist hell.

Yet another manifestation of this phenomenon can be seen in the realm of corporate taxation rates. While we hold our corporate tax rates at an average of a little more than 39% (counting both federal and state rates), almost all of our major trading partners have lower rates than ours, and many of them are lowering their rates even further.

For example, the average among the G7 nations is 36.5%, among the Asia-Pacific nations 30%, among the Latin American nations 28.5%, among the thirty OECD nations 28.5%, and among the EU nations 25.8%.

And many of our trade competitors are lowering their corporate tax rates even further. The Czechs have announced that their rate will drop from the current modest 24% down to 19% in 2010. The Czechs are hoping to emulate the Irish, who created an economic miracle in part by dropping their corporate rate to a mere 13%. The Irish economy is now the Tiger of Europe, and Ireland imports people rather than exporting them.

This is promoting a *good* race to the bottom: more and more countries are beginning to lower their corporate rates to promote business growth. Nicolas Sarkozy, who recently won the presidency of France, made a campaign promise to lower the French corporate tax rate, currently 34%, to 28%. And while Germany has in the past railed against low-tax policies as "tax dumping," Chancellor Angela Merkel's ruling coalition has pledged to lower the corporate rate from 39% to 30%.

Still, no cuts are likely here, in the land of free enterprise. The Democrats have made it clear that the filthy, greedy corporations are not yet paying enough. So, once again, you can expect to see us regress, while others progress. — Gary Jason

**Market movies** — I have never seen a mention among fans of the free market of one of my favorite movies of the 1980s, Barry Levinson's "Tin Men" (1987). This sort-of-a-comedy is the story of a feud between two grasping and street-smart aluminum-siding salesmen, played by the sharkish Richard Dreyfuss and IRS-hating Danny DeVito. It shows them being deceptive while also managing to be "a sentimental celebration of the soldiers of capitalism," as Rita Kempley wrote in her review in the Washington Post. "Tin Men" also satirizes the city government's Home Improvement Commission, a boy-scoutish effort to protect the consumers — who are portrayed in this movie as poor fish. At the end, when the feud is finished and the regulators win, the two "tin men" ride off in a garish Cadillac, looking for the next opportunity.

Another Danny DeVito movie should interest fans of capitalism: Norman Jewison's "Other People's Money" (1991). It is a corporate takeover movie in which DeVito plays "Larry the Liquidator" against a folksy Gregory Peck — and the movie takes DeVito's side.

— Bruce Ramsey



# Nine Days in July

*by Jon Harrison*

Iraq is a quagmire. Staying to fight and retreating are both fraught with problems. No one has a clue about what to do next — and at midsummer, the clock was heard ticking loudly.

The nine days following the Fourth of July, 2007, were a watershed for American policy in the Middle East. Consider the following chronology:

*Thursday, July 5:* Sen. Pete Domenici, Republican from New Mexico, comes out publicly against the Bush administration's policy in Iraq. He joins Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, and Sen. John Voinovich of Ohio, who in late June made public their opposition to Bush's course. These men are true-blue, establishment Republicans. This isn't Chuck Hagel or Ron Paul criticizing the administration. It represents a sea change. The Republican Party hasn't experienced anything like this since the spring of 1974, when Barry Goldwater and Bill Buckley stated publicly that the Watergate-embroiled Richard Nixon should resign the presidency. When the bedrock of your party starts to crumble under your feet, Mr. President, you've got big problems.

*Friday, July 6:* Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf escapes death when his plane is fired on, almost certainly by Islamic militants, while taking off from an airfield at Rawalpindi. His escape reveals yet again the very thin line that keeps Pakistan tethered to its U.S. ally. Despite that alliance, Osama bin Laden and the rest of al Qaeda's top leadership are ensconced

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in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan, where the Pakistani government's writ runs out. Indications are that al Qaeda has largely reconstituted itself there. Meanwhile, Islamic militancy appears to be gaining throughout Pakistan. A few days before Musharraf was attacked, militants seized the Red Mosque in Islamabad. Although they were eventually crushed by the Pakistani Army, this certainly is not the last we will see of the fanatics who may one day rule over the Muslim world's sole nuclear power.

*Saturday, July 7:* Three weeks into full-scale surge operations in Iraq, a truck bomber strikes the village of Amerli, killing over 150 people. It is the deadliest single bombing since the war began in 2003. Throughout Iraq, over 220 people die on 7/7/07, a "lucky day" for newlyweds and others in far-off America.

It is already clear that the Sunni fighters, including al Qaeda in Iraq, are largely avoiding the surge. They are fighting when and where *they* choose. In Baquba in June, they melted away — the U.S. military estimated that 80% of the

leadership simply escaped. At the same time, the Shiite militias remain virtually untouched by American forces. The British, already drawing down their forces inside the country, are skirmishing with the Mahdi Army and other Shiite fight-

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*The surge is working, Petraeus says. "Progress is being made." Tell that to the Iraqis in Amerli, General. Tell it to the families of the troops who died today.*

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ers around Basra, Iraq's second city. Basra is reportedly slipping away from Coalition control, with radical sectarians and criminal elements vying for power.

Both Sunnis and Shiites appear to realize that they need only wait us out to win this first round (the second round they will fight against one another). As in Vietnam, time is on the enemy's side.

*Sunday, July 8:* The New York Times comes out editorially in favor of an "orderly withdrawal" from Iraq on a definite timetable. Despite the fact that the Times prints a lot of left-wing bilge, this is an important event. The Times wants to remain *the* establishment paper. It doesn't like to go out on an editorial limb. This won't have quite the same effect as Cronkite turning on Johnson in '68, but it's still a straw in the wind for the Bush administration.

The Pentagon announces that Defense Secretary Gates will not make a planned four-day trip to Latin America. He will instead attend meetings on Iraq during the lead-up to the administration's July 15 interim report to Congress.

*Monday, July 9:* An important day in Washington. Late in the day, anonymous administration sources reveal that the Iraqi government has missed *all* the targets for political, economic, and other reforms set for it at the time the surge was approved. No wonder Gates stayed home.

The movement for a change of course in Iraq seems to be gaining strength in Congress. Senators and representatives are feeling the heat from their constituents, and many no longer seem willing to wait even for Gen. David Petraeus' mid-September briefing on the progress of the surge. Freshman Democratic Sen. James Webb of Virginia (once Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Navy), with Majority Leader Harry Reid at his side, announces that he will introduce an amendment to the Defense Authorization bill that would give troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan at least equal time stateside between tours. If passed, this would put paid to any hopes for a military solution in Iraq. Under Webb's plan, forces would no longer be available to maintain the operational tempo of even the pre-surge period.

The first reports describing how the American command views the initial surge operations are dribbling in, via the usual news outlets. "Some tactical successes, but no real

change." Did they expect anything else? True, the individual American soldier is superior to any Arab fighter. However, the introduction of 28,000 additional U.S. troops into a territory the size of California will not turn around a guerilla struggle of the kind we are facing in Iraq. It's too great a task, undertaken with inadequate reserves.

Reports are also coming in that the Turks have massed 140,000 troops on the border of Kurdistan. One too many PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party) provocations, and there will be a Turkish army in Mosul and Kirkuk. As the Kurds are our only real friends in Iraq, it will be interesting indeed to see how the Bush administration responds to any Turkish invasion.

While all this is going on, a surreal event is held at the American Enterprise Institute. Televised on C-SPAN, and with the supercilious AEI vice president Danielle Pletka moderating, neocon Fred Kagan and retired General Jack Keane wax loquacious on how *well* the surge is going. These men, with four years of miscalculations and false optimism behind them, are clinging to an Iraq that exists only in their minds, a vision that serves to vindicate their past prognostications. The pudgy Kagan is particularly obnoxious, as he layers bromides over the suffering and horror. He tells the audience that Iraq is "not infinite" in extent (really?), asserting that the additional American forces will overcome insurgents who are running short on room to run. This man taught for ten years at West Point. Was he raiding the vending machines when the concept of force-to-space ratios was being discussed?

*Tuesday, July 10:* The morning papers report that the Army missed its recruiting goals in May and June. Well, I wonder why. Why aren't more kids signing up for duty in an unwinnable war fought in a hellhole 6,000 miles away? Maybe they've decided to wait for the terrorists to "follow us home" (as John McCain, among others, likes to say) after Iraq is lost. Better to die defending your native soil than fighting for God knows what in a place like Iraq. Of course, failure in Iraq doesn't mean that al Qaeda will land on our shores the next day. If the Iraq intervention is the only thing preventing that, then we might as well just convert to Islam now.

The fall-off in recruiting is yet another sign that surge or no surge, America is sick of this war, doesn't believe in it any more, and wants out, come what may. Indeed, a poll released by USA Today/Gallup shows that over 70% of the American

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*Victories are easily described — witness Norman Schwarzkopf's briefing at the end of Gulf War I — but a losing cause requires convoluted language.*

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public wants most U.S. troops out of Iraq by spring 2008. Sixty-two percent believe the war was a mistake in the first place. Support for the president has sunk to an all-time low of

29%. While over 60% of Republicans still support Bush, that figure was at one time over 90%.

At an appearance in Cleveland, the president maintains that he will stay the course in Iraq at least until Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker present their reports on Sept. 15. As we already know that Petraeus and Crocker will give a mixed picture, with some good indicators (cooked-up or not) to go with the bad, this means that Bush remains committed to the surge. He hints that he might be open to a change in the fall, but this seems no more than a ploy to buy time. He also says he will veto any bill out of Congress that interferes with his current strategy. Despite the recent Republican defections, an override appears unlikely.

Homeland Security Director Chertoff pops up after a considerable absence from the headlines. He warns of terrorism here at home, based on al Qaeda's having reconstituted itself in the Pakistani tribal areas, its supposed penchant for summer attacks, and other intelligence information that he "cannot disclose." Does he really know something, or is he just trying to look wise before the event in case something happens?

*Wednesday, July 11:* Debate begins in the Senate on the Webb amendment to the Defense Authorization bill. Senators on both sides pontificate about past uses and abuses of cloture, rather than the issue at hand. Webb speaks of the unanimity among ground combat veterans in the Senate in favor of his amendment. The remainder of the Democrat contribution to the debate, however, is utterly forgettable. Majority Leader Reid chooses to bring up, of all things, the administration's supposed muzzling of a former Surgeon General. What's that got to do with the body bags coming home from Iraq?

Opponents of the amendment, led by Sens. McCain and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, maintain that Petraeus and the Bush administration ought to be given at least until the original Sept. 15 deadline. Taken in the context of the period since January 2007, this makes some sense. Given the record of the past four years, it amounts to political escapism. On the other hand, 55% of the American people currently express the opinion that it's probably best to wait for Petraeus' report, giving the opponents some ground to stand on. The Webb amendment goes down to defeat. The apparent momentum for a change of course is broken. The surge will go on.

National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley makes the rounds on Capitol Hill, meeting with a score of senators in advance of the administration's July 15 report card on Iraq. His mission is to shore up support in the face of coming bad news. Republican senators up for reelection in 2008, like Domenici, urge that the administration use the Baker-Hamilton commission's report on Iraq (a truly amorphous document) as a blueprint for future policy.

Later in the day, Senator Domenici appears on CNN's "Situation Room" with Wolf Blitzer. I haven't seen the senator in a while. He's in his sixth term, and it shows. He appears to be senile. His antiwar stance is clearly dictated more by his hopes for a seventh term in 2008 than by any careful thought or conviction. He's a damn good argument for term limits.

Gen. Petraeus issues a statement from Iraq. The surge is working, he says. "Progress is being made." Tell that to the Iraqis in Amerli, General. Tell it to the families of the troops who died today.

Petraeus repeats what he told Chris Wallace of Fox News

in June, that successful counterinsurgencies take time, "about ten years." He's right about that. The very few successful counterinsurgencies (U.S. versus Huks in the Philippines, Brits versus communist guerrillas in Malaya) took about that long.

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*A complete evacuation of Iraq down the Tigris and Euphrates to Kuwait would present very tempting targets to the Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias.*

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But does Petraeus really think the country will be patient until 2017? Even more to the point, Petraeus knows the surge cannot last beyond spring '08, because of constraints imposed by the size of the Army and Marine Corps. He, like the president, must be trying to buy time in the hope that a stroke of luck will change things for the better.

It is becoming clear that no one really has a clue about what to do next. There appears to be no workable middle way between the surge and retreat (a point made very cogently by Stephen Biddle in today's Washington Post). Those who advocate getting out of Iraq lack a realistic plan. The cut-and-runners don't seem to realize that a withdrawal, even to designated areas within Iraq, would be fraught with problems. Not only do tens of thousands of troops have to be moved, but also vast quantities of stores and equipment — and all this in a hostile environment. A complete evacuation of Iraq down the Tigris and Euphrates to Kuwait would be even more difficult, and would present very tempting targets to the Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias. If it ends in disaster (heavy U.S. casualties, a collapse of Iraq into anarchy and genocide), one can be sure that Bush and the neocons will launch a massive "we were stabbed in the back" campaign, blaming opponents of the war for defeat.

The surge-backers, on the other hand, are grasping at straws. They keep promising that with just a little more time, a few more troops, or a little more effort by the Iraqi government, the corner will be turned. The last four years, not to mention the record of counterinsurgencies past, provides virtually no evidence to support their contentions.

The American political class has failed to shape sound policies for Iraq and the larger Middle East, while the military command has failed to master the situation on the ground in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The ditherings we are now witnessing are the fruits of these failures. As in wars past, it is the individual soldier overseas and the taxpayer at home who pay the price. The politicians, thinktankers, and generals get off scot-free.

The evening news announces that the Iraqi report card due out on the 15th will be released tomorrow instead. The preliminary indications are that the old saw about there being three types of lies — "lies, damned lies, and statistics" — will form the basis of the report's conclusions.

*Thursday, July 12th:* The Associated Press reports that yesterday House Republican leader John Boehner of California called Republican defectors in the Senate “wimps.” Boehner’s spokesman Brian Kennedy is quoted as saying that the Congressman “intended to illustrate the fact that we just recently voted to give our troops our full support, including ample time for the Petraeus plan to work.” Ample time? Petraeus himself says it will take ten years. Congress only gave him till Sept. 15. The right hand doesn’t seem to know what the left is doing.

The Department of Homeland Security, following up on Chertoff’s remarks of a few days ago, issues a report saying that al Qaeda has reconstituted itself inside Pakistan. Its capabilities are approaching the pre-9/11 level. How seriously should one take this? Chertoff’s department has partnered with Disney on projects that have nothing to do with homeland security, and everything to do with spreading money around in the name of PR. (On the farcical relationship between Homeland Security and Disney, see William Arkin’s column, “Chertoff is Groovin’” in the July 11 Washington Post.) Based on the one real crisis it’s had to deal with so far, Hurricane Katrina, its effectiveness remains (to put it mildly) undemonstrated. Both the department and Chertoff lack credibility. Using reverse logic, I conclude that they’re on to something and that a terrible event will probably occur in the next few weeks.

Then a National Intelligence Estimate leaks out concluding that al Qaeda has indeed regained much of the operational capability it had lost after the invasion of Afghanistan. The failure to finish the job at Tora Bora is coming back to haunt us.

The Iraqi report card is in. The government and the police receive failing grades. No surprise there — we already knew that both are riddled with sectarianism and corruption. The Iraqi army, on the other hand, is supposedly showing improvement. This is a rather bold lie. That army is incapable of standing alone for *a day*. The Kurdish units are an exception, but they are too few to make a difference on a national

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*The introduction of 28,000 additional U.S. troops into a territory the size of California will not turn around a guerilla struggle of the kind we are facing in Iraq.*

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scale. Moreover, they represent the nascent state of Kurdistan; their interest in *Iraq* is nonexistent. When we are gone, they will form the core of a Kurdish national army, not of an Iraqi one.

The president, announcing the results at an afternoon press conference, seems at times out of touch with reality. He describes al Qaeda in Iraq in such a way as to make it seem that *it* dispatched the 9/11 hijackers to America. If he’s sincere,

and he may very well be, then he (echoes of his father) is out of the loop. If he’s being mendacious, he’s chosen a formula that may resonate, at least with Joe Sixpack out in the heartland. One is left to ponder where the “let’s buy some more time” thinking ends and reality begins for this administration.

One had rather been expecting Bob Woodward to make an appearance, and sure enough, he does. In a piece in today’s Post, he reveals that in 2006 the CIA was telling the Baker-

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*After Independence Day, Congress knew the country would support a bold move to change course in Iraq. It nevertheless failed to act.*

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Hamilton Commission, as well as the administration, that the situation in Iraq was beyond repair. So troops have been dying for . . . what, precisely? The administration’s desire to save face, it would seem.

*Friday, July 13:* Friday the Thirteenth arrives with an air of anticlimax. The expectation that Congress might do something to end the war has dissipated like a puff of smoke. The report card on Iraq is bad, but the president insists his policy is working. Nothing has changed.

The truth about the Iraqi army emerges, as the Pentagon admits that the number of Iraqi brigades “capable of operating without American assistance” has fallen from ten in March to six in July. Be that as it may, inertia has carried the day. The president has been granted a few more weeks, or perhaps months, to indulge his fantasy that we can win this war.

Gen. John Sattler, the victor of Fallujah, and now the Director of Strategic Plans and Policy for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gives a talk on the war at the Defense Forum Foundation. The catchphrases he employs are jarring: “stabilization matrixes,” “cylinders of excellence.” Even the jargon is reminiscent of Vietnam. Victories are easily described — witness Norman Schwarzkopf’s briefing at the end of Gulf War I — but a losing cause requires convoluted language.

### Where Are We Headed?

For American policy in the Middle East, the nine-day period July 5–13, 2007, was more than a snapshot in time. It was a turning point for the U.S. in Iraq and probably the region as a whole. It is not that any decisive event occurred during this time. What matters is what *didn’t* happen. Coming back to Washington after Independence Day, Congress knew the country would support a bold move to change course in Iraq. It nevertheless failed to act. The White House, which reads polls better than it does just about anything else, failed to seize the moment and reshape policy along more realistic lines — a reshaping that would have reflected a broad consensus of opinion.

An opportunity lost may not recur. With time running out

*continued on page 53*



# Reverence for Skeptics

*by Leland B. Yeager*

Rational inquiry, the careful weighing of evidence, the refusal to come to premature conclusions — these are the things that a free society needs, not a belief in God.

Some conservatives and classical liberals credit features of Western society, including individualism, capitalism, and liberal democracy, to the Judeo-Christian belief in a personal god. They see religion as essential to morality (e.g. Evans 1994, Overman 1997). “If the universe was an accident,” Dean Overman insists, “there are no absolutes, and without absolutes . . . morals do not exist. Right and wrong have the same meaninglessness. . . . The very fact that one sees wrong and distinguishes it from right means one rejects an impersonal beginning to the universe. For Jewish, Islamic, and Christian theists, God is the moral absolute of the universe” (1997, pp. 177–78). Overman simply makes these assertions; he does not argue for them.\*

Members of the clergy often claim and are accorded special moral authority even on social and economic issues. Yet although economists and some other social scientists are not especially equipped to give moral guidance, they are bet-

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ter equipped, I conjecture, than persons whose profession makes an actual virtue out of faith, out of believing and teaching propositions without and even despite evidence. They are less likely to be content with noble-sounding words and more inclined than the clergy are to ask what asserted principles would mean in practice and what institutions would be required to carry them out.

Libertarianism is a doctrine or attitude about social and economic organization and policy. It is tolerant of diverse grounds for accepting it. It does not require theological roots and could even be embarrassed by insistence on them. As an example and as a personal exercise, I set forth my views here on the existence of God, the efficacy of prayer and ceremonies, the relation between religion and morality, and life after death. My current (though revisable) beliefs add up to what I call “reverent atheism.”

I was raised in an ordinary non-fundamentalist Protestant

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\*In contrast, the philosopher R.M. Hare writes: “God or no God, the attitudes that make us revere the laws of morality are a social necessity; we could not live in communities without them. . . . [S]ociety would collapse unless children were brought up to feel bad when they do bad things . . .” Furthermore, “a reflective critical morality can *justify* these laws or rules or principles and our attitudes to them” (Hare 1997, p. 20). Thus Hare, like David Hume, Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, Henry Hazlitt, and other classical liberals, roots ethics not in theology but in the requirements of social cooperation.

family. My brothers and I regularly attended Sunday school and occasionally church services in the local Congregational church, of which I became a member at the usual age. My parents exposed us to religion to that extent, although my father was not actively religious and rarely attended church (until his old age, anyway). My mother took greater part in church activities but was not particularly concerned with doctrine. Around the time of the change in my own views described below, I asked her if she believed in the core doctrines of Christianity, which I recited. No, not literally, she replied.

I had considered myself a staunch Christian, actually believing mainstream Protestant doctrine. In the fall of 1941, within a few weeks before or after my 17th birthday and a few weeks before Pearl Harbor, I decided to prove my strong faith to myself by ordering several "little blue books" on atheism from the Haldeman-Julius Company of Girard, Kansas. To my surprise, reading them completely dispelled my religious faith, and in about a week. I felt no particular crisis of soul. On the contrary, I enjoyed the intellectual stimulation and felt comfortable with my new skepticism.

As treasurer of the Young People's Society of our church, I was business manager of the play that the society presented each spring to raise money for a religious retreat. Despite the shift in my own religious understanding, I felt committed to carrying on with my responsibilities and did so for the remainder of the school year. Perhaps I should have felt ashamed of hypocrisy, but somehow I did not. Perhaps I felt that publicly trumpeting the state of my soul would seem too self-important.

Whether one believes in God depends, of course, on the word's meaning. I do not believe in a personal God — a being with consciousness and personality who created a universe distinct from himself, who created man partly in his own image, and who sometimes intervenes in human affairs, even responding to prayer. One reason for my skepticism is the problem of evil, including agonies, disasters, and human nastiness. Theodicy does not explain away or justify these evils to

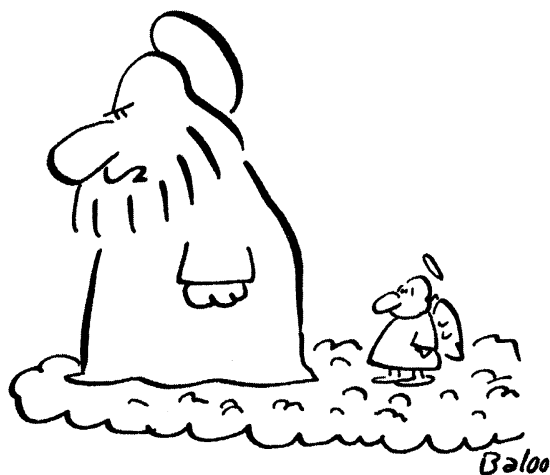
my satisfaction. A broader reason is the clash among different attributes usually attributed to God. Standard notions of God as good, merciful, and so forth at least tacitly acknowledge a preexisting morality: the good is not simply whatever God decrees. The God of the Judeo-Christian Old Testament, by the way, was hardly a paragon of virtue. Still another reason for skepticism is Occam's Razor, the precept against unnecessarily multiplying entities in trying to explain observations.

Is atheism or agnosticism the more accurate label for these views? To refer to the etymology of "atheism," mine is a belief "without God." I am not *certain* that no personal God exists. I have changed my view on the issue once, and further information and reasoning could conceivably make me change it again. Although I know few things with absolute certainty, not being omniscient and infallible does not bar me from holding beliefs on the basis of the information that I do have and the reflection that I have done; it does not require answering practically all questions with "I don't know." The revisability of beliefs does not require always suspending judgment. I have reached the judgment that a free-market economy offers better prospects for human happiness than socialism does. New evidence and argument could conceivably change my mind, but that possibility does not require my declaring myself agnostic on the issue of capitalism versus socialism.

I am not utterly certain that no seven-headed sea serpents are swimming around in the Indian Ocean.\* Proving a negative like that is notoriously difficult; but the serpents' existence seems vastly implausible to me, incompatible with biological and other knowledge that commands confidence. It would be inaccurate to call the question of sea serpents an open question. Even apparently closed questions are not permanently and irrevocably immune from being reopened. My deviation from utter and permanent certainty does not require my calling myself merely agnostic on the question of sea serpents — or on the question of God.

A great mystery remains — the universe itself — but saying that God created it is no solution. Who then created God? Are we not verging on an infinite regress? If something as wonderful as a creator God could have existed before he set to work, why could not something just as wonderful, the universe, have existed without a creator distinct from itself? And why be so anthropomorphic? If indeed there is a God, why suppose that he (or she or it) is so much like human beings as to have consciousness and purposes of his own and to concern himself with human affairs? Religious people who like to emphasize the ineffability of God and the possibility that his nature is incomprehensible to mere human beings should recognize that the standard religious conceptions of him may be inaccurate. Perhaps he is not an entity distinct from his creation. Perhaps he is thoroughly intermingled with the material of the universe and with the principles or regularities of its operation that scientists try to formulate as laws of nature.

The doctrine to this effect — that God is intermingled or identical with all that exists — is pantheism. But what is the difference between this belief and the absence of belief in a



"Atheists I can put up with — it's those wishy-washy agnostics I can't stand!"

\*Bertrand Russell's analogy (1952) involved a small teapot in orbit around the sun. One cannot utterly disprove the existence of such a teapot, yet belief in its existence would be absurd.

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## And Does It Matter?

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personal God distinct from his creation? What is the difference in substance, not just in words and possibly in emotional yearnings, between pantheism and atheism?

In recent years several scientifically literate thinkers have been formulating the old argument from design with new sophistication (Barrow and Tipler 1986, Barrow and Silk 1994,

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*I decided to prove my strong faith to myself by ordering several "little blue books" on atheism. To my surprise, reading them completely dispelled my religious faith, and in about a week.*

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Harris 1991 and 1992, Behe 1996, Overman 1997; however, Drange 1998 criticizes their "Fine-Tuning Argument"). The universe and life on earth could not exist if various constants of nature and features of organic chemistry deviated more than extremely slightly from what they are in fact. The probability that the universe and life could have originated by sheer chance seems vanishingly small. But as Ayn Rand said, "existence exists." Whatever is is possible. The universe, life, and human consciousness do exist, regardless of whether we have any way of determining why anything at all exists rather than just nothing. If the universe exists, *of course* it has the properties necessary to exist. It would be all the more remarkable if the universe existed with properties downright incompatible with its existence, as if some circles were square in shape.

Agreed, the known constants of nature seem highly improbable. So does any actual deal from a deck of cards, with specified cards composing each of the four bridge hands (Drange 1998 employs similar analogies). A universe looking highly improbable because of its highly detailed characteristics can similarly be expected on ordinary probability grounds. Or perhaps the constants of our universe were not the consequences of a train of pure chance; perhaps some overarching future theory will account for them; perhaps some sort of internal drive or natural selection was at work. Perhaps there are or have been extremely many actual or aborted universes; so that any specific one, like the bridge deal, looks like the product of extreme chance. The hypothesis of multiple universes looks far-fetched, of course; but at one stage of scientific theorizing it can be fruitful to give free range to the imagination and come up with multiple hypotheses. Further research can work on weeding some or all of them out. Even hypotheses that prove wrong can be heuristically or otherwise useful at one stage of research: they can be better than mere strings of words masquerading as actual hypotheses.

It is premature and presumptuous to suppose that all hypotheses about the universe have already been conclusively ruled out except the God hypothesis (which, however,

as commonly preached, is intolerably vague). What better approach is there to the mysteries of the universe and even of its very existence than the scientific method? That method, as I understand it, includes giving definite formulation to questions thrown up by experience and by perceived inconsistencies among hitherto held beliefs. Mysteries, even including the mystery of the apparently deliberately fine-tuned constants of nature, are grist to its mill. The method includes conjecturing answers to questions and searching for evidence to rule out unsatisfactory answers. It includes trying to formulate propositions about reality that show wide consistency with each other and that stand up to our best efforts to disprove them. Why reject that method at a certain point and suppose that the mysteries remaining establish a theological proposition? Why believe in a "God of the gaps"?

It is no reconciliation of science and religion to say that they cannot conflict because they concern distinct and non-overlapping domains.\* Religion, or Christianity anyway, purports to teach transcendentally important truths about reality and about how things actually work. But science is an ongoing search for a more and more adequate grasp of reality and of how things work. Over the centuries the progress of science — its filling of gaps — has forced theologians to abandon or reinterpret quite a few of their doctrines.

I do not claim to know infallibly that the scientific method is the only or the best route to profound truths about the universe. But let those who think they possess a better one — divine revelation, infallible intuition, secure faith? — argue for it and demonstrate its efficacy and superiority. Absent such a demonstration, the pretense of standard religion even seems morally questionable.

Morality seems likely to have evolved as the practices, precepts, and character traits that support social cooperation, which is essential to human survival and flourishing.

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*I am not utterly certain that no seven-headed sea serpents are swimming around in the Indian Ocean. My deviation from utter certainty does not require my calling myself merely agnostic on the question of sea serpents.*

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Religious beliefs and ceremonies may have contributed to this cohesion and survival of societies. Perhaps, during cultural evolution, a kind of natural and social selection has fostered religion. Even if so, that likelihood does not speak to the truth of its doctrines. Neither does the frequent beauty of

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\*James L. Evans, a Protestant pastor, citing the biologist Stephen Jay Gould, provides a recent example (2006) of this insistence on distinct domains.

religious ceremonies, music, architecture, and the other arts, nor does the comfort that they give to many people. Pleasure and comfort in the beautiful aspects of religion may go far toward explaining its appeal, but they provide no support for its actual doctrines. They may even count toward explaining religious belief *away*. And the contrasting phenomenon of dogmatism and fanaticism centering on religion and causing chaos and bloodshed is all too familiar throughout history and nowadays still.

The opportunistically vague and shifting doctrines of some Protestant sects (relative to Roman Catholicism, perhaps) repel me. Several decades ago I attended a talk at the University of Virginia by a Protestant minister remarkably named Dr. John Knox. His theme was that some members of a congregation want to accept Christian doctrines and Bible stories as literal truth, while others accept them as allegories or poetry. Fine: a minister can preach so as to satisfy both groups. Dr. Knox took no questions but left the room directly after his talk, leaving an example of the sort of intellectual dishonesty that discredits organized religion.

As for prayer, what conception of God does it imply? Either God constantly needs to have his attention directed and needs advice or else is vain and needs to be constantly flattered and groveled to. Sure, this assessment of God's character supposes that he has person-like characteristics. But that is a standard anthropomorphic supposition among many believers, not mine in particular. If, instead, God has characteristics so beyond human experience as to be incomprehensible to human beings — another familiar doctrine — how can anyone know that he needs or welcomes propitiation by prayer and ceremonies? How can we rule out his being thoroughly intermingled with all of creation instead of being distinct from it? How can we rule out pantheism, alias atheism?

Next comes a topic that it may be embarrassing to admit brooding about. Still, it is what religion — Christianity, anyway — is all about: salvation, getting to heaven. In a letter to the Opelika-Auburn News, December 2004, Dr. Jere Colley

ished McKown, age 74, that he still had time to “cram for the finals.” If McKown's belief were correct, then life doesn't matter much anyway. If he were wrong, then he would soon be in one “hell of a situation.” Did McKown “really want to take this chance?” With this threat Colley had restated or perhaps independently reinvented Blaise Pascal's Wager.

That wager recommends worshiping God and trying to believe in him because nothing is lost if he does not exist, whereas disbelief in an actual God might bring eternal dam-

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*What is the point of accepting doctrines about states of affairs, like disembodied minds and souls, that cannot even be clearly conceived of, let alone examined factually?*

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nation. But what comfort can anyone draw from believing in a God who, besides possessing his traditionally supposed powers, would be so morally perverse as to punish intellectual honesty and reward the opposite? We humans would be in a desperate predicament at the scant mercy of such an unjust God. Of course, the extreme unpleasantness of a doctrine does not by itself prove its error.

The wish for some sort of life after death seems to be widespread among different societies and different times. In 2001 I attended a lengthy funeral at which numerous relatives and friends eulogized the deceased. All or most seemed to take it for granted that he continued to exist in some other and better realm. Some of the speakers may have been reciting mere cant, but I doubt that. All or most seemed genuinely to believe what they were saying. The yearning for a doctrine to be true helps explain widespread belief in it, but yearning and belief are no actual evidence.

Evidence for life after death is skimpy and dubious. It is unsatisfactory to propagate belief in an unobserved phenomenon with none but the vaguest of notions of just what it consists of and of how it might occur. What best fits in with the rest of our knowledge is that dead animals and dead persons have simply ceased to exist as conscious beings, and their bodies decay. I cannot really conceive of dead pets, my mother and father, other relatives, and friends as somehow still alive in another realm. Minds, souls, and consciousness are not distinct entities but *functions*, albeit remarkable functions, of material bodies. Examples abound of interaction between bodies and their mental functions. Placebo effects on health and “the power of positive thinking” apparently are real. So are psychosomatic illnesses. So are the effects on minds of drugs, disease, and accidents. Disembodied minds and souls are a fantasy.

Far be it from me to taboo fantasies and half-baked ideas. They often have been steps toward achieving, testing, rejecting, or modifying scientific hypotheses. But they are not *con-*

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*Any actual deal from a deck of cards, with specified cards composing each of the four bridge hands, seems highly improbable. A universe looking highly improbable because of its highly detailed characteristics can similarly be expected on ordinary probability grounds.*

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replied to a letter in which Dr. Delos McKown, retired head of Auburn University's philosophy department, had described his atheism and his belief that after his death he would simply not exist, just as before being conceived. Colley admon-

## And Does It Matter?

clusions of research. What is the point of accepting doctrines about states of affairs, like disembodied minds and souls, that cannot even be clearly conceived of, let alone examined factually? I personally find it harder to form a definite conception of life after death than even of seven-headed sea serpents in the Indian Ocean.

Still, people — sometimes even I — may regret the prospect of totally ceasing to exist. But feelings and wishes are not evidence. And anyway, would anyone really want perpetual existence, with no prospect of relief if it became a burden or a torture? I doubt that I would want to cling to the sort of life that I have occasionally observed in nursing homes. I hope never to lose the option of suicide. Its irreversibility, though, will make me hesitant to exercise it. What I can hope for is that some people will remember me favorably after my death. I will not be around for that satisfaction, but even now I might enjoy thinking myself worthy of it.

John Stuart Mill (1861/1863, chapter 2) recommended remaining interested in human affairs even toward the end of life. I wanted to see how serious the Y2K problem would turn out to be — whether computers could cope with the change from 1999 to 2000. (I first drafted this note in March 1999, while delayed overnight by a flight cancellation, and I have tinkered with it ever since.) My next goal was January 1, 2001; for ever since I first realized the inevitability of death and had a general idea of human life span, as I did when about five years old, I hoped to see the new century. After that I hoped to see how the euro worked out and even to hold in my hands a few of the euro coins and banknotes that would come into circulation early in 2002. I have survived to have these experiences, but other interests remain (I hoped to attend conferences in Sweden and Argentina in the summer of 2005 and did attend the latter). When my interest in the future fades along with mental and physical powers and especially if life becomes a mixture of frustration, boredom, and pain, I expect to be ready for an end to it all. Even if I had not felt ready, once the end had come, I would not be around to regret it.

Like Delos McKown, I imagine my future dead self as nonexistent, as if in some permanent total dreamless sleep. Experience testifies that a temporary lack of conscious existence is not so bad. Often, on awakening at night, I even regret having only a couple of hours or a few minutes before time to get up. While hospitalized in December 2004, I experienced a couple of episodes of extreme drowsiness and thought that dozing off, never to awake, would not be bad at all.

Even so, I cannot help wondering how utter nonexis-

tence will feel. The answer is that I will no more feel nonexistence than anything else. I will be in the same position as my never-born and never-conceived sister Alice and as the much-desired but never-born son of Georges Simenon's fictional Commissaire Maigret.

As I hope I have shown, mine is not a smart-alecky atheism. I am no "evangelical atheist" (as I once heard someone described); instead I am a "reverent atheist." I have deep reverence for the immensity and wonders of the universe, including the mystery of the apparently deliberately fine-tuned constants of nature. I do not kid myself into thinking that I already have answers to those awe-inspiring mysteries. To accept a question-begging nonanswer ("God did it") as their explanation would, for me, indicate disrespect for the wonders of our universe and for their continuing exploration.

### Appendix: Social and Political Aspects of Religion

The near-universality of some kind of religious belief is no strong evidence of its truth. As mentioned above, religion may have promoted ethical behavior, social cooperation, and the happiness of many persons — within relatively small and homogeneous societies and sects, anyway.

My old friend James Waller used to worry that we moderns are living off and eating up our religiously based moral capital of the past. Suppose that it would indeed be socially healthy if we could rebuild our moral capital on a religious basis. Again, what follows about the actual truth of religion? Counterexamples to Waller's conjecture — examples of non-religious but decent people and of societies where morality apparently flourishes without religious consensus — supposedly lose their force; they simply exemplify living off inherited (or perhaps imported) moral capital. But a thesis thus immunized against counterevidence loses its substance.

I do not think that public policy should try to root out religion and other erroneous beliefs. Despite a widespread myth, the U.S. Constitution does not build a "wall of separation" between church and state. The First and 14th Amendments, read as written, do not bar prayer in public schools or religious symbols on public property. Instead, the First Amendment includes a reminder that authority to legislate about religion has not been granted to the federal government; and nothing in the 14th Amendment does grant it. True enough, if I were a member of a state legislature or a school board, I would vote against prayer in the public schools and against teaching "intelligent design"; but nothing in the U.S. Constitution bars either. □

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# Skepticism, and Beyond

*by Stephen Cox*

We can't know everything about the universe, but the evidence indicates that there is a God, and that he is important to a free society.

I am grateful to Leland Yeager for his wise and tolerant essay on the question of religious belief — a question that is continually debated in the libertarian community.

My guess is that libertarians are about equally divided between believers and nonbelievers. And although it seems possible to me that a person's ideas about God may have no relation to his or her ideas about liberty, most libertarians apparently believe that the two are closely related. That's why debates about religion tend to be so acrimonious in our community.

Professor Yeager's judicious account of his own thoughts and experiences — an examination of belief from the nonbeliever's point of view — does much to dispel these clouds of furor. He has generously given me permission to present a contrasting account, a defense of the validity and importance of religious, and especially Christian, ideas. I should mention that I share Yeager's reverence for the skeptical mind, wishing only that believers as well as nonbelievers always had enough of this reverence to separate bad arguments from good ones, as Yeager does.

I'll start by making a distinction that both opponents and proponents of religion often neglect, the distinction between "historical," "philosophical," and "scientific" ways of approaching the subject. Of these, the scientific seems to me the weakest — as Yeager illustrates, in his review of the many

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questions that science currently fails to answer, to the satisfaction of either believers or nonbelievers.

Science does show that believers shouldn't be naive enough to take the first two chapters of Genesis literally. Yet only a minority of believers are that naive. Most are untroubled by the idea that God used the natural processes that he created — including evolution — to work his will. Meanwhile, as Yeager notes, despite all the instruction science can give, "the probability that the universe and life could have originated by sheer chance" still "seems vanishingly small."

There may, to use his image, be some degree of probability that a universe like ours could have been formed by chance, like a hand of bridge — though to me, the analogy is not fully instructive. A bridge hand is a chance event within a highly ordered system; it has no order in itself; its nature and significance derive from the rule-bound process by which it was generated. A closer analogy would be that between a universe

## And Does It Matter?

and the game, with all its rules. Imagine the game of bridge arising, chock-full of rules, by random chance. Impossible! But the universe is an incomparably more complicated game than bridge.

Where scientific explanation leaves off, philosophical explanation begins. Like Yeager, I maintain a large degree of skepticism about philosophical responses to the basic religious question, Is there a God? The "ontological" or purely philosophical argument for God's existence, an argument proceeding by logical deduction, occupied the attention of such great thinkers as Anselm, Descartes, Leibniz, and Gödel. It does not occupy mine. Neither do the attempts by Ayn Rand and other Objectivists to create an ontological argument *against* the existence of God, an argument that seems to me a mere juggling with words. (For two analyses of this argument, see Parrish 2007, Toner 2007.) In my view, to say, with Rand, that "existence exists," and that everything that exists has its own "identity," implies precisely nothing about what may exist and about its possible origins and actions.

One philosophical approach has gained, I believe, some grip on the problem. We know that the natural universe, the universe that science studies, functions by means of rule-bound relationships among time, space, and their strange sibling, matter. It is this fact, indeed, that makes chance appear so improbable as an explanation for the universe, because it would have to explain not only wombats and wolverines but also the existence and regularities of time and space. Now, either these qualities of the natural world had a beginning, or they did not. Everything we know about the natural world suggests that everything within it *began*. The evolutionary scientist can hardly stop his investigations at a discrete place in history and declare that "this is just the way things always were." No, he is obliged by his own premises to go all the way to the beginning, and earlier.

So we must conceive of nature, with all its rules, including the relations of time, space, and matter, as beginning somewhere. At some "place" within existence, matter, space, and time itself *began*. So, what existed before time? (This is a paradox, of course; but cosmology, atheist or Christian, is necessarily full of apparent paradoxes, particularly in its consideration of the notion of time.) Since the age of St. Augustine (or before him, that of St. John the Divine), Christians have answered that question with the word Eternity — the timeless state in which God exists. Timelessness is the only option, because it is the only thing that could lie outside — or if you prefer, around — the world of time, and provide a "place" for its beginning.

Timelessness, eternity, is where the question-tree is rooted. Timelessness, eternity, is where the material world sprang forth, in the only way in which it could spring forth — at once, and from the hand of a Creator. A being who exists in eternity exists in a timeless state, a state without beginning, midst, or end. So there is no reason to ask the question, Who created God?

If you retort, Can't I say the same thing about the physical universe, and simply dispense with God?, the answer is plain: the physical universe, so far as we can tell, is always a place of time, space, and matter. There is no savor of eternity about

it; no evidence of any ability of time, space, or matter to plan itself, arrange itself in mathematical order, begin the intricate dance of laws that govern physical reality from the smallest particle to the farthest star. Wherever we see planning, it is always associated with some conscious being. That is why we

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*The evolutionary scientist can hardly stop his investigations at a discrete place in history and declare that "this is just the way things always were." He is obliged by his own premises to go all the way to the beginning, and earlier.*

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conceive of God (whether we believe in him or not) as a conscious, eternal being, as one who existed, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "before all worlds."

If this be anthropomorphism, make the most of it. There's nothing wrong with anthropomorphism, if it happens to be true. To imagine that God has certain characteristics that humans also have — consciousness, volition, and that mysteriousness, that unpredictability, that opacity to full explanation that we find in even our own best friends — is not by definition a philosophical offense. If you have a strong personality, which most libertarians do, you may tend to see the world as the workmanship of some other strong personality. That doesn't mean that it isn't, or that there isn't any reason for your idea, beyond a primitive psychological projection.

But the kind of philosophical argument that interests most libertarians — like most other people — is the "moral" argument against the existence of a deity, or at least the kind of deity posited in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

David Hume states the argument succinctly in his "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," the great work of philosophic art that provides the substance of most contemporary atheist arguments. One of Hume's *dramatis personae* suggests that it is pointless to worry about the existence of a God who obviously doesn't worry about us: "His power, we allow, is infinite; whatever he wills is executed: But neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness" (Hume 1986, p. 63). In other words, supposing that an amoral, merely intellectual "watchmaker God" might exist, why would he merit our attention?

My favorite response to this argument appears in one of the poems in Robert Browning's "Men and Women." Browning's spokesman, a Roman Catholic bishop of a skeptical and argumentative disposition, comments on what every true skeptic knows — the fact that neither believers nor non-believers are completely secure in their convictions. Believers have moments of doubt about their faith; nonbelievers have moments of doubt about their *lack* of faith. Questions keep coming up:

This good God — what he could do, if he would,  
Would, if he could — then must have done[,] long since:  
If so, when, where, and how?

(Browning 1898, lines 192–94)

Good questions! And it is precisely these questions that a historical religion, a religion based not on philosophical deduction but on empirical evidence of God's work in history, tries to address. Its job is to provide the "when, where, and how" of what a good God "must have done, long since." Christianity, with its story of God's intervention in history in the 1st century A.D., is one such historical religion.

If we find God's fingerprints on history, we should not be surprised if they give us proof of his existence while giving us only partial knowledge of his intentions. We shouldn't assume that once we know something, we will know everything, and that we "shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). Our working assumption can be nothing more than this: If we can find reasonably accurate accounts of God's intervention, we will have an adequate ground for belief in him, just as we have an adequate ground for belief in many other basic facts of human history itself, despite the refusal of these facts to grant us total knowledge.

Few people refuse to believe that Socrates existed, although the evidence for his existence can be traced to the works of a very small number of authors, all of whom take obvious liberties with his story, and none of whom fully elucidates his unique and therefore enigmatic character. Plato admits as much, in the speech he attributes to Alcibiades in the "Symposium." Socrates, says his would-be lover, "is like no other human being, either of the past or the present. . . . [T]his person is so peculiar, and so is the way he talks, that however hard you look you'll never find anyone close to him" (Plato 1999, p. 61). We cannot expect that history will give us final evidence about the personality of God. Yet knowing something is a great deal better than knowing nothing.

It is perfectly true, as Yeager suggests, that no one has succeeded in fully explaining God or even the concept of God. Every Christian would agree, but in doing so would not be saying anything essentially different from what I say when I admit that I lack any fully formed idea of how my transmis-

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*If we find God's fingerprints on history, we should not be surprised if they give us proof of his existence while giving us only partial knowledge of his intentions.*

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sion works — though I have reason to believe, from my history as a driver, that there is such a thing and that it helps me get from Hillcrest to La Jolla, on most (but not all) mornings. The question isn't whether we know all about God (or

about our best friend, either); the question is whether such a Friend exists, and what evidence one finds for him in human history.

It's curious to see how far Hume goes in making the transition from philosophical to historical approaches to religion. There is a great deal at stake in what he says, because it shows

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*There is a great deal at stake in what Hume says, because it shows the curious flirtation between skepticism and dogmatism that is basic to the atheist position.*

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the curious flirtation between skepticism and dogmatism that is basic to the atheist position. Hume's "Dialogues" admit that "a purpose, an intention, a design [in the universe] strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker." They refer to the laws of nature and to the steady scientific pursuit of the *reasons* behind things: "[A]n anatomist who had observed a new organ or canal would never be satisfied till he had also discovered its use and intention" (Hume 1986, p. 77). Even today, one is hard pressed to find a discussion of biological evolution that does not include the language of *purpose*: maple trees *use* winged seeds to propagate their kind; chimpanzees evolved strong muscles *in order to* seize their prey.

But after this bow to natural philosophy, Hume has his chief spokesman slyly remark that philosophical skepticism is actually "the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian*." Why? Because Humean skeptics understand that philosophy alone will never reveal the attributes of God. Skeptics must, therefore, look to God for some historical "revelation" of his "nature, attributes, and operations" (Hume 1986, p. 89). Yet as we know, any "believing Christian" is convinced that such an account (*pace* Hume) is already available, and it is found in the New Testament, a history of God's revelation of himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Hume did not agree — and it is interesting to consider why.

His position was that any account of divine intervention is inherently unbelievable, because it relies on acceptance of the possibility of miracles, of the intrusion of the supernatural into the natural order. He reasoned that we can judge evidence only by experience, and that a miracle — which is, by definition, outside our regular, normal, and natural experience — has nothing to command our belief (Hume 1985).

I think I have stated Hume's celebrated argument fairly, though I have chosen the kind of words that emphasize its flaw. It asserts that we must reject any experience that might alter our view of experience. His position is no longer skeptical, but dogmatic. He goes so far as to say that "the Indian prince, who refused to believe the first relations concerning

## And Does It Matter?

the effects of frost, reasoned justly," because they "arose from a state of nature, with which he was unacquainted" — yet the formation of ice was only *marvelous*, not *miraculous*. The miraculous could never acquire enough proof from experience or testimony (Hume 1985, 29–33).

It's true: someone who had never heard of a temperature below 32 degrees Fahrenheit would have no business believing rumors of ice formation. But someone who saw ice form before his eyes, or received numerous reports, from independent sources, of ice forming somewhere, would have good reason to believe that ice could happen. How much more would belief be recommended by experiences bearing a close analogy to one's experience of beings like oneself!

If someone contends, as astrologists are always contending, that people's lives are morally influenced by the planets, I'll have a lot of trouble believing him. I live on a planet, and I have never experienced any influence of that kind. I am unaware of any marginally reliable source who testifies that a planet spoke, gestured to, or otherwise affected him. But I have experienced the effects of friendship, and it does not surprise me that the Creator of the world should turn out to be someone like my own friends — unusual, unpredictable, highly individual, perhaps even inexplicable, yet interested enough in me to offer evidence that they care about my fate.

In short, if I see a "miracle" (such as the unlikely but strongly attested miracle of friendship), I will believe it. I may be insane, as Hume insinuates; but I won't bank on his opinion. I can't very well pronounce myself insane, and still trust my own judgment about my supposed insanity. And if I have good reason to trust *your* word, I will probably believe in *your* reports of "miracles," especially if their apparent source is a being who bears a likeness to the beings I know. Atheists often explain religious belief by saying, "Of course, those people believe in God. I guess they need a friend." Maybe so — and what of it? Does the fact that they need a friend, or that there are false friends in this world, or that people are often mistaken about their friends, mean that there is no such thing as friendship, and we should refuse to believe any reports of it? Would that be skepticism, or dogmatism?

I have no trouble conceding that reports of God's interventions aren't scientifically testable, any more than my report that I dined with my friend last night at 8 p.m. can be tested in the lab. Historical events happen only once, and our belief that they actually did happen must depend on testimony, not on laboratory experiments or on some process of *a priori* philosophic reasoning. If the events happened before photography was invented, we will have an even harder time verifying them; but that's when the vast majority of historical events did happen. If God intervened in human history, the odds are that he did it a long time ago: "Then must have done, long since."

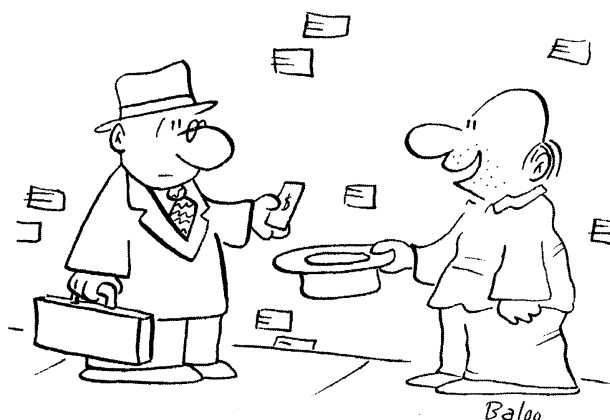
When I open the New Testament, I see at least six independent, mutually corroborating accounts of God's intervention in human history, through the life of Jesus (Cox 2006, pp. 5–12). The earliest of these accounts is reliably dated to about two decades after his death; the latest to about six decades after. Most are clearly based on still earlier sources. No one has solved the puzzle of how these stories could have taken the form they did, absent the events to which they refer. You

can construct Rube Goldberg explanations, but as they grow more complicated, they also grow less credible.

There are clearly imperfections and disagreements in the New Testament accounts. If there weren't, I would suspect their general accuracy, just as policemen suspect the accuracy of two identical accounts of the same traffic accident. But over the past 300 years of intensely skeptical research, the New Testament's literary integrity and its tight grip on the events it purports to describe have been vindicated against the assaults of a hundred schools of theory-mongers. It's not an accident that even such skeptical scholars as J.A.T. Robinson, who was determined to point out discrepancies and to re-date everything in the most radical way, emerged with findings that make the NT accounts look almost as plausible as they ever looked, and much closer to the events they describe (Robinson 1976).

Some people will study this evidence and feel compelled to believe, as I was. Others will find it insufficient. But now, at least, we are debating the evidence on which Christianity actually bases its ideas. The fascinating thing to me is how seldom this debate arises. Many atheists are fonder of laughing at William Jennings Bryan, pretending that fundamentalists are about to take over the country, decrying the excesses of Joshua's campaigns in Palestine, wondering where "Mrs. Cain" came from, reminiscing about the horrors of life in 15th-century Spain, debunking magic acts and flying saucers, and urging the latest, certain-to-be transitory cosmological speculations than they are of considering Christianity's basic claims. If they ever get to New Testament territory, they usually show themselves as naive as the History Channel, or the fundamentalist pastor down the street. And many Christians respond in kind, by defending every position, weak or strong, that the atheist wants to attack, instead of repairing to the historical evidence of a very simple proposition: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

But the central methodological question, preceding all specifically religious ones, remains: are you willing to consider



"This will be our last little transaction, sir — I start work tomorrow as a televangelist."

alleged evidence of a “supernatural” event? When I ask my atheist friends this question, they almost invariably answer No. They believe dogmatically that the natural world (as currently understood, of course) is all there is, and all there could possibly be, and that there could never be any valid counter-evidence.

This makes things very easy. We can part as friends, without bothering to debate anything of consequence. Throughout the Western world, both popular and intellectual culture are

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tilting that way. Religion is increasingly considered a “faith tradition” (“In my faith tradition, we have our Sabbath on Sunday; in your faith tradition, you fire-bomb your enemies as they emerge from a rival mosque”) instead of a subject for serious intellectual consideration and controversy.

My dissertation adviser used to say that he knew how to tell whether a work of past literature was alive or not: “If it’s assigned for class, it’s still alive; if it’s not, it’s dead.” Roughly speaking, he was right. But what, in our culture, is “assigned for class” in the field of religion? How many college graduates are familiar with even the most basic arguments for and against the majority religion of the West, or any other religion, for that matter?

America remains the most devoutly and actively Christian nation in the world, but American Christians know less about religion than they ever did before. And on this subject, the intellectual sophistication of atheists and agnostics is even less remarkable. It sparkles on the mountain peaks, as in Yeager’s essay, but the trails below are dusty. One anecdote sums it up. An acquaintance of mine, a professor at an elite university, is a scientific atheist. After attending the baptism of a child, the professor remarked, “It was OK, but I was surprised at how *religious* it was.” This is an image of post-Christian America.

There are a variety of plausible opinions about the final result of this blank denial of religious belief, or even curiosity about religious belief. So far as we know, religion has been a fundamental part of all human societies. We have no historical experience of the ways in which an absence of religion, over any extended period of time, might influence a civilization.

As Yeager reminds us, we do have examples of societies that have gone completely haywire under the influence of religious cults. For many people, such as Christopher Hitchens in his most recent book, this is good enough evi-

dence that religion is simple “poison.” On similar evidence, he might have reached a similar conclusion about atheism. In the name of an atheistic philosophy, Lenin, Mao, and Stalin each slaughtered their compatriots by the millions. Much the same can be said of the French revolutionaries who carved “Death Is an Eternal Sleep” on the portals of cemeteries, and of Hitler, whose private conversations showed him as much an enemy of Christianity as he was of Judaism (Hitler 2000, throughout).

Of course, any evil philosophy can be acquitted, in the minds of its followers, by an appeal to its *essential ideas*. In that way of thinking, “Marx can’t be blamed for Stalin’s regime; Stalin wasn’t a real Marxist.” But the difference is this: the materialist programs of Marx, Hitler, and Robespierre could never be realized without force and violence. The ideas of Jesus and Paul were very different. Jesus preached the individual’s reconciliation with God; he had no political agenda, and he rebuked his followers when they visualized themselves as rulers (Matthew 20:20–28). Paul preached Jesus’ gospel of love, and added the idea of freedom from Old Testament law — the idea of freedom, *a fortiori*, from all law (Galatians 1–5). If you tell me that a logical means of realizing such ideals is the formation of a monarchical church that tortures and kills all who oppose it, or the organization of busybodies into political groups to harass their neighbors, I can only say that you might as well arraign James Madison for trying to create an omnipotent state. Modern politicians have tried to do that, while invoking the names of the founding fathers, but no one should take them seriously as representatives of the great American tradition.

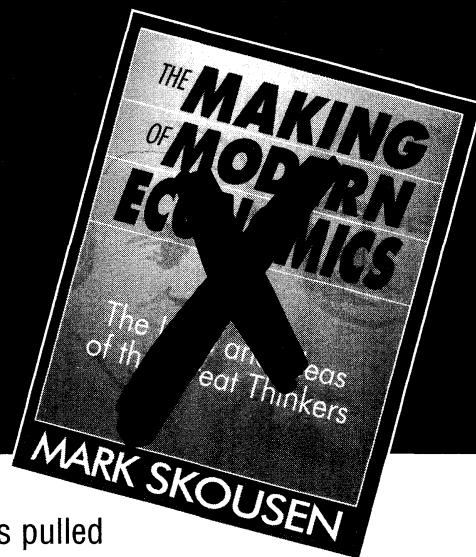
Similarly skeptical views can be taken of modern “Islamic” applications of Mohammed’s ideas, of latter-day “Taoist” applications of Taoism, and so forth. But there is a feature of Christian ideas that deserves to be emphasized. Christianity can never honestly and permanently depart from the founding documents that are its source and evidence; and in these documents, the books of the New Testament, there is no attempt to invoke force in support of religion. Instead, there is every attempt to separate belief from force and even from government. There is not a syllable in the New Testament commanding Christians to persecute their enemies, or, in fact, to have anything to do with politics. “My kingdom,” Jesus told the judge who condemned him, “is not of this world” (John 18:36). If you choose to worship Huitzilopochtli, and call him Christ, that’s your business; but it’s no reason why I should call you brother.

In the four gospels, we see Jesus crucified by the secular and religious establishments of his time. In the Revelation, we see, symbolically and dramatically enhanced, the struggle between the state and individual belief, in the conflict between Church and Empire. Throughout the New Testament, we see an overwhelming emphasis on individuals and individual decisions (Cox 2006, pp. 30–37). The New Testament stories insist on the radical differences between people who, from an outward or materialist perspective, we would expect to be the same: the two sisters, Mary and Martha; the two brothers in the parable of the prodigal son; the members of Jesus’ own family (Luke 10:38–42, Luke 15, John 7:5). These stories also



# BANNED

## BY MARXISTS, KEYNESIANS AND AUSTRIANS



Why would a history of economics create so much controversy?

Dr. Mark Skousen's book, *The Making of Modern Economics*, was pulled from the library shelves of the University of Philippines, a hotbed of Marxism.... censored by Keynesians at Columbia University...and blacklisted at the Mises Institute.

Skousen's "tell all" history doesn't pull any punches. Nobody's favorite pet economist — whether Marx, Keynes, Mises, or Friedman — escapes unscathed (although one economist is rated #1 for his "system of natural liberty" and becomes the heroic figure of the book).

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Why has Skousen been censored by Keynesian professors at Columbia? They don't want students to read his chapter on Keynes and Samuelson, what one economist has called "the most devastating critique of Keynesian economics ever written."

Why does the Mises Institute refuse to list Skousen on its recommended list of free-market authors? Despite the fact that his book is the only one-volume history written by a free-market advocate with 3 chapters on Austrians, it has been censored due to two favorable chapters on the Chicago school and how they have dominated the profession....words they don't want their students to hear. (Plus they dislike what he says about Murray Rothbard, their patron saint.)

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students."  
— William F. Buckley, Jr., *National Review*

insist on the powers of judgment inherent in the individual mind: "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter" (Acts 17:32).

But what conditions are necessary to maintain the moral order in which individuals are allowed to function without let or hindrance? Suppose, at night on a deserted street, I encounter an opponent — a purveyor of atheism, perhaps. I ask myself, "Why shouldn't I just rob and kill him?", and I start ransacking my bag of philosophical ideas to see what utilitarianism or Platonism or Objectivism or the Nicomachean Ethics has to say on the subject. Anyone who found that I had to do that, in order to decide not to rob and murder someone — or to form a political party that would do the job for me — would make sure never to meet me on any deserted street.

The good thing is that few people in our society have to resort to this kind of philosophical inquiry. At least in America, the world's most Christian nation, the vast majority of people never even consider the possibility of liquidating their ideological opponents, commercial competitors, or religious adversaries. I think that this is because we were taught — as during many generations, Western children have often been taught — that all people have moral standing in the eyes of God, a Person who cares about other persons. We learned it at our mother's knee: even though Catholics, or Protestants, or Democrats, or Republicans, or blacks or whites or rich or poor or southerners or northerners or Objectivists or socialists may not be as "good" as "we" are, God doesn't want us to hurt or destroy them.

This is a very limited moral message, and its application has sometimes been absurdly limited. Christians have fought wars like other people. Christians, like atheists, have fiendishly persecuted their enemies. But Christians were also the first people in the world to campaign against slavery. They were the first people in the world to campaign for women's equality. From their older brothers, the Jews, they borrowed the idea of the God-commissioned prophet, an idea that established a legitimate social role for individuals who find themselves in responsible moral opposition to their communities. They took this idea, and they made the most of it. Not always

puritans, ranting atheists, supercilious spokesmen for political thinktanks, and even editors of libertarian journals. Every ideal contains an enormous potential for abuse.

Yet it was in Christendom that the founding documents of a religious regime announced that God's kingdom is not, in fact, a franchise of this world. It was in Christendom that the church competed for its right to exist distinct from the state,

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*There is not a syllable in the New Testament commanding Christians to persecute their enemies, or, in fact, to have anything to do with politics.*

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and full separation of church and state was at last accorded the force of law. It was in Christendom that God was declared the "author of liberty" and the guarantor of individual rights in a way that has never been witnessed in any other culture.

In every Islamic country except Turkey, the notion that religion is not the business of the state never seriously occurs to anyone. In every Christian or quasi-Christian country, this is the default position — not because most people keep laboriously reasoning it out for themselves, but because they imbibed it from their parents, along with the respect for individual life and property that is likewise enshrined in the New Testament documents. "Friend, I do thee no wrong," says the employer in Jesus' parable, resisting demands that he fork over more wages than he had contracted to pay. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" (Matthew 20:13–15). It's because the religiously sanctioned idea of individualism and private property is so prominent in our culture that libertarians don't have to start arguing for those values from the ground up.

So I believe that Leland Yeager is asking an important question when he wonders about the fate of our civilization in a post-religious age. I wonder too; though I believe I reach different conclusions, or come to different speculations. I do not suppose that people's lives can be much improved, intellectually or politically, by a world in which the longing for infinity, a longing that seems endemic to humankind, is directed toward merely finite objects. In Europe, the steady decay of Christianity has been accompanied with every repulsive permutation of such finite objects: the cult of Napoleon and other Great Men, the adulation of race and nationality, the worship of science and "scientific" social planning, the childish trust in Theosophy and other pseudo-religious cults, the sacrificial devotion to communism and fascism, the idiocy of anti-Semitism, and now the obsession with celebrity, sport, fashion, sex, and "career" — together with the hysterical self-

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*American Christians know less about religion than they ever did before. And on this subject, the intellectual sophistication of atheists and agnostics is even less remarkable.*

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for good, of course: pig-headed, self-righteous "prophets" are the curse of every moral movement. The same kind of people who might have been Hebrew prophets have often become obnoxious Christian evangelists (e.g., St. Stephen), bigoted

*continued on page 54*

# The Market for Body Parts

*by Gary Jason*

What used to be science fiction is now just common sense.

The federal government prohibits the sale (as opposed to the donation) of human organs. Under the National Organ Transplant Act of 1984 (NOTA), it is a felony to give or receive compensation for them. Legalizing sales has been discussed in some circles, but proposals to let people sell their own organs as they see fit do not appear at the top of the list of most discussed issues, or anywhere close to the top.

Yet the issue of organ sales (sales of body parts, bone, skin, and tissues of any sort) is becoming ever more urgent. One reason has been noted by Laura Meckler:<sup>1</sup> for many years, organ transplants were rare, dangerous, and costly, and the supply of donated organs from the deceased was enough to cover demand. But now that organ transplants are relatively routine, relatively safe, and covered by many insurance plans, the number of organs available from donor corpses is insufficient. Patients either have to wait or turn to living relatives for donations.

The problem will become more dramatically evident over the next decade, when for the first time in our history elderly people will be upwards of a third of our population. And the notoriously narcissistic Baby Boomers will hardly be squeamish about replacing their faulty organs. Look how many have embraced Botox injections and cosmetic surgery, procedures that have nothing to do with keeping you alive.

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So the proposal to legalize organ sales is well worth discussing — but with some care.

Certainly, from the libertarian perspective, there is a compelling moral case for it. Being a free agent means that I control my own body. If my body isn't my property, what is? The idea goes back to one of the founding documents of libertarianism, John Locke's "Second Treatise on Government." Even if you draw the line at suicide, as Locke did, selling a kidney won't kill you, at least in normal cases. This is all the more true if we are talking about my agreeing *while alive* to sell my kidneys *after I am dead*. Another idea that has been influential on libertarianism, the harm principle, enunciated very clearly by John Stuart Mill, tells us that rational people ought to be allowed to do whatever they please, so long as it doesn't harm anyone else. Well, what harm is done to anyone else if I decide to sell Fred one of my kidneys? *Prima facie*, there

doesn't seem to be any — indeed, it will likely save Fred's life.

Utilitarian ideas also seem favorable. If I benefit from the money Fred pays me for my kidney, and he is better off, then everyone directly affected by my action benefits. As a rule, allowing organ sales would increase the wealth of the poorer and the longevity of the wealthier. It would obviously encourage more donations of life-giving organs. Consider how many more people would put codicils in their wills allowing the extraction of their body parts upon their demise if the sales money could be passed along to surviving spouses and other heirs.

If the philosophical case seems defensible, add to it a reason drawn from precedent and current practice. People are free to sell their blood, and many regularly supplement their income by doing so. And people are free to *donate* their body parts. If people are rationally capable of and morally entitled to give away their body parts, why can't they profit by the transaction? That is, if my autonomy as a thinking, choosing human being allows me to grasp the risk and pain of an operation to give a kidney to my child because I love her, then why not allow me to sell my kidney to a stranger, for love of money? Remember that money is typically desired instrumentally, as a tool to get other things; it is seldom loved intrinsically, for itself. Suppose that the money I get from selling my kidney will be used to help my family — give them, say, better food, or a better house, or a better education. Is that not also a case of giving my kidney to save my family, albeit indirectly?

Now consider the practical benefits of organ sales. One of the most important of them is that it addresses the shortage of organs available for transplant. Meckler puts the number of living *donors* (usually kidney donors) at about 7,000 a year. Most of them are people who give organs to keep family members alive. Those willing to donate to strangers are much more limited. Several internet sites have been developed to make it easy for willing donors to connect with those who need organs; MatchingDonors.com is one example. But the last I checked, there were fewer than 4,000 such persons. This is woefully inadequate. One recent estimate is that there are

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*Being a free agent means that I control my own body. If my body isn't my property, what is?*

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over 90,000 Americans already waiting for body parts. Other estimates are of 70,000 waiting for kidney transplants alone. The shortage has several consequences.

To begin with: people die. A few years ago, Brian Doherty estimated that every day, 17 Americans die waiting for organs. No doubt the figure is higher now. The shortage has also created a black market, with all the unpleasant side effects that

brings. There have been cases in which people have purchased organs of uncertain provenance, only to find out that they were taken from people who died of syphilis or hepatitis B. Finally, the shortage has produced the bizarre result, nicely explored by Kerry Howley,<sup>2</sup> that in this black market, everyone pockets good money except the donors. This is extremely unfair compensation.

Why, then, would anyone object to organ sales? There are three broad reasons: first, worries by medical ethicists about the nature of the choice; second, concerns about the potential for abuse, as suggested by some recent horrific headlines; and third, concerns raised by some religious ethicists about the sanctity of the human body. Let me briefly examine these areas of concern.

You can get an idea of what troubles medical ethicists by looking at an article by Papadimos and Papadimos<sup>3</sup> that opposes allowing women to sell their ova to pay their college tuition. The Papadimos paper raises a number of objections to the practice, objections that apply equally well if not more forcefully to organ sales in general. Ironically, all the objections are considerations of autonomy.

The authors view autonomy as involving "voluntariness, competence, capacity, understanding, and disclosure. . . ." And they feel that decisions to sell ova fail to meet the standards of real autonomy. One of their arguments is that, since college students need the money, they are under the influence of the buyers. They are being exploited. Another argument is that the age of the students (typically, 20–25) makes their mental capacity questionable, and renders suspect their ability to understand risks. As the authors put it, "Persons may comprehend information, but do not or cannot accept the information. For example, if a twenty year old female is told she has a 1% chance of hemorrhaging, a 1% chance of having a post operative infection, and a remote chance of death with an egg donation procedure; can she accept this? Can she understand the long-term risk of fertility drugs, including the risk of cancer? This young woman may very well understand these risks, but can she actually accept the fact that she has a remote, yet possible chance of getting cancer or dying?"

These theoretical worries strike me as hyperbolic. Again, look at actual practice. We allow young women to take birth control pills and elect for surgery of all sorts, from abortion to cosmetic surgery. All involve significant risk. We allow young men and women to drive cars, not to mention volunteer for combat; this also involves significant risk, and with far less disclosure required. As to the idea that the need for money invalidates a person's autonomy, that would seem to disallow any trade of any sort in any economic realm.

Turning next to the potential for abuse of a free market in organs, recent horrific headlines suggest major problems. There have been cases of sophisticated grave-robbing. A recent New York case is illustrative.<sup>4</sup> Seven funeral home directors pleaded guilty to plundering corpses for body parts. They removed bone, skin, and organs from hundreds of corpses, pocketing millions by selling the tissues to biomed companies. A recent AP report announced the apprehension of a former director of UCLA's Willd Body Program. He was arrested for appropriating parts of the bodies donated for research and selling them to an outside company for tens

of thousands of dollars. The owner of the company was also arrested; he had made over a million dollars by reselling those body parts to various hospitals and medical research companies.

News stories have also been generated by the aggressive harvesting of organs by certain authoritarian regimes, most notoriously China. Recent stories — see, for example,

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*Seven funeral home directors pleaded guilty to plundering corpses for body parts. They pocketed millions by selling the tissues to bio-med companies.*

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Coonan and McNeill<sup>5</sup> — indicate that the Chinese are systematically harvesting organs from executed prisoners and selling them to rich Japanese and Americans, who pay about \$50,000 per kidney and \$110,000 per liver. This is a significant inflow of foreign currency to a country that executes 8,000 people yearly, more than all other countries combined. Even more ominous are recent reports that China now targets groups it dislikes, such as political dissidents and Falun Gong, for arrest and execution, in part because the trade in human organs is so lucrative. Even more alarming are reports that the organs are being harvested from prisoners who are still alive.<sup>6</sup>

The Chinese government heatedly denies these various reports. China's foreign ministry has conceded using some organs from prisoners, but only with prior permission. Its spokesman, Qin Gang, said, "It is a complete falsification, a lie or slander to say that China forcibly takes organs from the people convicted of the death penalty for the purpose of transplanting them." Still, China has announced it will start requiring donors to give permission in writing before allowing transplants. This is the same government that denies it has carried out any military buildup, that Tibet was ever an independent nation, and that anyone died at Tiananmen Square. Its credibility is hardly compelling. But in any case, the danger is clear: allowing an unrestricted market in organs runs the risk of giving incentives to totalitarian regimes to violate people's rights in the most horrible ways. From a tyrannical government's psychopathic point of view, it's a perfect "two-fer": it gets rid of annoying groups *and* makes a ton of money.

But it is easy to draw the wrong conclusion from such claims. I would argue that what is driving people to go to totalitarian regimes or other black markets is precisely the growing unmet demand for organs by people who face certain death if they don't get them. If you don't let these people obtain what they need legally, don't be surprised when they do so illegally.

The third set of concerns — those of religious ethicists

— centers on feelings that the body is sacred, not to be tampered with lightly or for base motives. Some people suspect that legalizing organ sales will somehow be like legalizing abortions; it will cheapen life and encourage an ungodly practice.

Again, I find such worries understandable but overblown. There is little comparison between abortion, the killing of a new life-form, and selling an organ, which is someone's existing tissue, for the purpose of moving it to another's body. While many religions hold that the fetus has a soul (at some point in its development), no religion of which I have ever heard views my liver as having a soul. Moreover, abortion is not generally done to save someone's life, whereas that is the whole point of organ transplants.

In any event, why would giving some of your body to save someone else's life defile your body? And if giving it wouldn't defile your body, why would selling it? Even if one believes that giving tissues defiles his body, what gives him the right to impose that view on others who don't share it — and in so doing, condemn many others to early deaths?

While I find the three broad types of concern generally unpersuasive, and the theoretical, practical, and moral case for allowing a free market in organs compelling, there are some legitimate issues that must be addressed — in other words, practical problems that must be addressed by some legal mechanism.

One set of problems involves fraud and misrepresentation. If we are going to allow rational people to sell parts of their bodies, there has to be real informed consent. Downplaying the risk and pain would be an attractive ploy for any sales agent: "Look, kid, what's your worry? You have two kidneys, so you won't even miss one of them. We'll pop it out of you — no hassle! Just think of all the cool stuff you can buy with the ten grand we're giving you!"

Another set of problems involves the limits of people's rationality. The reason we wouldn't want to allow a 12-year-old to sell one of her kidneys is the same reason we don't allow her to drink or have sex: adolescents are not fully capable of making such choices. But what about cases that aren't

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*China now targets groups it dislikes for arrest and execution, in part because the trade in human organs is so lucrative.*

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so clear? What about drug addicts, or the clinically depressed, or people with early Alzheimer's? We need more than a simple age limit here.

Even more worrisome, in my view, are problems of coercion, problems involving people who are executed to harvest their organs, or have their organs stolen after death. Of course, it seems likely that if we were to allow *legal* sales of



body parts, the illegal sales would be less attractive, since the price would drop. But we still need appropriate safeguards to minimize the chances of theft, fraud, manipulation, and coercion.

My proposal is to allow free trade in organs, with certain tight restrictions. We should begin by requiring that all purchases of body parts be from sellers who are United States

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*What about drug addicts, or the clinically depressed, or people with early Alzheimer's? We need more than a simple age limit for organ sales.*

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citizens. The market could be expanded to sellers from other countries, but only on a case-by-case basis, and only when we can assure ourselves that the country in which the sellers live is free and has the same controls on the organ trade that we do. And in exchange for seeing legal organ sales within this country, citizens ought to be willing to prohibit fellow citizens from buying transplants from abroad. That would help stop the kind of abuse going on now, with growing numbers of Americans buying organs from corrupt, totalitarian regimes, where organs are obtained at the cost of liberty.

Second, an organ sale must be accompanied by a contract between the buyer and a named seller, be it an individual or a hospital. This contract would have to be drawn up to legal standards, just like an incorporation or will, by a licensed legal practitioner. And it would have to be accompanied by a sworn affidavit by an independent, licensed medical professional that the seller of the body parts was an adult, apparently of sound mind, and provided blood tests showing him to be free of the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of signing. At the time of transplantation, the DNA of any purchased body parts should be verified against the DNA of the seller, as listed on the contract.

Third, the contract would have to be accompanied by a signed statement of disclosure, in which the known risks and health consequences of the procedure, as stated by the AMA, would be listed fully and clearly. The statement would have to be signed by a neutral medical professional, not someone who was a party to the financial transaction. I envision doctors and nurses working *pro bono*, or being paid by charitable organizations, to apprise sellers of all the consequences of their decisions, without any manipulative sales pitches.

Fourth, when setting age requirements we should distinguish between sales of organs while the seller is still alive from sales of organs after death. Put the minimum age at 18 for the latter (perhaps with special provisions for parents who wish to donate the organs of their deceased child), but 21 for the former.

Fifth, there should be a requirement that any organ avail-

able for purchase be checked by a lab for the presence of HIV, hepatitis viruses, or other dangerous communicable diseases.

Sixth, the sales of all body parts must be completely recorded and available for inspection on the internet, so that the market will be transparent to all interested parties — potential sellers and potential buyers, as well as journalists and other investigators. In this way, sellers and buyers will know the going price for various body parts, and investigators can monitor sales for patterns of abuse. This will make it less likely that a naive or ignorant person can be tricked into selling his organs at some absurdly low price. We require such transparency for other markets, such as real estate, and the organ market would need it even more.

There is a clear and growing need for organs and other tissues. Now, there are occasional stories about “cloning organs,” i.e., taking a stem cell from a person and growing (say) a replacement liver from it. Of course, were such a procedure to exist, the whole issue of whether we should permit organ sales would be rendered moot — nobody would pay to buy another’s organs if he could get new ones based on his own DNA, which would eliminate the problem of tissue rejection and the need for immunosuppressant medications. But no such procedure seems even remotely close to becoming available, so our choices remain either keeping organ sales illegal, or making them legal under practical regulation. The case for the second option is far stronger than for the first.

I think there is growing recognition in D.C. that something needs to be done soon to solve the shortage of organs created by an ill-considered federal law — Lord, how often do we see the government working at any given time to clean up the damage it caused by its stupid laws of a prior time? Recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Charlie W. Norwood Living Organ Donation Act, which aims to make it easier for donors of kidneys to switch recipients with other donors in cases of biological incompatibility. That is, if I want to donate a kidney to X, and Fred wants to donate a kidney to Y, and my tissue is incompatible with X, but not Y (and vice versa for Fred), the law would allow us to switch recipients. That should result in a fair rise in the number of available kidneys, but it will still be way short of what is needed. We need to open up the process fully and make it transparent, by repealing the NOTA and crafting more realistic and less idealistic laws. □

#### Notes

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# 50 Really Stupid Ways to Save the Earth

by Karl Hess

Karl Hess (1923–1994) was a much-loved author and libertarian activist. He became an Associate Editor of *Liberty* in December 1987. This article appeared in the September 1991 issue of *Liberty*.

Recently I came across “50 difficult things you can do to save the Earth,” a collective effort by members of various U.S. environmental groups at the invitation of Earth Island Journal. Here is the list, with my comments following:

1. *Bury your car.*

Now you’d think that such concerned folk would recommend that it be sold for scrap. That way it would be recycled. The steel industry has been recycling metal for decades. Oh, I forgot. Steel mills use electricity. (See point 4)

2. *Become a total vegetarian.*

Many people in Africa depend on insects such as locusts as a major source of protein. Perhaps you could talk them into eating more beans. But then how would you visit them (see point 43) prior to rebuilding the schooner fleet? Oops, schooners require old-growth timber . . . (See point 13)

3. *Grow your own vegetables.*

Sure, I and others have grown vegetables even on urban rooftops, but snow is a problem and the time taken to do it is a luxury not everyone can afford. Later, of course, lots of time will be available because there will hardly be anything else to do except grow them veggies and trudge dozens of miles to help build houses (out of saplings).

4. *Have your power lines disconnected.*

You won’t have much time to use any electrical device anyway after hoeing, raking, and trudging your way through this entire agenda.

5. *Don’t have children.*

Save the Earth by ending the human race. Neat idea.

6. *Restrict the population of motor vehicles.*  
But, but . . . I thought we’d bury ‘em all!

7. *Don’t build cars.*

Well, that would take care of restricting the motor car population. But does that include buses? (See point 43)

8. *Stop building roads.*

So that no fugitive motor car could escape burial, I suppose.

9. *Replace roads with homes, parks, and gardens.*

How about at least leaving some footpaths so that folks in Maine could trudge to Florida for their natural Vitamin C or folk music festivals?

10. *Halt weapons production and exports.*

Have you tried that one out on the Pathet Lao or the Shining Path?

11. *Stop the sale, distribution, and export of cigarettes.*

Joints too? Horrors.

12. *Send money to Brazil to provide urban jobs for impoverished workers now forced into the rain forests.*

How come they get urban jobs while

the rest of us are demolishing roads and picking berries? And where do we get money when we have to work without electricity, have no cars, and still have to plant and hoe, plant and hoe?

13. *Blockade a lumber truck carrying old-growth trees.*

Okay, but let pass the trucks carrying firewood, fresh pine lumber, plywood, and so forth? Don’t forget, firewood can replace electricity and, with enough burning, cause interesting waves of lung disease in those urban areas populated by working Brazilians subsidized by non-working Yankees.

14. *Spend a month tree-sitting.*

Now, let’s see, is that sitting *with* a tree, or *in* a tree? And who will bring us our vegetables?

15. *Try to live within the world average income (\$1,250 a year) for one month.*

That would come to \$104.17 per month — a princely sum for those of us who have buried our car, sworn off meat, and grown our own veggies.

16. *Cut up your credit cards.*

Well, you can’t be wrong *all* the time.

17. *Unplug your television.*

And miss all those Public Television shows?

18. *Undertake a "Conservation Sabbath" — one day a week without consuming electricity or fuel.*

Is that before or after we bury all the cars and dig up the roads?

19. *Fast one day each week and spend the money saved on food to help feed the hungry.*

Sorry, but since we started growing all our food we'll have to send turnips instead.

20. *Adopt a homeless person.*

And send him or her out to tend the veggies.

21. *Raise the minimum wage to a survival income.*

See point 15.

22. *Enact a maximum wage law.*

No worry, if the rest of the agenda succeeds, there won't be any wages.

23. *Tie politicians' salaries to the average working wage.*

The tie is tight already. Where do you think those political salaries come from, anyway?

24. *Replace majority rule with proportional representation.*

And the proportional reps would what? Require a majority vote on stuff? Pass laws with proportional provisions for various groups? *Oy vey.*

25. *Replace the electoral college with direct democratic elections.*

Hmmm. Whatever happened to proportional representation? You're taking the biggest majority vote of all.

26. *Abolish the CIA and the National Security Act of 1949.*

Okay. But we might need a little help from anyone not ripping up the roads, etc.

27. *Pass a nature amendment to the U.S. Constitution.*

Now let's see, would that be to limit nature, zone it, make it pay a fair share of taxes, or what?

28. *Oust Presidential advisor John Sununu.*

And replace him with the Earth Island Journal collective?

29. *Plant one new tree every day.*

Okay, but remember, Eskimos in Alaska haven't had much luck with trees the past few hundred years.

30. *Go to jail for something you believe in.*

Wherever is the jail going to get its veg-

gies? How will it transport its inmates? Is tax resistance okay as something to believe in? How about slaughtering people you don't like because you believe them to be inferior? And while everyone's in the clink, who attends to the rest of the agenda?

31. *Don't own pets.*

Let 'em run wild. There's nothing more "natural" than a pack of feral dogs.

32. *Allow all beef-producing domestic cattle to become extinct.*

Would that be extinction by .44 Magnum or lethal injection? Or how about starvation or being eaten by feral dogs?

33. *Redirect the military budget to restoration work; convert weapons factories to peaceful research; retrain soldiers for ecological restoration.*

And, besides, they'll be used to walking on rough terrain such as all those ripped up roads. But that research item sounds suspiciously like letting technology in through the factory door. Do you really want that, in view of your other points?

34. *Remove the U.S. Forest Service from under the Agriculture Department; place USFS, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service under the Environmental Agency.*

Come on, collective, couldn't we just bury them along with the cars?

35. *Consume only products produced within your bioregion.*

Since bioregions are much larger than countries or states, doesn't that raise the ugly question of roads and tracks and stuff?

36. *Don't eat anything that comes in a package.*

Here, clerk, just shovel that granola into my bag (made from the hide of a now extinct beef cow).

37. *Don't buy anything that comes in a box.*

Okay, okay, let's get this package and box thing sorted out once and for all.

38. *Require operators and owners of nuclear power plants to live within one mile of the site.*

Sure, sure, without cars they'd have to. But what are those nuclear plants going to be doing? Remember — we disconnected the power lines!

39. *Mandate federal recycling and institute a refuse tax on solid waste.*

Groan. Get out the shovel, Jack. We're going to have to dig up that damn minivan after all.

40. *Pipe polluted water back into the water supplies of the companies that do the polluting.*

We trust that includes all units of government, the acknowledged largest polluters on the continent.

41. *Don't own anything that runs on batteries.*

Sure. What the hell. By the time we get in from the hand planting, hoeing, reaping, and road ripping we're too tired for any of those gadgets anyway.

42. *Hand over all the excess packaging to a store manager on each visit to the grocery store.*

Pardon our continuing confusion, but aren't we supposed to be growing all our own food?

43. *Travel by bus, never by air.*

Okay. So we don't bury the buses but we do bury the planes?

44. *Stop using toilet paper and Kleenex; use washable cloth.*

What's wrong with your fingers, Mac? They're washable.

45. *Extend the life of your wardrobe by learning to make and mend your own clothes.*

Phew. I really thought that loincloths were going to be mandatory on this one.

46. *Give money to every single panhandler you meet.*

Including the ones who make more than you do? And how can we make sure there'll be enough dough left over for those folk in Brazil?

47. *Democratize your workplace; start a union or a collective.*

Like the Teamsters? Or like those wildly successful collective farms in the USSR?

48. *Learn to farm.*

Tell it to all those farmers living off government subsidies.

49. *Liberate a zoo.*

Nothing like a bunch of rattlesnakes, panthers, hippos, and elephants romping through the neighborhood.

50. *Ask your boss if you can take the day off to work on healing the planet . . . with pay.*

What boss, what work, what pay? I thought all that stuff was obsolete according to the implications of most points 1 through 49. □

# Why I Don't Like Europeans

*by Jacques Delacroix*

The tiplessness should have tipped me off. Not even a nickel? Must be a European person, for sure!

I was born in Europe, in France, that's an inescapable fact. But I left early, at 21, a long time ago. Since then, my irritation toward Europeans, soon amounting to dislike, has not stopped growing. The astounding shortage of gratitude among them toward a United States that saved their asses twice, once from Nazism, the other time from Communism, plays a role, of course. Yet, in the end, that's not a good explanation because I know that people who barely lift a finger to save themselves will resent their rescuer, whose energy humiliates them as it makes their own passivity stand out.

Later, I came to think that I was merely annoyed at the active, visceral, mindless anti-Americanism I never fail to witness both when I am in Europe, and elsewhere, almost every time I pick up a European periodical. Once, in Morocco, on a study trip, I found myself at the railroad station to buy local periodicals when a stack of *Le Monde*, fresh from Paris, arrived at the news kiosk. Now, *Le Monde* is *the* hoity-toity French daily, a sort of New York Times, except even more presumptuous and without the endearing gardening rubric. I only read it occasionally, and only in France on assignment because I know it's bad for my blood pressure. Nevertheless, that day, I took one without thinking and perused the front page. It pointed to a long article inside on the revival of the Iraqi theater, written by a young female "Culture" reporter. Just my cup of tea!

The first sentence read as follows: "Baghdad, three days after the arrival of the American army: looters are carting away the seats of the Iraq National Theater, *encouraged by a G.I.*" (Emphasis added.) A parcel of willful, pure, scintillating evil! No, lady, it's extraordinarily unlikely that American

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combat troops would encourage looting. Stand by without intervening because they had no orders to stop lawlessness? Probably, and that's bad enough. What kind of gratuitous nastiness would motivate an American soldier to *promote* the looting of a theater? Americans are just not like that. They may loot, themselves, on occasion, even murder and commit other war atrocities, but they are not likely petty vandals by proxy.

The rest of the article was worth reading, quite interesting, well written. The author was not some semiliterate dummy. My strong guess is that she established her credibility among her readers and among her peers by starting her article with a completely invented piece of anti-Americanism. In certain European circles, it's almost a convention, a matter of tribal courtesy, to make an anti-American gesture by way of self-introduction. But even many instances of this kind of mendacity are probably not enough to account for my chronic hostility. In a perverse way, they end up inducing a sort of vague sympathy: what a pity that once great people are reduced to such poor circumstances that petty lies are their only ego defense!

One eventless morning, at the terrace of my favorite coffee shop in Santa Cruz, I gained a deeper insight into my own negativity. Two young Italians in their 20s whom I had seen before but did not know were finishing their coffee while fiddling with their laptops. I had overheard that both were enrolled at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a school that is not generous to foreign students, treating them as out-of-staters tuition-wise. One took his empty cup inside, just as I was going inside myself. I thought he was bussing his own ware. Instead, he stopped at the sugar and milk station and filled his used cup nearly to the brim with half-and-half. Then, he dropped four spoons of honey into it and walked back out. Presto, coffee *and* breakfast for the price of just coffee! Now, Europeans in general are not poor anymore and those two young Italians were apparently well off enough to afford a good laptop each and UC tuition. They were definitely not driven by need. The stinginess, the pettiness, the grubbiness, the eagerness to take advantage of the spontaneous, open-handed trustfulness of small American businesses!

This episode reminded me of the fact that the last time I was in France, I had to ask the café waiter for sugar for my coffee. He delivered it one cube at a time. Apparently, in that part of Europe, if you leave sugar on the table, customers take it home to save a little money. Or the owner merely imagines that they might. What a pleasant relationship between merchant and customer! Talking about France, the country of my childhood, I have to mention what must be a near-mystery even to the most cultured foreign visitors. Many shops show a large sign, usually near the shop's name that says, "*Entrée libre*." Of course, this means literally, "Free admission." The sign is not intended to communicate the idea, as one might fear, that there is no door fee to gain access to the shop. What it does signify however is this: "Feel free to come in and browse; we will not force you to buy anything to justify your presence in our space; we will not treat you like dirt if you leave without a purchase." The fact that customers have to be told in large, bold letters that they are welcome expresses a mentality

of pettiness, mistrust, and puny greed, it seems to me.

The same Santa Cruz coffee shop I mentioned previously is a permanently jolly place. It's an un-Starbucks, a privately owned shop whose proprietor has the good sense to understand that he cannot compete with the big guys on prices or on product quality. Instead, he concentrates on creating an

unfailingly pleasant atmosphere by selecting serving employees for their human and social qualities. He does a great job of it. In spite of the high turnover that usually plagues those modestly paid positions, your beverage is always served to you by someone young, attractive, and frequently, obviously literate. Customers respond predictably to the good humor: regular customers always tip. Even poor students, who purchase the smallest ordinary coffee, leave a dime behind. Dollar tips are common.

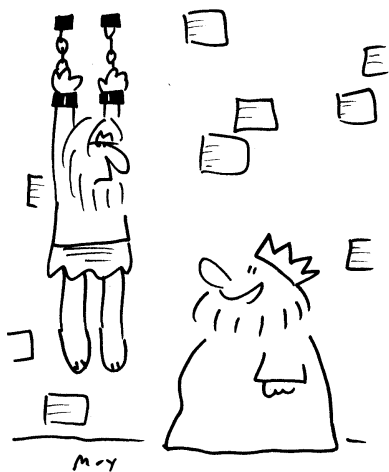
A woman in her early 40s enters the shop just ahead of me. As we stand in line, I observe that she wears expensive high-heel shoes and a nice silk dress. She has a pricey haircut. (Don't ask me how I know. I have been studying women for 50 years! And no, I am not gay!) She orders a tea to go. "It's two dollars," says the cheerful barista. The elegant lady hands her two one-dollar bills and turns around with her drink in hand. As she says goodbye, I notice a strong English accent. I had not spotted her as a European before, although I am good at it. She was dressed like any prosperous American professional or businesswoman, like someone who lives here. She was not a visitor. The tiplessness should have tipped me off. Not even a nickel? Must be a European person, for sure!

Now, what are the causes of this European cramped approach to the world? One may simply be the collective remembrance of past privations, a historical memory that perpetuates habits of prudent consumption, sometimes blending into larceny. This explanation does not go far because today's Europeans are quite into conspicuous consumption. In my subjective but systematic comparative observation of many years, class for class, Europeans are more likely than Americans to indulge in vulgarity spending. I mean by this, spending for self-indulgent or showy reasons without redeeming humanistic value. Thus, my urban and urbane French relatives crave SUVs I would not get caught in, dead or alive.

As I write, a news story comes on the radio. A recent study purportedly shows that, on a per capita basis, Americans give privately seven times more than the French and 14 times more than the Italians. I have not checked the study. I don't know if it's true. But it sure makes intuitive sense.

There is another, more persuasive explanation of the differences between Americans and Europeans that I abhor: the 40-odd years of social democracy the latter, but not the former, have experienced. There are two major relevant features of social democratic societies: moral vagueness about property rights and pessimism about the possibility of upward mobility.

All Europeans born after 1960 have only known a world where many things belong to the government, including most television and other mass media, railroads, airlines, most of the highly visible or advanced manufacturing industries, and even luxury hotels. But what belongs to the government does not seem to belong to anyone in particular. There is so much of that which does not seem to belong to anyone in particular that the very idea of private property becomes diluted (with one exception; see below). It's easy to appropriate that which does not belong to anyone in particular, like picking an apple off a tree in an abandoned orchard, perhaps. The exception is this: there is a whole category of goods that have



"The country's going metric, LaBoeuf, so I'm increasing your sentence to 100 years."

*continued on page 54*

# Reviews

**"Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games,"** by Edward Castronova.  
University of Chicago Press, 2005, 344 pages.

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## *The Massively Multiplayer Life*

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David Friedman

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The approach to virtual reality that got most of the attention over the past few decades relied on elaborate technologies to create as complete an illusion as possible of the experience of a different world — goggles over the eyes, headphones, motion sensors, and much more. The one that worked relied on a still more advanced technology: the human imagination. The flat screen of a computer monitor, sound from its speakers, a keyboard and mouse to control a player's online avatar, a compelling world and storyline; and millions of people — more than ten million for "World of Warcraft" alone, perhaps a hundred million for all the so-called "massively multiplayer online games" combined — found themselves immersed in a fictional world.

With the advantage of hindsight, the outcome should have been obvious. After all, millions of people have been losing themselves in fictional worlds for a very long time, through the much narrower bandwidth of the printed word.

The player of a conventional video game interacts only with the computer.

In a massively multiplayer online game, he shares his world with thousands of others. Human beings are much better at impersonating human beings than computers are, making such games enormously richer and more interesting, social rather than solitary. Players can make friends, flirt, fight, gossip, or engage in any social activity that does not require physical contact, with a social network no longer limited by geography. My family routinely adventures with a friend on the other side of the continent; my daughter's online circle includes a married couple of French Canadians living in British Columbia. On one occasion my wife, investigating the question of why the person she was talking with had a different idea from hers of what time it was, discovered that he was in Spain.

In "Synthetic Worlds," Edward Castronova, an associate professor of telecommunications at Indiana University, explores the universe of virtual worlds as of a few years ago, sketches out what is known about its inhabitants, reports on interactions, surprisingly substantial, between virtual and real world economies, and dis-

cusses ways in which such worlds will become increasingly important over the next few years. The book has a number of faults, including an unconvincing attempt to show the relevance of virtual worlds to the currently hot topic of terrorism. But it also gets some important things right, including the attractions of such worlds, the roles they are likely to play over the next few decades, and the considerable ambiguity in describing them as less real than other parts of our lives.

Castronova's research suggests that, contrary to what many outsiders assume, most players are adults, a large minority are married or the equivalent, and a substantial number are parents. That fits my experience: it is common for someone to apologize for having to drop out of a group to feed a baby or put a child to bed. For many players online gaming is a substitute for television, consuming a similar amount of time in a much more interesting way.

A central theme of the book is the interaction between virtual worlds and the real world. Multiplayer games have their own economies, in which individuals find or create virtual goods,



exchange them, sell them to the game or to each other, even put them up for auction. Increasingly, those economies interact with the economies of the outside world. Virtual money and virtual goods and services are routinely sold online. The current exchange rate is about ten units of "World of Warcraft" gold to the dollar; the total size of the market is by now almost certainly over a billion dollars a year. The user agreements of many games prohibit such transactions, but the restriction is widely ignored, with much of the online supply coming from "Chinese farmers" — workers in the third world who make their living playing online games, accumulating virtual assets, and selling them for real money. Their number in China alone has been estimated at anywhere from 100,000 to half a million.

Current virtual worlds have their limitations. They offer sight and sound but no taste or feel. We cannot live on virtual food or be kept warm by virtual clothing. On the other hand, they have been designed, as our world has not, to be places that people enjoy occupying. They are inherently safe — my real world body cannot be injured by other people's virtual actions — and they come complete with a carefully designed structure of objectives, activities and story line, all planned to attract customers. In the real world I am stuck with the body nature gave me. In a virtual world I can be tall or short, handsome or ugly, male or female, old or young. Those are good reasons why

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*Contrary to what many outsiders assume, most players are adults, a large minority are married or the equivalent, and a substantial number are parents.*

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many people prefer to spend much of their time there. And I can choose not only my body but my world — fantasy, science fiction, a free-form environ-

ment created by the users . . . whatever enough people want to make it worthwhile for someone to provide.

Virtual worlds have other advantages as well. If I move across the country or vacation in Paris, I leave my real-world friends behind but bring my virtual world, my online life, along. As we shift more of life to virtual spaces online we become more mobile. That means that governments will find it increasingly necessary to offer value for money if they wish to attract and keep taxpayers.

That constraint applies still more strongly to virtual worlds themselves, a point whose implications Castronova does not entirely appreciate. He is bothered by the fact that the rules built into the software of a virtual world are created by a private firm free to ignore the wishes of the inhabitants. He thinks *something* should be done to give the citizens of "World of Warcraft" a vote, but he isn't sure what. It has apparently not occurred to him that the system of governance he observes online is the same one he encounters every time he goes into a restaurant or hotel. I have no vote over the menu of my favorite Japanese restaurant, just as I have no vote over the next set of modifications that Blizzard adds to "World of Warcraft." I have, in both cases, absolute control over whether or not I choose to be a customer. Competitive dictatorship is, on the available evidence, the best-known way of running things.

Castronova might respond by pointing out an important difference: sunk costs. Changing restaurants loses me the value of my accumulated knowledge of a particular menu, but that is very little compared to what I lose if, after spending two years gaining skill, levels, gold, and equipment in a virtual world, I decide to shift to another. As in some other economic relationships — marriage and employment are the obvious examples — relationship-specific sunk costs convert what was *ex ante* a competitive market into a bilateral monopoly *ex post*.

But then, I knew all that when I signed up and I chose my virtual world accordingly. If customers preferred virtual worlds in which they got a vote on the usual combination of autocracy and anarchy, it would pay firms to provide it. On the evidence so far, customers

don't. The universe of virtual worlds is a competitive market for environments, the nearest thing yet to the late philosopher Robert Nozick's utopia, in which

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*The current exchange rate is about ten units of "World of Warcraft" gold to the dollar; the total size of the market is by now almost certainly over a billion dollars a year.*

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everyone gets to live in his preferred community under his preferred rules. The outcome of that competitive market is good evidence of what environments the customers prefer.

A further point Castronova misses is that if costs of change are a serious problem, in virtual worlds it is not only possible but profitable to reduce them sharply. There is nothing to prevent a new entrant to the market from offering a special deal to its competitors' customers. I turn over my "World of Warcraft" account to them, and they provide me with the equivalent in their world — an avatar of corresponding level with the same name, a sum in virtual gold sufficient to equip him as my old avatar was equipped. They then sell off my old account for dollars, and we split the money. Creating virtual gold, advanced avatars, and high-end gear, after all, costs them nothing. Potential customers may be reluctant to leave their friends behind, but then, the invitation is open to the friends too.

As high-speed internet connections become more common and the quality and variety of virtual worlds continues to increase, more and more people will use them. As the technology improves, worlds will become increasingly immersive. In the limit you can imagine a society where almost everyone spends almost all of his time in virtual reality, perhaps through a direct link between mind and computer, with only enough real-world production to keep our bodies alive while our minds wander.

Would this be a bad thing? Castronova worries about “toxic immersion” — games sufficiently addictive to pull customers in, keep them in, and ultimately give them very little in exchange. One might argue that some real-world institutions already do that: the Church of Scientology, the Moonies, fundamentalist churches — a list whose contents depend on which of the things to which other people devote their lives that you consider obviously worthless.

A more fundamental problem is the philosophical issue of what sort of life is worth living. If I write books, I do not care whether they are read on paper or on a computer screen, in real space or in a virtual world. If I make clever con-

versation, it is equally satisfying in my living room or online. But if some day a computer can give me a believable illusion of the experience of rearing happy and productive children, it will still be no substitute for the real thing. As the illusion gets better and better, we will all have to choose between the experience and the reality.

But then, we have to make that choice already. Considered as an illusion, playing “World of Warcraft” is a great deal more rewarding, more useful, more real, and a better environment for learning useful skills — not how to throw fireballs but how to get along with other people — than watching soap operas. □

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**“Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,” directed by David Yates. Warner Brothers, 2007, 138 minutes.**

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# Ghastly Disobedience

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John Lalor

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I admit it: I’m a fan. So far, I’ve read the first five books of the Harry Potter series. OK, so it’s not the most ingenious writing ever, and the concepts are hardly novel, but something that’s gotten kids in such large numbers reading adventure stories can’t be all that bad.

But there’s something more in these books. They take kids back to a different time, to a land where political correctness hadn’t been invented, and the health and safety industry hadn’t commenced destroying all semblance of risk, fun, or excitement. Fighting, scheming, and disobedience; a child having self-

belief when all others take the easy option; the acknowledgment of good and evil; indeed, the mere existence of people of better and worse ability — all of these things are in serious danger of being subverted by the egalitarian, risk-free, moral-subjectivist agenda of the Nanny Statists.

But more still, there was something quite different in the fifth installment, whose movie version has just been released. It didn’t take me long to realize that there was something all too controversial and disobedient about it. It almost seemed Objectivist.

Most of the movie is set in the school for witches and wizards, Hogwarts. Ayn

Rand herself, and, more recently, Edwin Locke and Leonard Peikoff, railed against the debilitating effects of statist education. Replete with “unknowables” and the dissemination of falsehoods, modern education, as Rand believed, so damaged the minds of children that they entered the real world pathetically ill equipped to think for themselves.

The major conflict between Harry and Dolores Umbridge — a Ministry of Magic drone who slowly takes over Hogwarts — is about lies. Harry, an honest, decent boy, simply believes his senses. This results in his spreading the news that evil Lord Voldemort is back, and his frustration to the point of anger by Umbridge’s insistence that this is not true. The Ministry has turned rotten — not unlike the Senate in another sci-fi franchise, *Star Wars*. From the Minister of Magic himself, Cornelius Fudge, through his underlings at the Wizengamot, a corrosive impotence has spread. Morally, there is no one to stand up either to Voldemort himself or to the idea that his return is imminent. Ostrich-like, people hide from the truth.

Impotence is not limited to the Ministry; it is spread to the children’s minds. Imelda Staunton, who plays Umbridge, is superb in the role. She is the embodiment of the state zealot, absolutely evangelical about the righteousness and infallibility of the Ministry. Substitute “Ministry” with “state,” and the plot flows as one continuous sounding of the dangers of state control of education, criminal justice, crime — indeed, everything in the lives of witches and wizards, or normal people, either. Whatever is believed to be best practice by the Ministry must be executed by agents like Umbridge, and the health of the Ministry is paramount.

The premise of the Harry Potter series has always been the necessity for students to learn to arm themselves against evil. Each year (i.e., each book) has brought a new teacher, so difficult and dangerous is the task in the face of the mounting threat of Voldemort and his minions. So, just when the children need to be taught how to succeed — whether in “Harry Potter” or in Rand’s writings about the real world — they are laden with useless, contradictory, and inhibiting “skills.” In these less-is-more times of continuous assessment,

learning-by-rote (very important to Umbridge), and pointless courses substituted for inspirational and important ones, filling children's heads with information has completely missed the point of truly worthwhile education.

Harry and his friend Hermione are stunned that the Defense Against the Dark Arts course Umbridge teaches has been, you guessed it, dumbed down. They are not to be taught practical skills, just theory. When Harry states the obvious — that there is a lot of evil out there, and that theory will not protect them — Umbridge scoffs, replying that there's nothing to worry about. After Umbridge shouts at Harry, "I won't have talking in class!", Hermione responds, under her breath, "You won't have us *thinking*." After all, from the Ministry's point of view, isn't an obedient, passive, dependent group of young witches and wizards far more manageable?

All readers will have encountered mind-numbing, infuriating bureaucracy, and will readily identify this behavior in Umbridge. No matter how wretched, how condescending, how suffocating she acts toward the pupils, she maintains the veneer of the perfect teacher: smiling, quiet, succinct, agreeable, and gracious — in other words, patently dishonest. She is the impossible face we have all met at airport security, at our children's school, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and so on. The connection? State bodies and their life-sapping bureaucracy.

When we see for ourselves the ways in which such agencies operate, what becomes obvious is that the interaction between state agent and Ordinary Joe or Jane is meant to be as dehumanizing as possible. I was a school prefect

in my senior year in high school, and the school principal instructed us how to deal with younger, disruptive pupils. We were to act as if we were listening and nod at appropriate times, but we were never actually to engage in discussion. Regardless of claims and protests from the pupil, we had only one response, predetermined before the naive young soul opened his mouth.

I was reminded of this rotten relationship when I saw Umbridge deal with students. What is worse is that we realize (and she eventually states this herself) that she hates the children with whom she spends so much time. Are you reminded of any bitter, tired state employees you've met recently, people who, above all else, cannot abide the public they "serve"? This is what pointless, obstructionist policies do to once-enthusiastic employees.

Umbridge's effect on the school is poisonous. A giant wall in the ancient building becomes a testament to her rules and regulations. She has the school caretaker, Argus Filch, nail decrees to the wall, and they are so many that his ladder balances precariously, at a dangerous height, so as to fit them all (a small point about imagery, but significant when one thinks of the ever-increasing mountain of federal laws produced annually). With every problem she perceives, there is no reasoning or debate, just more laws, more force, and more punishment.

Something I realized in my trips to Eastern Europe — where my morbid fascination with communism and state terror brought me to museums covering the brutality of the 20th century — was that the suffering entailed so much more than just the loss of economic and social freedom. People were

emotionally crushed: every last dream they had, every waking moment of privacy and peace, was stolen by heartless bureaucrats and state thugs. We see this in "The Order of the Phoenix." The constant drone of public announcements about health and safety in malls, train stations, and

airports — invariably telling us of the innumerable activities forbidden us — is deeply unnerving. Likewise, the pupils at Hogwarts have a constant stream of oh-so-terribly-polite mes-

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*Umbridge is the embodiment of the state zealot, absolutely evangelical about the righteousness and infallibility of the Ministry.*

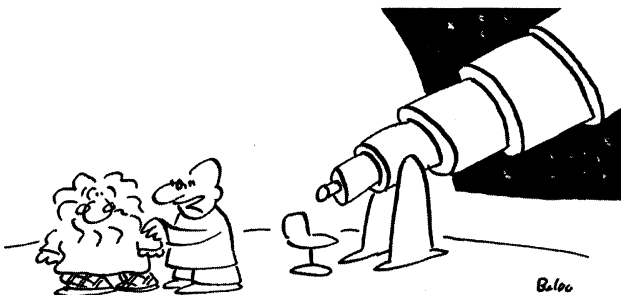
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sages from Umbridge raining down on them. One by one, their assumed freedoms and joys are being eliminated.

The most heinous crime of all, thinking for oneself, leads the pupils to form their own class, hidden away in a secret chamber, to learn how to defend themselves against evil. Their society is called Dumbledore's Army, named after the school principal, Albus Dumbledore, one of the few adults they can trust. The parallels with education in the real world are striking: the inability of the Ministry-run education system to prepare the pupils for the outside world; the realization by the pupils that they, led by Harry's magical expertise, will have to teach themselves. Again, substitute the self-teaching of the pupils with home schooling or private, supplementary tuition, and one would be forgiven for thinking that Rowling knows just how bad state schools have become.

Suspicion and distrust are in the air at Hogwarts: the existence of the subversive Dumbledore's Army and its illicit training sessions are under threat of being discovered by the Ministry. Through use of a truth serum, Umbridge turns pupil against pupil in her effort to discover these covert activities, the very divide-and-conquer policy that Stalin used to destroy perceived enemies within his ranks. After all, when the state is to be defended, the end justifies all means.

While the translation of the story from book to film is somewhat lacking — there is a loss of depth in the story, and a failure to develop many of the



"It's all right, Strudelbart, it's all right — the kids next door just got a trampoline, that's all."

characters — the general philosophy that Rowling seems to be conveying makes it well worth a trip to the movies or bookstore. This viewer was caught up in the continuous parallels between

the story and his antistatist tendencies. Whether or not the plot was compelling or the characters were credible mattered little in comparison to the joy of cheering on the ghastly disobedience. □

**“‘All Governments Lie!': The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I.F. Stone,”** by Myra MacPherson. Scribner, 2006, 598 pages.

# He Should Have Been a Libertarian

Richard Kostelanetz

Born Isador Feinstein in 1907, Izzy took the rock-hard *Amerikanische* name of I.F. Stone (much as Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum took the name of Ayn Rand) and became one of the most impressive investigative journalists in American history. Residing in Washington, where he refused politicians' invitations to socialize, he was during the 1950s and 1960s unrivaled at unearthing damning documents and other illustrations of politicians' idiocies. My sense is that Stone developed the ability not to read closely but to look at a document until something problematic jumped out at him, much as experienced lawyers know how to find the decisive lines in a judge's verbose opinion without reading every word.

When the last newspaper to employ him, the New York Compass, went under, Stone went into business for himself. The eponymous I.F. Stone Newsletter attracted a sufficient num-

ber of subscribers to keep going for eighteen years (1953–71). Only In Fact, published between 1940 and 1950 by his acknowledged hero George Seldes (1890–1995, yes, 104 years old) could stand as a precursor. Even in the era of the internet, which makes so much more public information accessible (if you can find it) to people working at home, as Stone did (and I do), there's been no one like him since.

Stone's problem was that he remained sympathetic to communism in general and Soviet Russia in particular for so long that this sympathy remains the major issue for most reviewers of him now, whether they are commenting on the new biography about him, or on the recent anthology selecting from his voluminous writings. On the one hand, I think the conversion of intellectuals, especially Jewish intellectuals, to communism, especially Soviet communism, ranks among the greatest con jobs of modern times. On the other hand, since I grew up among the children of American communists,

whom I now regard as deceived but not stupid, I can't get too worked up about the issue, either to praise or to blame. The ancient debate no more engages me (and, I would wager, those younger than I) than charges of anti-Semitism in Ezra Pound and Ferdinand-Louis Céline, let alone E.E. Cummings.

Nonetheless, reviewers disapproving of Stone's 1940s politics feel compelled to document, yet again, the fact that he tolerated Stalin for too long and that he had contact with Soviet agents. (If so, what did he pass on to them? He could only have passed on information that was already public to those who knew where to find it. He wasn't working in Los Alamos. Nor were government officials sharing confidences with him.) People more sympathetic to his 1940s politics doubt these charges, citing foggiest of evidence derived from coded cables and KGB agents who were no more reliable at collecting accurate information than, say, gumshoes at the FBI. Respecting the principle of full disclosure, I should confess that I think the fellow who stole my football in the playground at pinkish Downtown Community School in 1949 was a commie agent. You could tell by the red shirt he was wearing.

The title of the latest Stone biography, “All Governments Lie!”, expresses a truth familiar to libertarians. But what should we make of the fact that Stone is beatified to a level unavailable to, say, John T. Flynn (1882–1964) and Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968), both

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*The conversion of intellectuals, especially Jewish intellectuals, to communism, especially Soviet communism, ranks among the greatest con jobs of modern times.*

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comparable writers? Remember that just as Flynn was skeptical about the beginnings of World War II, so Stone's “Hidden History of the Korean War”

(1952) suggests that South Korea, with U.S. support, provoked the North Korean attack.

This third Stone biography clocks in at the now customary size of 564 large pages, besides the customary footnotes and index. Written by Myra MacPherson, a veteran D.C. journalist, it was, internal evidence suggests, begun a while ago and then put aside until a contract for 600 book pages came. To characterize it as padded is an understatement. Though it received many favorable reviews, usually from journalists who like to honor Stone's memory, and some unfavorable notices, from those predisposed to remind readers of his protracted Stalinist sympathies, may I predict that this is the sort of book that will soon be remaindered for less than five dollars?

The book contains some fresh, though not exactly titillating, gossip. Stone and the famous attorney Leonard Boudin married sisters who were both loyal helpmates, Esther Stone becoming her husband's principal assistant on the Newsletter; but whereas Boudin was a philanderer, according to Susan Brady's biogra-

phy of Boudin and his daughter Kathy (the long-imprisoned Weatherman), "Family Circle" (2003), it now appears that Stone remained faithful to his wife and three children. The second revelation is that federal authorities wasted a ton of money tailing Stone, interviewing informants, illegally searching his car, and even pawing through his garbage. Again, it's interesting, but not exactly shocking.

We also learn that, notwithstanding his drive to read what others ignored, weak eyesight plagued Stone for his entire career. Toward the end, he needed to use a magnifying glass to supplement his thick eyeglasses. For many years he was also deaf. Though multiply disadvantaged at pursuing his work, he survived, depending on his tough ego and the strong support he received at home.

One detail in the book's cover photograph has a significance that apparently escaped the author. Behind Stone's right ear is a video screen; beside his left arm is a computer screen and keyboard, suggesting that perhaps the greatest tragedy of Stone's writing career might be that he didn't get the opportunity to exploit the new information-retrieving technologies that have arrived since his death. He didn't live long enough to have a blog. This in turn suggests the unhappy thought that our lives as writers and readers are always limited by the information technologies that lie beyond our use.

MacPherson thinks that Stone was among the first to see through "the myth of a united Communism" popularized in the 1950s by John Foster Dulles. She repeatedly contrasts Stone with the D.C. journalist Walter Lippmann (1889–1974), a self-consciously establishment Jew, who was easily deceived. What clearly emerges from Stone's writings (see "The Best of I.F. Stone," edited by Karl Weber [Public Affairs, 2006]) is that he was best at exposing government officials. The fact that he was the first D.C. journalist to challenge President Johnson's version of the Gulf of Tonkin incident gave credibility to his subsequent criticisms of the unnecessary war.

To my mind, the dumbest line in MacPherson's biography is the quotation of Stone, four years before

his death in 1989: "I was a strong Wilsonian at elementary school. I still think Wilson was a great president in many ways, although he was a terrible

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*Stone was unrivaled at unearthing damning documents and other illustrations of politicians' idiocies.*

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imperialist in Latin America, I realize." Hell, Izzy, that ranks among the least of Woody's faults. Don't forget that "high-minded" Wilson got us into the First World War, even though no one had attacked our shores; he instituted the federal income tax; he introduced segregation into the American military; he sabotaged civil liberties in a phony Red Scare, deporting radicals who weren't even threatening (most notably Emma Goldman); he collaborated with Winston Churchill in redrawing the map of the Middle East (thus creating preconditions for the current Iraq mess); he sponsored the League of Nations, whose peculiarities helped cause the Second World War; etc, etc., etc. Woody rightly ranks as the worst American president, with Honest Abe a distant second. Perhaps this love for Woodrow Wilson explains why Izzy was slow to identify evil in other leaders of a state. Had he been a libertarian, he wouldn't have made such an egregious error.

Stone's intellectual problem was that he was essentially a newspaperman, and most comfortable with short forms. His typical article depended upon a revelation, followed by a witty punch line. Contrast him with such masters of the longer form as Seymour Hersh, who cultivates dissenting informants within the government; Edward Jay Epstein, whose books get remarkably little attention, though they continue to appear; and Noam Chomsky. Nonetheless, no matter how hard these guys tried, none could have written as Stone did: "All governments lie,

## ***Calling All Economists!***

To Mises, a scientist is "bound to reply to every censure" and "either unmask logical errors in the chain of deductions . . . or . . . acknowledge their . . . validity."

The "experts" in these pages not having unmasked any logical errors in the "new idea" regularly offered here have at least tacitly acknowledged its validity.

The only question is whether they will do so openly and honestly.

For the only honest economists and genuine libertarians, see *Intellectually Incorrect* at [intinc.org](http://intinc.org) and *The Mises Anti-Institute* at [intinc.blogspot.com](http://intinc.blogspot.com).

but disaster lies in wait for countries whose officials smoke the same hashish they give out." Or: "You may just think I am a red Jew son-of-a-bitch, but I'm keeping Thomas Jefferson alive." Or; "Once the secretary of state invites you to lunch and asks your opinion, you're sunk [as an independent journalist]."

Soon after Stone became a Random House author, the New York Review of Books (founded by an RH vice president) commissioned from him longer pieces that were less effective, because, not unlike many other newspapermen writing at length, he tended to get lost. I remember that in 1964 the New York Times' chief editorialist, James Reston, came to lecture us graduate students at Columbia University. He said that instead of giving a prepared lecture he preferred to answer questions that were put to him. To each question he delivered a reply that was 500 words long, with two sentences to each paragraph,

which is to say a draft of a Times editorial. This guy, I thought at the time, has a great 500-word mind. Reston's rare attempts at longer essays revealed his limitation. Much the same could be said of Stone, and of MacPherson. As a veteran newswoman, she gets lost in writing her book. Haven't we all noticed that people whose reading is mostly newspapers get lost discussing anything at length?

May I raise the question about how else biographies might be written? Can they be shorter and more focused? Need they be chronological? Can they move beyond conventional truths? Certainly changes can be made, beginning perhaps not with the subject's birth, for instance, but with a definition of his principal cultural achievement. But 600-page biographies are what the better publishers seem to want from overeducated writers, and so readers are stuck with books like MacPherson's. □

years doing exactly what we want. But I don't remember a single "visualization" episode. I was too busy running the business!

Karbo was not the first to espouse the power of positive thinking and visualization, nor would he be the last.

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*Byrne claims that she overcame debt by refusing to acknowledge her bills, visualizing checks in the mailbox instead.*

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**"The Secret," by Rhonda Byrne. Atria Books, 2006, 184 pages.**

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# Better Living Through Fluff

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Jo Ann Skousen

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Nearly 35 years ago my husband and I read a book that changed our lives: Joe Karbo's "The Lazy Man's Way to Riches." The book was 90% fluff, mostly about the power of visualizing goals and saying "I have" instead of "I want," that sort of motivational thinking. But 10% of the book was golden: Karbo described in detail his actual road to riches, which was a mail-order

business — basically, his success came from designing a product and selling it over and over again.

We threw out the visualization karma and started looking for something we could sell by mail. Within months, orders were pouring in and I was staying up past midnight six days a week processing them. (Mercifully, the post office was closed on Sundays.) Within three years we were financially set and have spent the ensuing 32

The philosophy resurfaces periodically, dressed up in new clothes and bearing new stories, but essentially promoting the same idea. Its latest incarnation, Rhonda Byrne's "The Secret," has talk show hosts from Oprah to Ellen all atwitter with Byrne's Newtonian "discovery" that the universe will give you whatever you want if you simply focus on it.

Byrne calls her "secret" the "law of attraction" claiming that thoughts are magnetic and attract whatever a person is thinking. Think of a hot fudge sundae long enough and you're likely to get one. Think of a million dollars, and you're going to attract that too. Wow! It's so easy! Byrne relies on quotations from experts including metaphysicians, life coaches, and "transformational leaders" to corroborate her claims. But that doesn't make it science.

Like Karbo's book, Byrne's is 90% fluff, with just enough truth to resonate with readers. Her suggestions to look on the bright side, express gratitude, put oneself first, and set specific goals are indeed good ways to achieve happier lives. In addition, many of us have had the experience of hearing from a long-lost friend shortly after thinking of the person, or getting over an illness after praying for health.

Unfortunately, Byrne goes beyond the power of positive thinking to the realm of outright mysticism. She tells



the story of a man who visualized a unique feather (to test the "law of attraction") and then saw the exact feather on the sidewalk days later; she suggests that if you don't like the way your day went, change the past "by imagining it differently," coming dangerously close to the "brains in a jar" pretense of "The Matrix." (She even refers specifically to the "immaculate matrix of the universe.")

If "The Secret" is just so much recycled fluff, why is Byrne's law of attraction attracting so much attention? Why are celebrities touting it and millions reading it? I have to admit, the concept is mildly intoxicating. Simply decide what you want, and order it from the cosmic catalog. No price, no carrying charges; just think it, and it's yours! I call it "The Couch Potato's Guide to the Universe." You don't even have to leave the house! If you're poor, you can get rich, and if you're a rich talk show host, you don't have to feel guilty, because you've made the cosmic catalog available to anyone. Byrne tells the story of Jeannie, who "watched the DVD version of 'The Secret' at least

once a day, so that she could absorb the message right into the cells of her body." Wow again! Why did I bother to go to college?

And what if, after all this visualization, your problems don't go away? Byrne has that covered too, conveniently referring to "time delay" to explain why things don't happen immediately. Sometimes the cosmic shipping department gets backed up. Just give it time, and keep focusing!

There is a benefit to focusing on the good things in one's life instead of focusing on the bad. The attraction principle offers a sense of control and hopefulness, a way to stop worrying about debt, poor health, poor relationships, poor me. But Byrne leaves out some important steps. For example, she claims that she overcame debt by refusing to acknowledge her bills, visualizing checks in the mailbox instead. Then zowie, powie, checks started appearing! She fails to mention what those checks were for. I suspect that, like Joe Karbo, she started selling something.

I suspect it was a load of baloney. □

**"La Vie en Rose,"** directed by Olivier Dahan. *Legende*, 2007, 140 minutes.

# Tragedy and Triumph

Gary Jason

"La Vie en Rose" (also entitled "La Môme") exemplifies a film genre that is not as popular now as it once was: the "biopic," or film biography of an important figure. The subject of this biopic is Edith Piaf, arguably the most

popular French singer in history.

Piaf's voice and style were iconic. She uniquely informed contemporary French popular singing in a way comparable to that in which Billie Holiday — also iconic — informed generations of American popular song (from Sinatra to Diana Krall). In many ways her life mimicked that of Holiday, and

especially that of Judy Garland, whom Piaf resembled at least in height (Piaf was a waifish four feet eight inches tall). I remember walking with my wife

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*You want to shake Dahan and shout, "Look, biographies don't get more interesting than this! Just tell the story!"*

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one evening from the Ile Saint Louis to the right bank for dinner. As we passed by a house, we saw a woman singing along with a Piaf record. To hear "La Vie en Rose" while walking across the Pont Marie over the Seine — now that's a tourist's dream!

Edith Piaf was the stage name of Edith Giovanna Gassion, born in a rough district of Paris in 1915. Her first name was that of a WWI English nurse who helped French soldiers escape the Germans. Her stage name "Piaf" was Parisian slang for "sparrow"; she was also called "La Môme Piaf" ("the sparrow kid").

Her mother was a failed cafe singer and her father a failed acrobat. Abandoned by her parents, she wound up being raised, from age three, in a Normandy brothel run by her grandmother. It doesn't take much guessing to suppose that this upbringing had a profound influence on her personality. While at the brothel, she suffered blindness for four years, followed by deafness for six. Her blindness was allegedly cured by a visit to the shrine of St. Therese, paid for by the prostitutes at the brothel, but one can suspect that both the blindness and the deafness might have been psychological defense mechanisms against her surroundings.

At age 14, she briefly rejoined her father, helping in his street act; but she quickly began working on her own as a street singer. At 16 she had an affair with a delivery boy; she bore a child, Marcelle, who died in infancy. At age 20, she was discovered by cabaret

owner Louis Leplee, who helped her overcome stage fright and develop her style. She recorded her first record that year. Laplee was murdered about this time, perhaps by a pimp who regarded Piaf as his property, and Piaf was charged as an accessory, but acquitted — an incident that is only hinted at in the movie.

In the 1940s, she began to meet and make friends with many of the eminent French of the time, including poet Jacques Borgeat, actor Maurice Chevalier, and playwright Jean Cocteau. She was actively working with composers, and often wrote her own lyrics, such as those for her signature song, "La Vie en Rose."

During the occupation, she sang for German officials, and they let her pose for photographs with French prisoners of war. She gave those photos to people working with the Resistance, who used them to create bogus passports. She managed to return to the camp and smuggle the passports in, allowing some prisoners to escape. (This incident isn't covered in the movie.)

In the 1950s, she rose to international fame. She appeared at Carnegie Hall twice and on the Ed Sullivan Show more than half a dozen times. She gave a number of concerts at the Olympia Hall in Paris, all recorded and sold to this day. Her albums have sold millions, and "La Vie en Rose" was awarded a Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1998.

But she suffered more tragedy. In 1949, the man she apparently loved most, boxer Marcel Cerdan, died in a plane crash, and in 1951 she was injured in a major car crash. This led to a continuing addiction to morphine. This the movie covers unsparingly.

Piaf married twice in this later period: in 1952 to a singer whom she divorced four years later, and in 1962 to a minor actor twenty years her junior. She died of cancer in 1963, at age 47.

The movie does a good job of presenting most of the key incidents and figures in her life, with the curious exception, as I have said, of her work with the Resistance. The cinematography is outstanding (it helps to be filming in Paris). The characters are vividly and convincingly portrayed by a superb cast. Especially delightful

are the supporting performances by Gerard Depardieu (Laplee), Jean-Pierre Martins (Cerdan), and Sylvie Testud (Piaf's longtime friend Momone). The movie shows Piaf warts and all, including her alcoholism and morphine addiction. This makes it a compelling tale, if at times painful to watch.

The lead actress, Marion Cotillard, has Piaf's quirky mannerisms down pat; she brings the character brilliantly to life, both as a young woman and as a failing invalid. The performance is a genuine tour de force. As for the songs, Cotillard sings some of them; the rest are dubbed by other singers or by Piaf's own voice.

But the film is flawed in several ways, at least from my point of view. First, it is too artsy by half, resulting in a particular problem with continuity. Rather than rely on a more or less linear temporal presentation of Piaf's life, one leavened, perhaps, by an occasional flashback, director Dahan (who also co-wrote the script) flashes backwards and forwards, making the movie jump around like a sparrow on speed. It would be hard for someone not already familiar with Piaf's life to follow the storyline. (In this regard it reminded me of Clint Eastwood's early directorial effort, "Bird," about the life of Charlie Parker.) You want to shake Dahan and shout, "Look, biographies just don't get more interesting than this! Girl is born abjectly poor, dumped in a whorehouse, hits the streets singing to survive, gets discovered, becomes a national icon, then an international diva, all the while struggling with internal demons, and dies tragically. Just tell the story!"

The second flaw is related to the first. It would have been interesting if the movie had tried to provide some insight into why Piaf was so self-destructive, and what we should make of it. This is an issue of general

interest. Faced with an Edith Piaf (or Charlie Parker, or Billie Holiday, or Judy Garland, or a dozen other artists one could name), we instinctively

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*Should we, the enjoyers of their genius, be filled with pity, or instead with anger, that their talent was cut short by their dangerous lives?*

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want to know what compels such people to abuse drugs, shorten their lives, and hurt those around them. Should we, the enjoyers of their genius, be filled with pity, or instead with anger, that their talent was cut short by their dangerous lives? Certainly the missed opportunity is tragic.

Still, I think this is a must-see movie for anyone who loves music or Paris. Perhaps one haunting scene will be enough to illustrate. Young Edith is badgered by her father to do something to amuse the crowd (which is indifferent to his contortionist act, and isn't contributing a centime to their collection cap). Edith is confused; but then she belts out a gorgeous a capella rendition of "La Marseillaise," the stirring French anthem. It is as beautiful a moment in cinema as I can recall seeing. □



"Oh, I'm quite rational now, but I was very superstitious in some of my previous lives."

# Filmnotes

## *A different, great escape*

— During the Vietnam War, American military leaders recognized the strategic benefits of using Laos and Cambodia to access targets in North Vietnam. Missions to secure sites in these countries were illegal, unofficial, and dangerous. Technically, they did not exist. One of my friends, a procurement specialist who served three tours in Vietnam, was assigned to several of these “special ops” missions. Twice he was left behind in Laos, seven miles from the border on one occasion and eleven miles the next. He and his companions had to make their way through the jungle, watching over their shoulders the whole way. Their experiences, of course, never officially happened.

My friend’s stories are a hike in the woods compared to the experience of Dieter Dengler, a German-born American flyer who, on a mission over Laos, was shot down, captured, and imprisoned, then organized a prison break to rival “The Great Escape.” Werner Herzog’s “Rescue Dawn” (Gibraltar Entertainment, 2007, 126

their duty to do so; keeping the guards busy with the POWs meant fewer German soldiers fighting at the front.

In “Rescue Dawn” we see the mental and physical breakdown of the prisoners. “Eugene from Eugene” (Jeremy Davies) has been there the longest, and is the craziest. What keeps him going is his belief that it will be over soon, and the guards will release them any day. He is emaciated, his skeleton barely covered by paper-thin skin. Dengler (Christian Bale) is a problem solver. What keeps him going is his determination to escape. He gradually loses weight throughout the months of imprisonment, until by the end of the film his cheeks are hollow, his face haggard, his sanity on the brink. Steve Zahn, known for his lightweight roles as a wisecracking sidekick (“Sahara,” “Bandidas,” “Employee of the Month”) reaches an emotional depth never before plumbed in his body of work — a taut, gripping performance, particularly his eyes. His sense of humor remains intact, but without the wisecracks. My respect for the craft of acting grew as I watched these gaunt, wild-eyed men continue to waste away in scene after scene.

Creative writing teachers often tell students that every detail of a story must matter to the narrative, but Herzog is known for the way he presents events without a distinct narrative thread. Scenes fade into scenes, sometimes with full blackout between them, as moments of memory, without clearly moving the story forward. The method works extremely well in this film, heightening the audience’s awareness of the prisoners’ confusion and dread. Herzog avoids gruesome torture scenes, allowing the very fact of imprisonment to be torture enough.

He also avoids any moralizing or discussion of the philosophy of this war. Like so many soldiers today, Dengler did not set out to fight a war; he joined up because he wanted to learn to fly.

“Rescue Dawn” is more survival narrative than war story.

Filmed in Thailand, “Rescue Dawn” could be a travelogue for a visit to Southeast Asia — at first. The scenery is magnificent. But the soaring mountains and dense jungle soon become a prison outside the prison as the men plot how to survive if they succeed in escaping. Herzog uses his location to full advantage, and manages to insert his signature raft trip as well. (Audience members near me, obviously Herzog fans, cheered “Raft trip!” when they saw the river.)

A filmmaker’s film, “Rescue Dawn” works on every level. Herzog pulls every ounce of strength from his actors, his script, and his crew. He expects the best, and he gets it. — Jo Ann Skousen

## *Dinner’s coming, rat now*

— “Anyone can cook!” That was the motto of the great chef and restaurateur Gusteau, and it frames the new Pixar/Disney animated flick “Ratatouille” (Pixar, 2007, 110 minutes). In this excellent family movie, the main characters all dream of being chefs in the hyper-competitive culinary world of Paris. The twist is that the most talented cook of the three is — a rat! Therein lies the tale.

The movie is a combination romance and buddy movie. The lead character, a rat named Remy (voice acted by Patton Oswalt), is definitely not a typical member of his species. He can read, and he has the human ability to combine tastes and create new ones. His father Django (Brian Dennehy) has set expectations for his son — mainly, to avoid people and steal as much food as he can lay his paws on.

The story gets underway when Remy sees a master chef, Gusteau (Brad Garrett), talk about cooking. Remy wants to learn to cook, and in a well-animated sequence, he gets washed down the sewers of Paris, emerging on the street near the restaurant owned by Gusteau before his death. Remy becomes friends with a garbage-boy, Linguini (voice acted by Lou Romano), who turns out to be Gusteau’s son.

Remy and Linguini work to take the restaurant back from the villainous Chef Skinner (unctuously voiced by Ian Holm) and restore it to its former glory. Remy manages the cooking, control-

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*My respect for the craft of acting grew as I watched these gaunt, wild-eyed men continue to waste away in scene after scene.*

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minutes) tells this harrowing story in a film that stays with you long after the credits have rolled.

This film is *not* “The Great Escape.” In that film, the actors are well-dressed, well-spoken, well-mannered, and well-fed. They plot their escape because it is

ling Linguini's movements by a kind of puppetry.

So the movie has the buddy movie element so common to films with male leads. The buddy formula — in which men join together to pursue some quest — is probably so common in movies and literature because it taps into a mindset reinforced in us by an evolutionary history of hunting. But a good buddy movie involves humorously exploring the differences between the buddies. Here that difference is one of species. The movie also has a love story, as Linguini gradually falls for the assistant chef, a girl-with-attitude Colette (voiced by actress-with-attitude Janeane Garofalo).

The action builds to a climax as the rat is discovered and the kitchen staff leaves, on the very night when the ultrasnooty critic Anton Ego (Peter O'Toole) is coming to do a review, one that will make or break the restaurant. Success comes with the help of Colette, who returns after reflecting on the motto "Anyone can cook!" The good guys (rats and all) cook a fabulous ratatouille (a sort of vegetable casserole associated with peasants). They are unmasked in the end, but the denouement involves a new restaurant being created, with Ego's help.

All this is done with great humor, and really pretty vistas of Paris.

Brad Bird deserves major praise for this effort. He not only directed the movie but wrote the screenplay and co-wrote the original story. He was the creative genius behind "The Incredibles," and this movie, like that one, throws in a number of sophisticated lines for adults to savor, as when Colette says, "I hate being rude, but . . . we're French."

Of course, the challenge Brad Bird had to overcome is (I hate being rude, but . . .) our species' aversion to rats. When you think about it, it isn't particularly tough to animate cats, dogs, deer, rabbits, or even pigs in such a way as to make them appealing. But a rat is a tougher task — humans have a visceral loathing of them, especially when you see a hoard of them together. But this movie nicely personifies them, without having to portray them overtly as people (walking on their hind legs, say, or dressed in clothes).

It's nice to see Disney come up with a great, solid animated movie on a par

with its past classics, such as "Snow White" and "Beauty and the Beast," and with modern Pixar greats, such as "Toy Story" and "The Incredibles." (Come to think of it, I can't remember a

Pixar movie that hasn't been excellent). Coming up with a *family* movie — one sophisticated enough to hold the attention of parents and teenagers, but simple and sweet enough to delight young

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children — is not an easy feat. But "*Ratatouille*" works beautifully.

— Gary Jason

**Faerie dust** — "*Stardust*" (Di Bonaventura Pictures, 2007, 128 minutes) suffers from two things: inept marketing and a source text it can't possibly live up to.

Taking the second complaint first: the events in "*Stardust*" the movie take place in the magical kingdom of Stormhold, while "*Stardust*" the book is set in the land of Faerie, of which Stormhold is a small but influential part. The latter setting is an incomparably richer land: from it come heroes and maidens and nursery rhymes; in it reside all high kings and hobgoblins and lost continents. In the hands of a master storyteller such as Neil Gaiman, Faerie becomes a showcase for invention within a formal framework. After all, the human imagination devotes enough attention to Faerie that a number of rules have arisen to govern its workings: hierarchies set, tropes established, formalities observed.

The same cannot be said for mere Stormhold, where the rules often seem made up as the movie goes along. However, it is still a much more intelligent place than the universes of its fellow films in the theater — and here the flaw in the marketing becomes apparent. Go watch the trailer online: so drab that the pseudo-mystical announcer sounds like he can barely keep his eyes open. Check out the glossy promo pics at the local bookstore: they're the same celebrity headshots any ensemble romance or fantasy gets. You see Michelle Pfeiffer as a sexy evil witch, without seeing her as the old crone she spends more time as. You see Charlie Cox as the dashing buccaneer, and not as the mousy cock-up he is for most of the tale. You see Robert DeNiro as . . . well, not as he really is in this film, anyway.

In a way this is appropriate, as Faerie, like Hollywood, is a land of glammers and appearance. But how did it all get so dull?

Me, I attribute it to PR departments believing more and more strongly that American audiences are incapable of processing plot, characterization, or dialogue on any level above that of a "Rush Hour 3." Confronted with

images of swords and robes, the PR folk make the reasonable assumption that the movie is another ripoff of "*Lord of the Rings*," and dress the merchandising to match.

A shame, because it's that approach which convinces many people *not* to see a movie, not after getting hoodwinked by impostors such as "*Eragon*" — and "*Stardust*" deserves to be seen by the same audience that, 20 years ago, made "*The Princess Bride*" a surprise hit.

— Andrew Ferguson

**Completely charming** — Aristotle, greatest of philosophers, gives an insightful analysis of friendship in Book VIII of the "*Nicomachean Ethics*." He distinguishes three types of friendship. Some friendships, such as business relationships, are based solely on utility: people become friends for what they can do for each other. Other friendships, such as brief flings or party palships, are based solely on pleasure: people become friends for the pleasure they get from each other.

But friendships of virtue, such as relationships among people of similar professions, are based on a mutual desire to promote each other's happiness by exercising some sort of human excellence. Only friendships of virtue improve the character of the people involved. In Aristotle's terms, friendships of utility and pleasure are inherently incomplete; only friendships of virtue are complete, i.e., symmetrical, in that each friend is concerned for the other person as well as for himself.

This analysis of friendship is useful in understanding a recently released Irish film, "*Once*" (Samson Films, 2007, 88 minutes). It is a delightful "small" movie, a quirky guy-meets-girl flick. The Guy — played winningly by Glen Hansard (member of the Irish band The Flames) — is a street musician by night and a vacuum cleaner repairman by day, working in his father's shop. He sings standard pop stuff during the early evening, to pick up a few coins, then switches to his own songs — best described as introspective folk-rock — as the crowds wane. One night while he performs, the Girl — played sweetly by Czech singer-songwriter Marketa Irglova — stops by and is fascinated.

The Guy and Girl — we never learn their names — quickly form a bond, based on a mutual love of music and a

desire to make it. The movie is a novel kind of musical: unlike the traditional version, in which characters periodically burst into song, here they sing in performances or composing sessions that are part of the movie's action. The viewer doesn't have to suspend his critical faculties as he watches people abruptly start singing during the middle of normal dialogue.

The storyline centers on the characters' attempt to record an album, with him on lead vocals and her accompanying. As we watch them enjoy each other's company in a variety of settings in their working-class district of Dublin, we see their love deepen. We learn that the Guy was emotionally hurt by his girlfriend's choice to leave him and move to London. We learn that the Girl lives with her mother and small daughter in a little flat, with a husband still living in the Czech Republic. Improbably, they find a way to put together a group of back-up musicians, rent a studio, and do the album.

Now, the Hollywood ending would make the love that has developed between these characters turn explicitly romantic, then frankly (and likely graphically) sexual; the record would become a smash hit. But "Once" doesn't go in that predictable direction, which is what makes the movie different. Early

on, as the Guy and the Girl are getting to know each other, he asks her if she wants to spend the night with him. In a painfully awkward scene, she looks hurt, and he realizes that this is not what she intends or wants. He also realizes that this is not going to be another ordinary fling — this relationship has a different cast to it.

One senses rather than hears these things, because neither character is very articulate — they express their feelings by their body language and music, rather than by their dialogue. In Aristotelian terms, they develop a friendship of virtue, wanting to grow musically and help each other succeed in that way, not use each other for pleasure or advantage. The movie ends with him going to London to try to make the album a success, but also to rekindle his romantic love with his girlfriend. And the Girl finally brings her husband over to join the family in Ireland. The relationship improved the character of both people in it.

The supporting actors all do fine jobs. Especially nice is the performance by Bill Hodnett, the Guy's father, who says little but shows his love for his son in his praise of the album and his support of his son's pursuit of a dream.

"Once" is filmed in a gritty style, with many scenes taking place in

deserted evening streets or cramped, decidedly downscale apartments, with working-class Irish accents delivering the sparse dialogue. The streets are not quite mean, but they are certainly not very friendly; you see pawn shops and drug addicts and struggling stores. And "Once" reflects contemporary Irish reality, with many immigrants from Central Europe moving into working-class neighborhoods.

But a lot of the scenes have undeniable charm. In one early scene, after the Girl learns that the Guy repairs vacuum cleaners, she shows up to talk with him, pulling a vacuum cleaner by its hose like a little girl tugging her dog by its leash. As they walk to his father's shop, her face expresses a searching for someone who can complete something incomplete in her life.

This certainly doesn't add up to a smash hit in American theaters. The idea that two people could love each other but have a relationship based on a love of music will strike most Americans as strange. But that is what makes the film unique and very thought-provoking. Not to mention thoroughly, thoroughly enchanting.

This summer is delivering a remarkable crop of good films, at least foreign ones.

— Gary Jason

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## Nine Days in July, *from page 20*

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on the surge, America's last card in Iraq, all indicators point to a bad ending. At the same time, other problems in the Middle East are approaching critical mass. In Pakistan, Islamic militancy is on the rise. Al Qaeda has turned the tribal districts into a new base from which it can direct attacks worldwide. The same area serves as the mainspring for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. At some point, we may have to go in and clean up that mess. If we do, Pakistan's fragile stability could be destroyed. Imagine a radical, Islamist Pakistan with the bomb.

Iran is currently aiding *everybody* who opposes us in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the Taliban (formerly its mortal enemy) and al Qaeda. It sees an opportunity to drive us from the region, and is striving to accomplish that goal. Yet only four years ago, in the wake of the U.S. entry into Baghdad, it made overtures for an accommodation, even on the nuclear issue. The Bush administration, overcome by hubris, chose instead the course of confrontation.

Dick Cheney and the neocons would love to attack Iran. War, however, is not on the cards. The U.S., thanks to the quagmire in Iraq, doesn't have the forces available for the job.

The hourglass is running out everywhere — in Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq. An American drawdown in Iraq is inevitable;

how it will be managed is critical. The outbreak of a regional war between Sunnis and Shiites is not being discounted by anyone, including the U.S. government. If it happens when we have only 30,000–40,000 troops left in Iraq, a disaster on the scale of the Yalu or Bataan could follow.

The potential disasters we may face are, however, nothing compared to what keeps the Israelis awake at night. Having suffered defeat at the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, and watched Hamas conquer Gaza in 2007, they must feel that their long-term existence is threatened.

Should the danger to Israel become acute, America could be sucked into a new Middle East war, this time as the defender of Zionism. What that might portend, given the likelihood that two Islamic states, Pakistan and Iran, will be nuclear armed and quite possibly under radical regimes, is very disagreeable to contemplate.

America is the world's sole superpower. Whether it will remain so is open to question. Indeed, the floundering on display during the nine days of July 5–13, 2007 — in Congress, the executive branch, and the military command — speaks ill of America's capacity for leadership. Those nine days in July may come to be seen as the beginning of a descent into chaos. □



## Is There a God?, *from page 32*

pity that blossoms when these false religions fail to satisfy: the violent self-pity and self-entitlement that discovered a goddess in Princess Di.

The political effects of a post-religious age, if that is what we are entering, will be various, but on the whole discouraging. We can expect to see a decline in certain kinds of fanaticism. But we will see the rise of others, unrestrained by the inherited religious conviction that there are certain things one simply should not do. We can anticipate much more of what we are already seeing: the evaporation of those high aspirations and profound tensions — that moral seriousness about oneself and others, that stirring sense of the importance of the individual life, seen in profile against the splendor of God's universe — which inspired the greatest accomplishments of Western music, art, and literature. Elton John is, after all, a very poor substitute for Bach.

It is true, of course, that atheism has occasionally produced its own great works — at least in the field of literature — although much of the atheist literary accomplishment, from "Anthem" to "Zarathustra," is an attempt to surpass Christianity by imitating its effects and inverting a few (though not most) of its values. I agree with Yeager that the glories of Christian art do not constitute specific proof of the ideas they express. But there remains the question of whether any way of thinking that is largely false can produce high art

for very long periods of time.

However that may be, an atheist culture, in which man's goals were conceived as the maximization of "enjoyment," and immortality as the physical propagation of one's genetic material, would not be an authentic culture for me. I wonder, indeed, whether an authentic "I" would continue to exist in such a world. The methods that the West currently uses to identify, evaluate, and enjoy the individual self are largely indebted to the West's majority religion, which consists, in practice, of the endeavor to see yourself against a cosmos that is also looking back at you. This is the great stage on which Western individualism has acted. Will the West's customary way of seeing the world finally cease? Will all the world be Sweden, where you can do what you want, so long as *your neighbors* don't object?

I doubt it. Christianity began as an insurgency of religious commitment in a pagan world, where the practical thing to do in case someone disrupted local customs and the smooth functioning of the government was to nail him to a cross. And Christianity has always succeeded in reviving itself, often against virtually incredible odds. But whatever happens, a believer must always agree with John Adams, writing in his extreme old age (1822, p. 580): "We need not trouble ourselves about these things nor fret ourselves because of Evil doers[,] but safely trust the ruler with his skies." □

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## Why I Don't Like Europeans, *from page 40*

a clear, well-specified owner: mine. Thus, the world of things is divided roughly into two classes: what's mine is mine and what's not mine is nobody's and therefore, possibly, should become mine also.

Two main economic axes of European social democracy are confiscatory taxes and overregulation of business. Although originally impelled by egalitarian ideals, the corresponding policies' secondary effect has been to paralyze small-scale entrepreneurship. Thus, indirectly, these policies have destroyed a main avenue of social mobility. Their paradoxical consequence over time has been to freeze almost everyone in his class. If your family was prosperous in the '60s, you are probably doing just fine. If it was not, you are out of luck, in most cases. (How many European Steve Jobs are there? In Europe, I mean. There are some in Silicon Valley.)

An acquaintance of mine, a recent immigrant from Europe and a well-educated cosmopolitan man of the theater, tells

me the following, without animosity: "You are an immigrant like me, yet, you are able to stop working in your early 60s; your wife does not work for pay either; you own the better part of a pretty house in a desirable town. You must have cheated." I quickly give up on my attempt to explain to him that I earned my modest well-being over 40 years, playing by the rules, and not playing especially well at that, and that it was not even hard. I am not sure he can contemplate the simple possibility of individual legitimate upward mobility contained in a lifetime because it is so contrary to everything he has observed in his 30-some years in Europe.

Let me summarize what I understand of this despicable European world view: what's mine belongs to me; what does not clearly belong to me might, soon, either because it belongs to no one (the government) or because its owner is a cheat and does not deserve it. Ergo, much stealing is not really stealing, or it's not really reprehensible. In a way, I am a kind of Robin Hood, even if it's only to my own benefit. □

## Washington, D.C.

Environmental activism, reported in the *Washington Post*:

When Gareth Groves brought home his massive new Hummer, he knew his environmentally friendly neighbors disapproved. But he didn't expect what happened next. The sport utility vehicle was parked for five days on the street before two masked men smashed the windows, slashed the tires and scratched into the body: "FOR THE ENVIRON."

"The neighborhood in general is very concerned with the environment," said neighbor Lucille Liem, whose Prius gets about 48 miles a gallon compared with the Hummer's 14 miles a gallon. "It's more liberal leaning. It's ridiculous to be driving a Hummer."

Liem quickly added that she does not condone violence.

## Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Intolerance of a deviant lifestyle, noted by UPI:

Authorities condemned John Puchniak's apartment when a routine inspection raised concern the bookstore owner's collection of nearly 3,000 texts could cause a fire.

Puchniak now resides in a local hotel. But even if he can restore the apartment to acceptable living standards, Puchniak has said he cannot afford to appeal to the city to reopen his home.

Attorney Jim Hayward has become a champion for the troubled literary fan. "Their (the city's) priorities are wrong. This is not the guy they should be going after," he told the newspaper. "The average person may not agree with how John stores his books, but does that mean it's wrong?"

## Wailuku, Hawaii

Nomenclatural note, from the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*:

THE call letters KUNT have landed at a yet-unbuilt low-power digital television station in Wailuku, Maui.

Alarmingly similar to a word the dictionary says is obscene, the call letters were among a 15-page list of new call letters issued by the Federal Communications Commission and released this week.

The same station owner also received KWTF for a station in Arizona.

From Skokie, Ill., comes a sincere apology "to anyone that was offended," said Kevin Bae, vice president of KM Communications Inc., who requested and received KUNT and KWTF. It is "extremely embarrassing for me and my company and we will file to change those call letters immediately."

## Cyberspace

The vanguard of the labor movement, heralded in the *Los Angeles Times*:

A loosely formed coalition of left-leaning bloggers is trying to band together to form a labor union it hopes will help members receive health insurance, conduct collective bargaining, or even set professional standards.

"It would raise the professionalism," said Leslie Robinson, a writer at ColoradoConfidential.com. "Maybe we could get more jobs, bona fide jobs."

## Albion, Ind.

Ornithological note, from the website of Fox News:

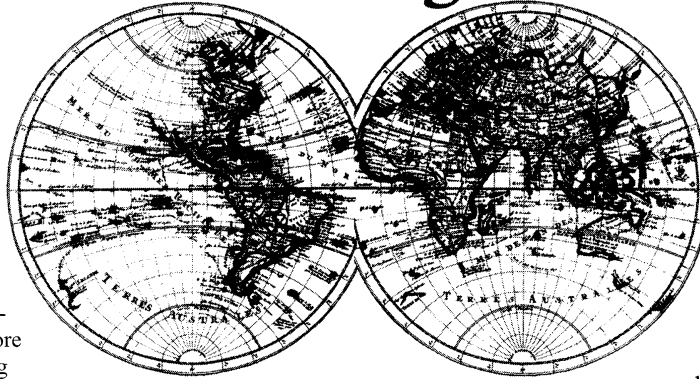
A volunteer construction worker pouring concrete outside a chimpanzee enclosure at Black Pine Animal Park began cussing after the chimp threw some feces at him.

The commotion caught the attention of Peaches, an 8-year-old Moluccan cockatoo, who then strayed from her normal vocabulary of "Hi, Peaches" and "Hi, pretty girl," reverting to a few of her old favorites from years she spent as a house pet.

"Go away, shut up, shut your blankety-blank mouth," senior zookeeper Jessica Price said. "She says a lot of very bad words."

It is difficult to get birds to stop using words they have learned, she said.

# Terra Incognita



## Chongqing, China

Advancement in sanitary engineering, chronicled in *USA Today*:

They're flush with pride in a southwestern Chinese city where a recently opened porcelain palace features an Egyptian facade, soothing music and more than 1,000 toilets spread out over 32,290 square feet.

"We are spreading toilet culture. People can listen to gentle music and watch TV," said Lu Xiaoping, an official with the Yangrenjie, or "Foreigners Street," tourist area where the bathroom is located.

"After they use the bathroom they will be very, very happy."

## Long Beach, Calif.

The Precautionary Principle vindicated, in a dispatch from the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*:

A suspicious item was discovered in a checked bag by federal Transportation Security Administration workers at Long Beach Airport.

"It is basically a handheld game board that a passenger packed," agency spokeswoman Jennifer Peppin told Fox News Channel.

"It certainly was nothing but it certainly looked like something. It had all the wires and components that you would see in an explosive device," Peppin said.

The adult passenger was being interviewed, she said. Firefighters, police and a bomb squad were called to the airport, about 25 miles south of downtown Los Angeles.

## Lansing, Mich.

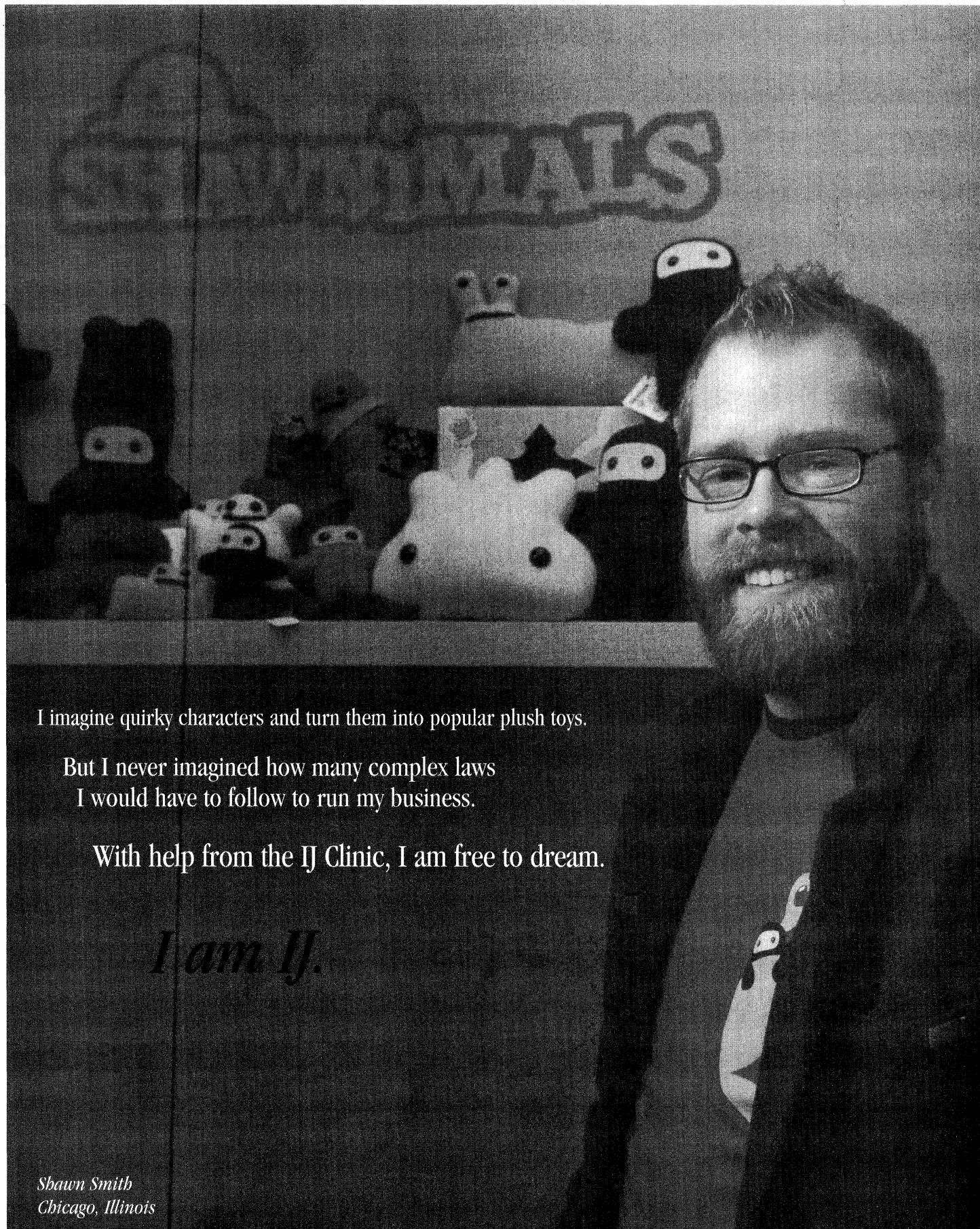
Potential impropriety in the use of equipment, from the *Lansing State Journal*:

A state forensics scientist who said she tested her husband's underwear for DNA to find out if he was having sex with another woman is being investigated to determine if she violated state policies against using state equipment for personal reasons.

Ann Chamberlain-Gordon of Okemos testified in a divorce hearing that she ran the test on the underwear of Charles Gordon Jr. Asked by his attorney what she found, she answered, "Another female. It wasn't me."

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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).)



I imagine quirky characters and turn them into popular plush toys.

But I never imagined how many complex laws  
I would have to follow to run my business.

With help from the IJ Clinic, I am free to dream.

*I am IJ.*

*Shawn Smith  
Chicago, Illinois*

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