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Liberty

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Inside Liberty

July 2009
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4 Letters Throwing out the first pitch.

7 Reflections We sashay down the aisle, scare ourselves to death, hold your tongue, play the lottery, ration health care, raise the Jolly Roger, change the course of history, take our ball and go home, dress to the nines, fully expose government schools, full-frontally expose students, and ponder a Freudian slip.

Features

23 The Start of Something Big? *Bruce Ramsey* reports on an old American custom — exorcising taxes.

27 Street Fighting Man We live in interesting times. As he explores the state of the world today and tomorrow, *Doug Casey* explains why that is not *necessarily* a curse.

35 Tombstones and International Trade What could be better than a glorious day by the sea? Free trade, answers *Jacques Delacroix*.

37 The Books of Summer The editors and contributors of *Liberty* offer their suggestions. Amazingly, there's no consensus.

Reviews

47 Slapping the Driveway Is journalism a dying profession? *Jo Ann Skousen* considers the cinematic evidence.

48 Chords and Discords Here is a film, *Jo Ann Skousen* says, that aims at the Academy Award — but nevertheless has something to say.

50 December Song *Jo Ann Skousen* enjoys a film demonstrating that age is what you make of it.

51 Overload Strangely, says *Todd Skousen*, there's a difference between being shocked and being entertained.

52 Booknotes Black-ops, psychics, secrets, and goats.

49 Notes on Contributors Those who know, write.

54 Terra Incognita The cliffs of insanity.

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Letters

Charity Begins at Home

Charles Barr hits the nail on the head by instancing the libertarian ethic "no one has a moral obligation to come to the aid of the [injured and orphaned] child" as a perceived reprehensible quality of libertarian thought ("Freedom vs. Fairness," April). I have considered myself a libertarian since 1972, when I voted for John Hospers, yet I too find this statement reprehensible, and I would shun any politics coming from those who express it. That others would also is no mystery.

Had the statement been limited to "no one has a *legal* obligation," it would seem much less objectionable, and that would be the way I would introduce the subject to a nonlibertarian. But that limitation would artfully cover over the regrettable fact that many libertarians adhere to Barr's version of the statement. How many of us movement old-timers have encountered the sort of libertarian for whom the end justifies the means, or who callously takes the principle of *caveat emptor* as license to cheat someone? They are walking evidence of libertarianism's moral emptiness.

We should be mature enough to understand that a society must develop bonds among its members if it is not to disintegrate into an anarchic, Hobbesian "war of all men against all men." The market does not solve this problem, for the nature of trade is that economic relationships are commodities and conveniences, such that we must resort to law to forbid trade based on theft or slavery. It comes down to these alternatives: either a society is constrained by coercion, or it is drawn together by sympathy and benevolence.

I therefore thank Barr for prompting the insight that the proper complement of libertarianism is Christianity, with its emphasis on the ethic of the Good Samaritan (and its explicit concern for the wellbeing of orphans and widows). There is no problem taking care of the injured orphan; we will do so as private individuals, out of our personal responsibility. This allows us to frame our answers to social questions into those that involve the government (enforcement of law based on man's rights) and those that involve individual conscience and responsibility (charity and public service). The corollary of Matthew 22:21 ("Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.") is that we have a moral duty to refuse the intrusion of Caesar into those aspects of life that demand our personal attention.

Not only would this be more acceptable to nonlibertarians, by dispelling their moral hesitancy about us, I believe it would also be more acceptable to libertarians, in that it allows us to stand forward as volunteers, offering deeds rather than airy evasions on the theme of "the market will solve it somehow."

Michael J. Dunn
Federal Way, WA

Barr replies: I don't believe that libertarianism is necessarily compatible (or incompatible) with Christianity — there are Christians and non-Christians

Letters to the editor

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across all points of the political spectrum. Nor do I think that a neat division between the realms of proper government action on one hand, and private charity on the other, resolves the dilemma of what to do for an innocent victim of circumstances, when private charitable resources are unavailable or inadequate.

I don't believe that libertarianism suffers from "moral emptiness." Rather, the problem is that the noninitiation-of-force principle, applied mechanically and without regard to context, leads to advocacy of policies that often conflict with the average voter's sense of fairness. This severely limits the effectiveness of libertarian outreach.

Most voters value both freedom and fairness, but value fairness more. We need to address both of these issues if we are to inspire more people to join our cause.

View From the Front

Jon Harrison provided a good assessment of the future perils Iraq faces ("Iraq: Now and In the Future," May), but as a U.S. Army Intelligence Officer who lived in Baghdad and Diyala Province in 2006 and 2007 I take exception to some of his conclusions regarding how peace was achieved.

It's true that the Anbar Awakening, ceasefire by Sadr, and reduction in sectarian violence were key events that led to an overall reduction in violence, but Harrison's assertion that U.S. forces played a "relatively small" part in the stabilization is grossly false.

It's true that the Anbar Awakening was initiated without much U.S. involvement when one particular Sunni Tribe decided to stand up to al Qaeda. This initial resistance to al Qaeda was recognized by American commanders on the ground, encouraged, developed, and formalized into what became nearly 100,000 local, friendly militia (who weren't all Sunni, by the way). Without the backing of U.S. combat power, who condoned and encouraged these groups to walk the streets armed, the original uprising likely would not have spread. In Diyala specifically, local friendly militia were not recruited and employed until the U.S. Army had first secured their neighborhoods. Additionally, without constant U.S. backing and firepower, these groups would have been eliminated either by al Qaeda, or by Iraqi security forces who for the most part did not endorse their activities.

Regarding Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, Jaysh al Mehdi (JAM), we were not treating them "gingerly." While Sadr's exact motivations may never be known, I can assure you that the senior

From the Editor

"Of making many books," wrote King Solomon in one of his own books, "there is no end." He added, "And much study is a weariness of the flesh."

Yes, I suppose so. But imagine how awful it would be if you were at home, getting ready to fly to Chicago . . . you picked up your bag . . . you made sure that the windows were closed . . . you looked around . . . and you discovered that you had no book that you wanted to take with you. Imagine finding out that *you'd read all the good books*!

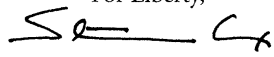
No science fiction movie has ever equaled the horror of that event.

Fortunately, as both Solomon and the authors of this issue's "Summer Books" feature testify, the end of books is much less likely than an invasion from Mars. Come to think of it, H.G. Wells wrote a pretty good book about *that* . . .

More likely to happen, some people say, is the end of intelligent commentary about political and economic affairs. According to some, we are on the brink of a world in which we do nothing but hunch over our computers while weird, implausible things — swine flu, American Idols, economic promises and projections — whiz across the screen, never to be comprehended or witnessed again.

But I don't think so. I don't think there will be an end of intelligent comment, any more than there will be an end of good books. There won't be an end of those things around here, anyway.

For Liberty,



Stephen Cox

leaders of JAM (Sadr himself excluded) were being targeted relentlessly by coalition forces, and that during the first six months of 2007 significant numbers of JAM brigade and battalion commanders were captured, as well as key leaders in JAM Special Groups who were responsible for sectarian death squads and other nefarious acts. It is quite possible that this effective targeting by coalition forces is exactly what led Sadr to cry uncle.

Your view of what reduced most of the sectarian violence is perhaps most troubling. The violence did not simply "run its course." The statement that "nothing done by Petraeus hastened its end" is completely false. Coalition forces drastically reduced sectarian violence in many ways, among them the effective targeting of al Qaeda's car-bomb network in Baghdad, from which much of the violence emerged. The surge also enabled U.S. forces to deploy more troops to small combat outposts and live among the people. This action improved security, built trust, and increased reliable intelligence collection. Thirdly, tribal reconciliation became a major component of our strategy. In Diyala province we saw a direct and immediate correlation between reconciliation and a reduction in sectarian violence.

All of the points I'm making above were enabled to a greater effect because of the surge. Without the surge, the violence would have continued to escalate, and the U.S. mission would still be viewed as a failure.

Maj. Scott Pettigrew
Sierra Vista, AZ

Harrison responds: It's great to see a letter come in from someone like Maj. Pettigrew. I do take issue with some of the major's points.

It's true that the U.S. military backed the Sons of Iraq (the movement that began with the Anbar Awakening). But we did not create that movement. Additionally, neither the major nor anyone else can say that but for the surge the Awakening would have been nipped in the bud by al Qaeda. Concerning Diyala Province specifically, the major may be right, but in Anbar Province, for example, the Sunnis rose spontaneously against al Qaeda, and were well on the way to defeating it before we came to their aid. U.S. military intelligence had in fact written off Anbar at the very moment the Awakening was beginning. As for the possibility that the Iraqi security forces could have suppressed the Awakening groups, I don't know of a soul who believes that. The Iraqi forces simply lacked the ability to do it.

There is no evidence that Moktada al-Sadr "cried uncle" because we were arresting his people. It's generally believed that he stood down in August 2007 either because the Sadrists were fighting amongst themselves or because Iran told him to do so (perhaps it was both). During the period from February to August 2007, U.S. and Iraqi forces did indeed treat al-Sadr gingerly. At that time we were focusing primarily on al Qaeda and other Sunni extremist groups. After August 2007, we arrested hundreds of Mahdi Army leaders, who surprisingly offered little resistance. No one knows why Sadr and his followers acted in this way. But more than a year into the surge, in March 2008, Sadr's forces were still strong enough to rout Iraqi government troops in Basra. The government's subsequent successes in Basra and Sadr City (April–May 2008) were won in large part because U.S. and British forces strongly backed those enterprises. But even then the Sadrists avoided a real showdown. The Mahdi Army remains a force in being, very much in the background at this time, but capable of reemerging after U.S. forces depart.

My article states the following: "The Iraqi civil war that began [in Feb. 2006] ran its course over about 18 months. Nothing done by Petraeus hastened its end or moderated its effects." If I could rewrite that now, I would drop the words "or moderated it effects." Without question, Petraeus' tactics did much to reduce the bombings and other violence that were plaguing Iraq's cities, especially Baghdad. I have said so on other occasions, including in this journal. When I wrote that sentence I was thinking more about sectarian cleansing, which began in earnest in 2006, and was largely completed by the time the surge began. The surge forces did not prevent its last stages from being carried out. Be that as it may, I clearly made an overstatement — one that I should have caught. I alone am to blame for not doing so.

The analyst at a distance, assuming he's any good at all, gathers all the information he can find from every reliable source available to him, weighs it, and then offers his judgment. True, he lacks the immediate experience of the man on the ground. The man on the ground, however, must guard against parochialism. Both must guard against groupthink. Examining what we know as objectively as I can, I must reject most of Maj. Pettigrew's arguments. There seems every reason to believe that Shiite and Sunni extremists (including even al Qaeda), while hurt by the surge, have lived to fight another day, and that this will become ever-clearer as U.S. forces leave Iraq.

Tabula Rasa

Jim Walsh describes Obama ("The Hollow Man," May) as a blank slate on whom everyone projects his own idea of what he represents. He then proves the point by asserting that Obama isn't a radical Marxist, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Perhaps Mr. Walsh could present some evidence in support of Obama's "moderation"?

Walsh also excuses Obama's long association with the contemptible Jeremiah Wright on the basis of political expediency. This judgment is based on what? The simplest explanation for Obama listening to and socializing with Wright for so many years is that he agrees with him.

Finally, Walsh writes that by all accounts Obama is a decent fellow who means well. Mr. Walsh, people who wish to treat me and my family as livestock are not decent and they don't mean well. They are evil. One would expect people who write articles in a magazine named Liberty would understand that.

Ray Wrisley
Bucyrus, KS

Walsh responds: The purpose of my piece was to give readers good arguments to make against Obama's starry-eyed worshippers; using excited rhetorical bits like "radical Marxist" and "evil," Mr. Wrisley plays into the hands of those basically emotional people. We who disagree with the president's political philosophy and approach to governing (neither of which I've ever connected to "moderation") need to state our criticisms in a calmer tone.

continued on page 53

Reflections

Truth or dare — I listen to the Sunday talk shows and I never hear the journalists who interview major political figures ask either of two simple questions.

They never ask, concerning matters of fact: "Would you be willing to say that under oath?"

They never ask, concerning matters of opinion, "How much of your own money would you be willing to bet on that?"

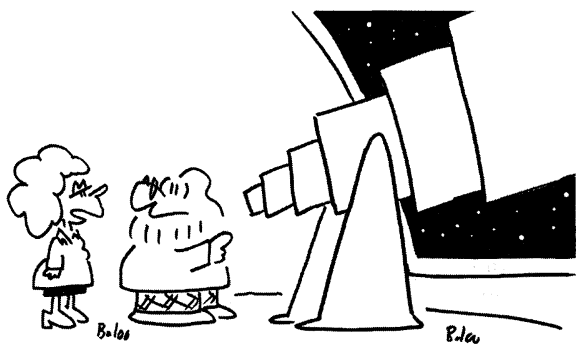
I think these two simple questions, once asked, would quickly provide the American public with more insight into the political process, as the public would then observe that no one would remain willing to be interviewed on Sunday morning. — Ross Levatter

Here comes the tide — Liberal Vermont has just legalized gay marriage through a vote of the legislature — the first time this has been done by a vote of elected representatives rather than a state supreme court. This is a leading cultural indicator — a much more important event than the narrow rejection of gay marriage by the voters of California.

Same-sex marriage may take a while to get to your state, but it is inevitable. What made it so was mainly that gays stood up and asked for it, demanding cultural inclusion using language that had been sanctified by the civil-rights movement. Further, once they adopted children and the kids didn't all turn out gay, adoption was going to be okay with the straight majority. With childrearing comes marriage, which is an institution designed to protect children and the spouse who looks after the children. And with childrearing and marriage comes acceptance.

It doesn't all happen at once, but once it gets going I don't see what stops it. Old people may not change their thinking about it, but the younger generation will. And in the long run, that is all that matters.

— Bruce Ramsey



"I doubt if Jupiter is really three weeks ahead of schedule — try cleaning your glasses."

Now fear this — The cycle of hype-to-panic-to-retrenchment that followed the recent outbreak of swine flu was entirely predictable. Same with hurricanes, same with terrorism, same with shark attacks. The mainstream media work hand-in-glove with statist bureaucrats to cultivate these neurotic episodes. Power accretes to the state when people are frightened, so the state nurtures fear. Eventually, people become desensitized to the panic; but, in the meantime, Leviathan grows.

A pox on the merchants of fear. — Jim Walsh

Self abuse — Wise men, from the first millennia suburbs of Athens to today's Ph.D.s in linguistics at MIT, have long observed that if a problem, social or otherwise, is to be solved, it must be stated accurately. This is an observation shared by many of us, wise or unwise, who simply seek the truth. "Going out" is not enough of an elucidation of my son's nocturnal activities to support a meaningful discussion. More words, more data are needed to obtain the blessings of him who pays the note on the family car and is, as yet, responsible for the behavior of this son.

It is particularly dangerous to use empty or misleading words today, the era of legislative explosion, since we favor words for their social innocence and gentility. But sharpness of definition is always required; especially for social and legislative purposes. Take "drug abuse," "substance abuse," and "alcohol abuse."

What deceptive, inaccurate phrases! We don't punish the drug; we punish ourselves.

"Abuse" means to mistreat. We don't mistreat drugs or alcohol. Literally the word might mean that we punish a fine imported beer by pouring it into the gutter. "Take that, you devil." But that's not usually what we mean. Notice how differently we use the term "spouse abuse." There, in fact, the first term in the phrase is what's mistreated.

Drug abuse is mistreatment of our own bodies, which belong to us. We have a right to do with our bodies as we will. But my point is not our freedom to do so; it's the grammatical clumsiness of the term and the false and thorny paths of thought it leads to.

The real statement of the problem, the statement that our culture shies away from, is that drugs, smokes, and alcohol are pleasurable, and many people are willing to buy present pleasure with future pain. That we don't say. — Ted Roberts

Fiat lux — Isn't it amusing that the suitor forced on Chrysler, which the auto company expected to rescue it from bankruptcy, has a name in English — Fiat — that means an authoritative and arbitrary command? — Tim Slagle

Outspoken — When I first joined the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, I was puzzled by my fellow reformers' positions on free speech at universities.

On the one hand, FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) aggressively defends students' rights to free speech and goes to court if necessary to protect them against

restrictive codes. On the other hand, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) chastises faculty members for expressing too much freedom of speech by letting their personal political opinions intrude into the classroom.

These actions both involve "academic freedom" — a term of some uncertainty. I wondered, "Should I be against it or for it?"

Thanks to a paper that the Pope Center commissioned from Donald Downs, a professor of political science, law, and journalism at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, I now have a better understanding. It turns out that, based on tradition, contracts, and legal decisions, lots of people have academic freedom — students, faculty, faculty departments, and institutions themselves (i.e. administrators).

These claims to freedom are sometimes at odds with one another, which keeps the courts busy. In the United States, legal precedents suggest that academic institutions (and sometimes departments) can set standards that individuals must adhere to. Otherwise, however, individual faculty members can largely teach what they please. And students are free to say what they want (courts have turned down most student speech codes, but schools keep enforcing them).

Another point I learned is that an individual's academic freedom is both stronger and weaker than the normal freedom of speech guaranteed by the first amendment. It's stronger primarily because of tenure. Tenured faculty can say what they want without losing their jobs; non-tenured faculty have less protection in practice, but in theory they too are protected under academic freedom.

Academic free-speech rights are weaker than the typical American's rights, however, because they must be balanced by academic responsibility. As an individual, I can say that the world is flat; a geologist would be flouting his or her academic responsibilities to say the same thing.

For me, there's still an unanswered question. Why do people in ivory towers have these special rights, anyway? Downs writes, "Liberal democracies protect academic freedom on the grounds that the open pursuit of knowledge and truth provides substantial benefits to society." That's a little squishy to me; my guess is that the cause is a historical development that reflects the power of elites at specific times in history. But if you have academic freedom, use it. We need all the freedom we can get.

— Jane S. Shaw

The incompetent parent principle — One of the major arguments given against educational vouchers by opponents of school choice is that parents — meaning poor, inner-city parents — are intellectually unequipped to choose schools for their children, if they are allowed to do so. No, these parents (unlike affluent parents and school administrators) are just too stupid to choose good schools. So it is better to keep their kids in the existing, bad schools.

Those of us who support vouchers have always found that argument specious on the face of it. To begin with, the people who say parents are not competent to choose their children's schools have no problem with those same parents choosing

Word Watch

by Stephen Cox

There are two types of communication: those intended to inform, and those intended to deceive.

Neither needs to be put into written form. Just as honesty may express itself in an open countenance and a candid glance, so dishonesty can present itself in gestures and grimaces. Politicians are good at pounding the table about issues they have no intention of doing anything about, and smiling beneficently on people whose throats they are about to cut. When Speaker Pelosi rambles on and on, describing the perilous state of the economy, she usually wears an enormous smile. She wears the same smile when she's announcing some draconian action against her political opponents. To some people, the smile looks like the crinkles of a kindly grandma. To others, it looks like the smile of a grandma who can't resist informing you that you are a miserable little piece of crap. And to others, it looks like a grinning skull.

No matter: the facial contortions are intended to deceive. This lady always claims to be in a good mood, but her moods are no different from those of her counterpart, Majority Leader Reid, who seldom bothers to disguise his emotions. It's always the good mood that Judge Hathorne was in, just before he pronounced sentence. Hathorne was the only one of the judges at Salem who never regretted what he'd done.

And yes: I'd say the same thing about Dick Cheney, and his own strange facial expressions. This is not a partisan column. My aim is to imitate President Obama, who promised that he would labor day and night, with all his might, with malice toward none and charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gave him to see the right, to bind up the wounds of America's partisan strife. Following his lead, I will blame Republican smarm, wherever I see it, as well as Democratic smarm.

It must be admitted, of course, that the president has not *actually*, and *in point of fact* (to use two of his favorite locutions), administered the healing touch. The congressional vote of April 29 demonstrated how far he is from binding any wounds. Not a single Republican voted for his $3.4 trillion spending plan. Well, good for them. But there was as little attempt at *healing* in that legislative process as there was at saving money. The president was not about to work with the loyal opposition. And no one in the mainstream media paid the least attention to whether he had. The promise of healing was enough, despite the fact that Obama's polls simultaneously indicated that he is an even more "polarizing" figure than his ill-fated predecessor. Think of that.

But to continue. It's curious that people's deceit-detection devices typically function very well in the private sphere but not at all in the public one.

I'm sure that during your lifetime you've received many a private message that made your heart leap up, and even dance among the daffodils, only to discover, on a second reading, that all was false and hollow within.

Remember when your first love said, "I just wish we could be

their children's doctors, or (for that matter) choosing elected representatives who oppose vouchers — as, ironically, many inner-city parents do.

But there is a limit to the persuasive power of mere argumentation. Observational data are always of welcome use. The fall edition of the Cato Journal has a nice article on this very issue: "Parental Valuation of Charter Schools and Student Performance," by James VanderHoff.

VanderHoff, an economics professor at Rutgers University, consulted New Jersey's fairly extensive data on charter schools. In particular, he was able to look at waiting lists for these schools. This allowed him a measure of control in analyzing the data. Different charter schools have different educational missions, but looking at the length of the waiting lists allows us — as will be shown — to assess the degree to which an academic focus (as opposed to, say, a focus on sports, or the newness of the schools' facilities) attracts parental interest. Remember, charter schools cannot charge tuition or use academic entrance exam scores to select for admission. Instead, they use a random lottery admissions process when the number of students desiring admission exceeds the available slots.

In New Jersey, the average waiting list for the 42 charter schools is 184 students, and the average number of openings is 40. Thus, a survey restricted to parents of students now in a charter school will leave out of the data set 80% of the relevant pool (on average). Moreover, some schools have longer waiting lists than others, so weighting schools equally is apt to overlook crucial determinants.

So VanderHoff looked at the size of the waiting list compared to a variety of other factors, including such variables as: the test scores at a school at a given time; the test scores of the grade equivalent students at regular public schools in that district at that time; the race and economic status of the students; and other school characteristics (class size, teachers' salaries, student-teacher ratios, instructional time, and so on).

Given the great diversity of schools in New Jersey, the state's long history of comparatively free school choice (i.e., limited, but larger than that of most other states), and the fact that it is one of the few states that keep waiting list figures, it is a good data source to use for this kind of analysis.

The result of his statistical analysis of the data is clear. The primary factor in what makes parents want to send their children to a school is that school's academic success and its endorsement of academics. Indeed, a 10% increase in a charter school's test scores causes the number of students on the waiting list to rise over 60%. And schools that push academics in their mission statements had a 75% increase in the number of students on the waiting list, all other factors held constant. Those other factors had either a small or a statistically insignificant impact on the size of waiting lists.

The results support the idea that parents are indeed both desirous of seeing their kids succeed academically and able to figure out which schools will focus on academics. The parents are *not* incompetent, despite the slanders of the teachers' unions.

— Gary Jason

as close as this forever"? Meaning: I am through with you.

Remember when your boss said, "We all appreciate your work, and look forward to many opportunities of collaboration in the future"? Meaning: You're fired.

Remember when you submitted that project proposal, the one that took you weeks to write, the one on which your entire career seemed to depend, and the recipient replied, "We are delighted to have the opportunity of reviewing your work. We will get back to you as soon as possible." Meaning: You will never hear from us again.

With experience, most people learn to interpret such deceptive remarks correctly. But the core audience for public, political remarks is incapable of learning from anything it has ever experienced. Its mental age is always that of the befuddled 17-year-old, or the gullible spouse of a hopeless alcoholic.

Millions of our fellow citizens think that it *means* something when a city councilman promises to *review* the tax code.

Millions of our fellow citizens think that it *means* something when a Republican candidate promises to *clean up the immigration mess*, *restore public decency*, and *bring fiscal integrity to our government.*

Millions of our fellow citizens think that it *means* something when a Democratic candidate promises to *provide state of the art healthcare to all Americans*, *ensure that all children receive a first-class education*, and *end poverty in America.*

On May 19, millions of California taxpayers went to the polls and voted to keep taxes at historic highs, because they accepted the following argument, as presented in their voter pamphlets:

"We have to take action now to start reforming our broken budget system. We're all frustrated . . . Year after year, politicians deliver late budgets that harm our schools, healthcare systems, police and fire services and more. The perpetual budget problems also hurt taxpayers as we see our taxes raised or services cut because of the legislature's failure to budget responsibly."

And so on and so forth. It will not surprise you to learn that this promise of reform was initiated by the very *politicians*, the very *legislature* that it so furiously claimed to oppose. The ballot proposals at issue were written for the purpose of ensuring that tax raises enacted to cover the legislature's enormous deficits would be cemented into law by the voters of the state.

It's 5 a.m., and your husband still hasn't come back from the bar. Instead, he dispatches his drinking buddy to tell you that he's got this wonderful scheme. This wonderful, wonderful scheme. Oh yes. He will *actually* get a job, and he will *actually* stop spending *more* of your money than you give to him. All you have to do is give him some *more* of your money right now, so he can pay off the drug dealer who, he asserts, is currently holding him hostage. No, *really.* This time he *means* it

There are millions of people in America who would never believe this at 5 a.m. on a bleary Sunday morning, but they devoutly believe it at 10 a.m. on election day.

Incidentally, the TV campaign for the California fiscal propositions featured an ad in which an unstylish, thoughtful, thirtyish father-figure looks into the camera and reports that he just happens to have been "reading about" a way to keep politicians from overspending the budget, and he's so sold on this *way*, this series of propositions, that he's concluded that there are just two things he can do for his young son — "teach him to play ball, and vote for Propositions 1a–f." Oh, and also teach him to lie with a straight face.

Mr. Obama, tear that embargo down! — Back in 1980, as a response to the United States' continued appeal to Fidel Castro to tear down Cuba's sugar cane curtain, and to our uncritical welcome of any and all Cuban refugees, El Máximo Líder decided to call Jimmy Carter's hand. Castro opened Mariel Harbor and gave a get-out-of-jail-free card to anyone who could get there and get out. Between April and October of that year over 125,000 Cubans took up his offer.

Many who left were *encouraged* to go. In a Machiavellian attempt to teach the United States a lesson, Castro cleared his prisons and insane asylums. The lesson worked. Now, only refugees who actually touch U.S. soil are granted asylum.

But turnaround is fair play. Castro has repeatedly called for the United States to lift what he calls "the blockade." It's time to call his bluff. Now is the time for President Obama to lift the trade embargo unilaterally.

Imagine a reverse Mariel Boatlift, with thousands of tourists, hardcore capitalists, and Cuban-Americans inundating the island with curiosity, dollars, criticism, and subversion. It's Fidel's worst nightmare. That's probably why he said that Obama had misunderstood Raúl Castro's willingness to discuss any issue at the recent interchange of ideas. Still, as John Lennon said, "Imagine!" — Robert H. Miller

Dark clouds gathering? — April proved a bloody month in Iraq. Just as U.S. troops were closing up shop in the cities, violence spiked. Suicide and car bombings caused the civilian death rate to soar — over 300 died, most of them in spectacular attacks inside Baghdad.

The Sunnis are complaining that the Shiites are not granting them the status and share of resources that they were promised. Shiites are angry with the Maliki government for not suppressing Sunni violence. Voices have been raised in the Shiite community for the Mahdi Army of Moktada al-Sadr to take up arms again actively. Everyone, it seems, is angry with the Iraqi security forces, which appear to be rife with corruption and ineffective without handholding by American troops.

Meanwhile, the U.S. command is seeking to retain U.S. combat troops in Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city. It is also al Qaeda's last big urban stronghold and a bone of contention between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds.

It seems clear that al Qaeda and diehard Baathists are working to reignite the flames of sectarian warfare just as the United States is starting to stand down. If they succeed, will the Obama administration re-escalate U.S. military involvement? Unlikely. Will we then witness a return to the bad old days of 2006–2007? It may be too early to tell, but I keep see-

Meanwhile, California's governor was reported as "upbeat" about promises that the federal government would soon *fix* the world economy. Chatting with reporters, he "said the federal government played a role in precipitating the world recession and has a responsibility to help fix things." In other words, the kid who threw that stone through your window must necessarily have the skill to fix it.

Well, maybe Arnold Schwarzenegger is as silly as the woman who trusts her drunken spouse for the 92nd time. But I'm betting that he's not that silly. I'm betting that he was attempting to deceive the voters, at least long enough for the economy to kick in, on its own account, so the state can appear to balance its budget — for which he can then take credit.

But the same question can be asked about all purported do-gooders in official spheres: Are they trying to deceive us, or are they just dumber than everybody else, and believe their own sayings?

Here's a curious but regrettably typical illustration. It's provided by S.C., a loyal reader from the Volunteer State. It's a saying, or motto, that seems to be appended to all documents issued by a certain university in that state. This inspiring statement proclaims that the university is "an equal opportunity employer committed to the education of a non-racially identifiable student body."

Huh? you say. What could that mean? S.C. comments, "I could understand *diverse*, but *non-racially identifiable* defies the common sense and rational thought of most people who read that statement."

You're right, S.C., but unfortunately that may be exactly what it's intended to do.

Let's think about the various things it *might* mean. It might mean, "We practice affirmative action, with a vengeance." Or it might mean, "We are working toward a color-blind society in which affirmative action has no place." (What a radical idea!) Or it might mean, "We intend to put bags over our students' heads and issue them voice distorters, so that no one will be able to identify their race."

But probably, given the presence of that king of all weasel words, "committed," the statement means nothing at all.

I should mention that the words about race that grabbed S.C.'s attention appeared on the program of a concert of choral music. This elicits a further question: Why *there*, of all places? Very few things excite suspicion so much as seemingly unmotivated announcements. I mean, what if the orchestra conductor walked on stage, and before raising her baton (for in this case, the conductor was a woman, a person who had fortunately escaped any necessity of working toward a non-*gender* identifiable music program) she took a few moments to announce something apparently irrelevant to music. Suppose she simply announced that her husband was sitting in the audience. Imagine the inferences that would be drawn from that simple statement:

My husband is *sitting*, not lying drunk in the aisle.

Rumors of our divorce were premature.

Contrary to rumor, my husband isn't out stealing jewels, at least not tonight.

But the seemingly unmotivated announcement concerning race has clearly not aroused any suspicions, except those of Liberty's correspondent. Why not? Are people who frequent universities as sheeplike as they look? Or do they enjoy being told things that they're not supposed to understand?

For the general population, some of the most dependable occasions for words that obscure or deceive, or otherwise exploit the unwary, are crises, real or imagined. On April 27, Time's online news service used the tried and true method of getting one's audience to snap to attention: it communicated the words *could be*. "Concern," Time said, "that the world could be on the brink of the first influenza pandemic in more than 40 years escalated Sunday." Yes, and the world *could be* on the brink of yet another

ing visions of Beirut in the mid-1970s, which were the beginning of years of sectarian violence in Lebanon. Only when an outside power (Syria) occupied the country, did the violence stop.

Will we be occupying Iraq 10 to 15 years from now? Not likely. Will Iranian forces, in alliance with Iraq's Shiite majority, be the occupiers instead? It could happen, and if it does what will the United States have achieved through its efforts? Answer in a word: nothing. — Jon Harrison

Acid test — On April 10, I watched former Republican Congressman John Kasich guest-host "The O'Reilly Factor." He was interviewing Sunsara Taylor, a self-designated anti-war protester. The topic was left-wing supporters of Obama who are upset with the president for making claims on the campaign trail about pulling out of Iraq, then reneging once he was in office. Taylor wanted all American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to come home immediately. The following dialogue is, I think, instructive:

Kasich: "Look, take Afghanistan for a second. I have my concerns about what we're getting into — it sounds amazingly like Vietnam — but, Sunsara, over there they're taking young women, if they want to go to school, and they throw acid in their faces."

Taylor: "That's true."

Kasich: "So what do you do? You just let that go?"

So it seems that we now live in an America in which John Kasich — known as a budget cutter during his time in Congress, chief author of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 — now believes that during a recession, a time of massive new government spending, a time of deficits that dwarf anything he fought against in the 1990s, the United States must deploy troops to countries that he himself has concerns about becoming other Vietnams, not because any Americans are in danger but because domestic violence has been reported there.

— Ross Levatter

Californinsanity — A recent report on the L.A. Times blog (April 16) gives us additional insight into how stupid laws come about, and why California has such a lousy economy.

State Senator Leland Yee (D-San Francisco — God, need I say more?) took umbrage at the fact that the Ladies Professional Golf Association considered last year a proposal to bar competitors who did not speak fluent English, under the theory that giving speeches and interviews is important to the association's promotional work.

Granted, this seems like a silly proposal. Anybody with the patience to watch a golf tournament (which competes, for

bout of hysteria. It usually is. And it certainly was on April 27.

At the same time, government officials were doing what they could to demonstrate their own capacity for obscurantism. A Customs and Border Protection flack assured the public that U.S. border officials were "watching for signs of illness." But in case any visitors to America might become alarmed, he added that the officers were "just taking a second look at folks who may be displaying a symptom of illness." According to the AP summary of his remarks, he became even more explicit, specifying that "if a traveler says something about not feeling well, the person will be questioned about symptoms." This, I suppose, is the same procedure that the government uses to detect illegal immigrants. If somebody *says something* about how he's faking his documents and jumping the queue, why then he'll be questioned. Surely that's enough, isn't it?

But let's return to the idea of *commitment.*

I'm sorry to say that President Obama, like most recent presidents, has been an enormous fan of that concept. The idea, as Wordsworth expressed it, is that there is "something evermore about to be." It's a matter, as Wordsworth said, of *hope*, "hope that can never die." Virtually all Obama's speeches are about this *commitment to the future*, this audacious *hope.*

Let me quote a typical Obama utterance, one so typical that it didn't get onto the White House website (which is appropriately selective in offering the president's remarks in cold, hard type). It came from a speech about the East African pirates, a speech that took place on April 13, the day after U.S. forces liberated an American captain from the pirates' clutches. Now, *that* was a gesture you could believe in. But the president began in this way: "I want to be very clear."

Whenever you hear that Nixonian phrase, you can be pretty sure that someone is trying to mislead you. Otherwise, why would he insist on his own *clarity*? But the president went on: "We are resolved to halt the rise of piracy in that region." Interesting. But notice: having "resolved" to do something is not the same as doing it, or even promising to do it. (Do you remember *resolving* to lose 20 pounds?) "And to achieve that goal, we're going to have to continue to work with our partners to prevent future attacks." Same thing. I'll just *have to continue* exercising. And notice that special little ploy, so characteristic of the current president: we don't just have to *work*; we have to keep *working with our partners.* So if nothing happens, guess who's responsible?

He went further: "We have to continue to be prepared to confront them *the pirates, not the partners* when they arise, and we have to ensure that those who commit acts of piracy are held accountable for their crimes." There, again, is the idea that we're *continuing* something, although in this case, we're not and we couldn't be. We can't be prepared to confront all pirates, "when they arise." It's physically impossible. (Oh, are you objecting to my equation of *when* with *as soon as*? Fine. Then what does *when* mean? How far after the pirates *arise* does *when* kick in? How many months? How many years? How many lifetimes?) And there again are some words — "We have to be prepared . . . we have to ensure" — that seem like a promise to do something, and aren't.

Meanwhile, Obama's employee, Secretary of State Clinton, was generating other headlines. Here's her Associated Press headline for April 25: "Clinton: U.S. stands by Iraqis, withdrawal on track."

How many times a day do you thank God you're not an Iraqi? Either way — America goes; America stays — you guys lose. It's another brave commitment to the future: We'll stand right next to you — while we're taking the first train out.

Of course, you might ask whom she most wants to deceive — the people who want us to stay, or the people who want us to leave? But probably even she doesn't know. It's the nature of deception finally to deceive itself.

excitement, with watching a postal clerk sullenly performing his work or a glacier moving majestically down a mountain) surely has the patience to wait for the translation of some golfer from (say) Thailand explaining her views of the game: "Yes, even as a child, I understood the importance of knocking the little white ball in the direction of one of those little holes in the ground."

But the LPGA abandoned the proposal, and anyway, it is a small organization. There is no evidence such policies as the one that was proposed are widespread in business. And for obvious reasons: why the hell would any self-interested business owner turn away paying customers, even if he or she gave a rat's rear about properly enunciated English?

Yet this aborted case, together with his putative recollection of an instance in his childhood in which his uncle was "mistreated" because he couldn't speak proper English, was enough to prompt Senator Yee to introduce a law prohibiting any business in California from discriminating on the basis of language — a gloriously vague enactment that would be open to endless interpretation.

Naturally, the state Senate (voting along party lines, with the Democrats supporting the bill) passed this proposal. The Assembly will vote on it next, and no doubt pass it. Our governor will then probably sign it. He is himself a victim of language discrimination, having been forced in his movies to speak English in a stilted if not endearing way.

As the Republicans noted, the law, if enacted, will open yet another floodgate of lawsuits in a state inundated with them already. Need I remind everyone that some of the largest contributors to the Democratic Party are the trial lawyers?

So it is that an airhead legislator, seeing a major social problem where none had been shown to exist, will enable lawyers to make money by suing the hell out of businesses. I mean, if some drunk tries to harass one of my employees, but does it in less than fluent English, and I refuse service to him, why, I can guess that the next day his lawyer will file a discrimination lawsuit against me on behalf of the psychically wounded and linguistically challenged customer, hoping to steal every business asset I have ever acquired. Of course, if I don't refuse service to the customer, the selfsame parasitic lawyer will sue me on behalf of my employee, for failure to correct a hostile work environment. A great deal for the trial lawyers, indeed!

The result will be fewer businesses, and thus even higher unemployment, in a state where the unemployment rate recently passed the 11% mark, together with higher prices charged by businesses that decide to remain. Thanks to a silly legislator with too much time and power on his hands, the state's business climate will get even worse than it is right now. — Gary Jason

Free car care for all — In one fell swoop, President Obama made the federal government the new owner of General Motors. So rather than allowing the company to reorganize on the other side of bankruptcy, the auto company is now the property of the U.S. government. I hope other companies in line for a handout have seen what happens when you beg from people with shadowy intentions. When the Godfather does a favor for you, you are indebted to the organization forever.

Now Washington will finally have the opportunity to try its hand at running an auto company. They've been pretty content to armchair quarterback for years, but now they will be on the field calling plays.

Most threatened by the recent moves is Ford who will now have a monopoly on the consumer-driven auto market, and will be able to produce the cars people want, rather than those that the government thinks you should have. Woe to them who threaten to profit from customer satisfaction.

As for the new American Motors, imagine all the efficiency of the post office, with the speed of Amtrak. Destination: breakdown. But never fear, President Obama assures us those warranties will be backed up with the full faith and credit of the U.S. government. How about that — we now have the very first universal health-care system for cars. — Tim Slagle

Capitalist tools — I started reading Forbes magazine in college. It was a good break from the more esoteric stuff that I spent most of my time studying. Malcolm Forbes ran the magazine then and gave the serious financial coverage a patina of libertine joy. (You might remember that he called his private jet "Capitalist Tool.") I wouldn't have guessed, then, that my life would follow a path closer to how I spent those breaks than to the rhetorical analysis of Seneca's plays that occupied most of my waking hours.

I've kept reading financial publications since. Even worked on a couple. This explains, in part, how I came to be a subscriber — evidently, one of the few — to Conde Nast's short-lived business magazine, Portfolio.

This disaster (said to have incinerated $100 million of its parent company's development money) was launched at the beginning of a severe recession by a publishing company best known for fluffy fashion magazines. Still, I read each issue; they started out quirky and quickly turned bizarre. The cover of the final one featured the careerist mendicant Timothy Geithner staring nervously back at the reader. The cover copy — reflecting some thematic twaddle about "leadership" — implored "Lead Us. Please"; the would-be leader looked, as he often does, like he was about to cry.

Portfolio had many problems. The most fundamental was that it was a business magazine directed at bureaucratic middle-level managers. The people who look for leadership from Treasury Secretaries aren't the kind of people that business-magazine advertisers pay to reach.

But even Forbes has lost some of its brightness in these perplexing times. One recent issue included a column by Robert H. Frank (an econ prof at Cornell and, dubiously, a regurgitater of conventional wisdom for The New York Times). Frank examined the tax preferences of these strange animals, "libertarians," for Forbes readers. His sociological tone might work with impressionable undergraduates and the peasants who read the Times; but Forbes readership likely contains many people who know what the term "classical liberal" means. They probably don't like being condescended to by some guy who doesn't even teach at Yale or Harvard.

And Frank's analysis didn't match the pretentious photo portrait that accompanied his words. He called John Stuart Mill "Libertarianism's patron saint." Er, no, Herr Doktor. Even if we limit consideration to dead British guys, I can think of two (Adam Smith and John Locke) who come closer

to patron sainthood. The rest of the column was some elementary stuff about consumption taxes being less bad than other taxes. Yeah, okay, so what? It must have been a slow week in Ithaca when they hired this guy.

The fact that journalists of this kind are trying to figure out libertarianism is a hopeful sign about the direction of conventional wisdom on economic policy. But I sort of miss Malcolm Forbes' reign at his family's magazine. — Jim Walsh

Goose and gander redux — Part of Obama's stimulus package is to fund $1.1 billion for comparative-effectiveness research on medical treatments, to determine "best practices" in health care.

This is a very useful concept. Who wouldn't want to get the best care possible for the money spent? This will be touted as one of the benefits of further government control over medicine.

The only problem is that this is what private health insurers have been doing for decades, only they haven't exactly received accolades for their efforts. They have the statistics from millions of cases to show what is most effective, and cost-effective as well, and use them every day in deciding what care to insure.

When the insurance companies do this, we hear complaints that they are depriving people of care because "clerks" decide to disallow certain practices for reimbursement on the basis that they are not best practices. And then those complaints are used to demand government control of health insurance and care.

So Obama could get his comparative-effectiveness research much more cheaply by just asking the insurers, and save that billion. The questions I have are these: Why is this such a bad thing when private insurers do it, but good when the government does it? When the government, instead of private insurers, starts "rationing" health care, will the socialists still be so happy about government control of health care?

— John Kannarr

Granola works — My former hometown of Portland, Oregon, is proud of its international reputation for sustainability and land-use and transportation planning. But lately the city government has descended to the level of a sitcom.

Episode 1 — The Election: In the wake of a scandal in which a former mayor (and covert leader of the city's light-rail mafia) admitted statutorily raping a 14-year-old girl when he was mayor, voters elect city commissioner Samuel Adams to the mayor's office. Adams becomes the first openly gay mayor of a large American city despite rumors — which he vociferously denies — that he had had an affair with an intern in a legislative office.

Episode 2 — The Confession: Three weeks after being sworn in, Adams admits to reporters that he did have an affair with the intern — though he claims he and the boy did nothing more than make out in the city hall bathroom until the kid turned 18 (and Adams was 42). Portland voters begin counting the days until they can recall him, which Oregon law allows them to do after he has been in office for six months. Meanwhile, clothing merchant fortunes are boosted by sales of T-shirts advertising Portland as a city where "you only have to be 18 to enjoy a Sam Adams."

Episode 3 — The Stadium: In a bizarre effort to save himself, Adams starts transferring as much public money as he can to potential campaign contributors while he has a chance. First, he signs an agreement with the owner of a soccer team — who happens to be the son of former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson — to spend $65 million in public money converting a baseball stadium into a soccer stadium. The city still owes nearly $30 million on the last remodel of that stadium in a failed attempt to attract a major-league baseball team.

Episode 4 — The Hotel: The mayor wants to spend $300 million of public money building a hotel next to the city's failed convention center. Back in the 1990s, when the convention center was half empty, the city argued that it needed to double the center's size to attract really large conventions. Despite voter rejection of the plan, the city carried it out, so now the place is three-quarters empty. Despite the fact that other Portland hotels, including at least one built with millions of dollars of public subsidies, are already suffering high vacancy rates, Adams says that another hotel is needed to help fill the convention center.

Episode 5 — The Sign: Mayor Adams' allies on the city council, Randy Leonard and Nick Fish, have a hissy fit when the University of Oregon buys a downtown building and announces plans to change the sign on top of the building to read — what else? — "University of Oregon." In the midst of a deep recession, Leonard and Fish propose to exercise eminent domain and spend half a million dollars buying the "historic sign." Historically, the sign has always had the name of the building's occupant, first "White Satin Sugar" and later "White Stag Sportswear." But Portland newcomers only remember the current sign, which reads "Made in Oregon" after a local chain-store. The debate is settled when the University agrees to change the sign to read just "Oregon."

Episode 6 — The Bridge: Portland's Sellwood Bridge, the busiest two-lane bridge in Oregon, is falling down; it has a sufficiency rating of 2 out of 100, and any bridge scoring less than 50 is recommended for replacement. When Mayor Adams decided to spend the city's share of federal stimulus money on a new streetcar line instead, the commission chair of Multnomah County, which owns the bridge, asked the mayor to help get funding to replace it. The mayor replied that he would support replacement only if the county commission supported the convention center hotel.

Episode 7 — The Accident: In early May, the mayor rammed a GMC pickup into a Subaru and pushed that car 50-70 feet across a Car Toys parking lot until it ran into a Honda. A witness said Adams then proceeded to "peel out" for another 100 feet before coming to a stop. A Car Toys employee told reporters Adams "smelled like beer," but Portland's police chief claimed officers on the scene lacked "reasonable suspicion" to perform a sobriety test. Apparently, playing monster trucks in a shopping center parking lot isn't suspicious enough. Even the most credulous Portlanders wonder why "Mayor Greenie," who wants everyone else to ride light rail and streetcars, drives a full-sized pick-up and patronizes Car Toys. Watch for T-shirts advertising Portland as "the city whose mayor is taking cars off the road, two at a time."

Episode 8 — The Legislature: Fourteen members of the Oregon legislature tell a reporter that Portland has been missing in action as the state decides how to allocate its funds among cities. "The leadership of the biggest city in the state

is not respected in the legislature," says one committee chair. "No one from the city has talked to me about what it wants," says another. Apparently, Adams has been too busy planning soccer stadiums and hotels to work on getting Portland's share of state funding for such things as the Sellwood Bridge.

Who knows what kind of wacky shenanigans the mayor and his council will get themselves into before July, when the Sam Adams recall effort will officially begin. The more serious question is whether the new power vacuum will be filled by anyone who has more sense than the people who have been running the city for the last 35 years. — Randal O'Toole

Vox populi — In April Rasmussen Reports noted: "Only 53% of American adults believe capitalism is better than socialism."

Rasmussen's national telephone survey found that 20% prefer socialism.

The age breakdown is as follows: "Adults under 30 are essentially evenly divided: 37% prefer capitalism, 33% socialism, and 30% are undecided. Thirty-somethings are a bit more supportive of the free-enterprise approach with 49% for capitalism and 26% for socialism. Adults over 40 strongly favor capitalism, and just 13% of those older Americans believe socialism is better."

It's certainly good to know that the large majority of Americans on the Social Security dole favor capitalism. Sad that the iPod crowd is harder to convince. — Ross Levatter

Bring back the Q-ship — A solution to the plague of piracy in the Indian Ocean off Somalia has so far eluded the world community. The rescue of Captain Richard Phillips of the *Maersk Alabama* by U.S. Navy Seals on Easter Sunday was an isolated success not likely to be repeated. The killing of three pirates in the operation has led their fellows to threaten reprisal attacks against Americans. There is every reason to believe that the pirates will now kill Americans when they have the opportunity to do so.

It is not possible for the U.S. Navy to protect every merchant vessel that sails through the expanse of ocean in which the pirates operate. Theoretically, all merchant shipping off the Somali coast could be organized into convoys that would be invulnerable to pirate attack, assuming they received naval protection. There is no indication, however, that any nation or combination of nations is prepared to use its naval forces to carry out what would be a complex, expensive, and ongoing operation. Moreover, it is by no means clear that the owners and captains of the hundreds of merchant ships to be protected would agree to participate in a convoy system. Many would doubtless rather take their chances sailing alone than accept the delays and costs associated with sailing in convoy.

There is a relatively cheap and easy way to eliminate piracy off Somalia. It involves reviving an old naval ruse: the Q-ship.

In 1915, when British seaborne commerce was being threatened by Germany's U-boats, the British Admiralty introduced the Q-ship. To all appearances the Q-ship was a tramp steamer, easy prey for the submarine. Torpedoes being too valuable to use on such a target, the U-boat would surface in order to sink the victim with its deck gun. But as it approached for the kill, the ruse would be revealed: the dummy trappings of a merchant ship would be swiftly stripped away by the highly trained naval crew, to reveal a warship bristling with guns. Surprised and outgunned, the U-boat would be blown out of the water.

The Q-ships did not contribute decisively to the defeat of the U-boats in World War I, partly because they were too few for an operational area that encompassed the North Atlantic, South Atlantic, and Mediterranean, and partly because the U-boats could remain submerged and use torpedoes. The Somali pirates, however, must close with their prey to make a capture.

Fifteen or 20 Q-ships, equipped with the latest surveillance and communications technology, and manned by U.S. Navy crews, would be enough to end piracy off Somalia. If the pirates believe that any ship they target could be a disguised U.S. warship with orders to capture them or send them to the bottom of the sea, they will soon lose their taste for piracy — or else, eventually, they will lose their lives.

For obvious reasons, it would be necessary to change periodically the disguise of each ship. But the expense of maintaining a flotilla of Q-ships off Somalia would hardly dent the enormous U.S. defense budget. In time the number of ships could be reduced as the pirate threat receded.

The Q-ship is a remedy for piracy on the high seas whose time has come — again. — Jon Harrison

Line management — On a recent flight I was dismayed to see a long line behind the metal detector. As I approached the end of the line, I was even more dismayed to see a perfectly good metal detector lane completely unused. Even more frustrating were the ten TSA employees (actually ten, I counted) standing around just chatting amongst themselves. It's not as if they were contributing to security, because they were all wrapped up in their own personal conversations, and not even looking at the passengers.

One way grocery stores compete for business is a "next in line" policy. Whenever there are too many people waiting in any line, someone in the store grabs the keys to a cash register, and opens another line, to insure that the customers never have to wait very long to do business. Newer McDonalds restaurants actually have dual-lane drive-thrus, because they've learned that hungry customers will only wait a couple minutes before they run across the street to Burger King, or change their mind entirely and grab a taco. The oil-change place I frequent has an old school gas station air hose bell, and when it rings, everybody in the service station (including the owner) drops whatever they are doing and rush into the oil change bay with the military precision of a marching band. It's on the pricey side, but I've never spent more than ten minutes getting an oil change. The value of my time more than compensates for the extra ten bucks.

The longer I waited in line, the more inane and grating their conversations became. I could care less about how nice the baby shower buffet was catered, or how much Costco is charging for 15-ounce cans of Niblets. I wanted to tell those jerks exactly what they could do with their buffet and their Niblets, but the prospect of a missed fight and strip search kept my demeanor polite.

I thought about how GM and Chrysler employees were going to be idle all summer long, and how these TSA uniforms were not doing much more work and getting paid, and

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it really irked me. Why was there nobody to tell them to open a second lane? And if for some reason that perfectly good metal detector isn't functional, why aren't those unnecessary employees being told to go home? And ultimately, what will happen when these same dedicated souls, are in charge of rationing health care? — Tim Slagle

More environmentalist nonsense — How quickly the new Democratic regime is moving this country left, especially in environmental matters! Late in March, Congress completed action on an "omnibus" or combined bill consisting of 160 other bills — legislation that totals 1,300 pages. The president promptly signed this legislation, which pushes the enviro agenda even farther than it had been pushed before.

The bill adds yet another 2 million acres to the federally owned "wilderness areas." Already, the feds have locked away 107 million acres of our country in this manner, making it virtually impossible to access and use those acres for anything of human value or the satisfaction of any human need.

We have now permanently frozen a mass of land larger than Montana! The Census Bureau estimates that there are only 106 million acres of developed land in our entire country. We have now sealed off more land than we inhabit!

Most of the two million acres newly taken from public use are in Wyoming. In freezing the land, the feds have forbidden the citizens of this country from using nearly 9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 300 million barrels of oil. Think of that when oil and gas prices spike again, as they surely will.

This is on top of an earlier decision by Obama's Interior Minister Ken Salazar to cancel 77 oil and gas leases in Utah — leases that had survived seven years of scrutiny by various planning agencies — merely because any drilling work would be visible from national parks over a mile away. Most of the sequestered land is in the oil-shale regions of the country, where there's 200 years worth of oil at our current levels of consumption.

These are the kinds of unbalanced priorities that will drive national policy for as long as the current gang controls the levers of government. These people live in a fantasy world where windmills will give us all the power we need, and where we will all drive tiny little electric cars made by the People's Motor Corporation, formerly known as General Motors.

During the presidential campaign, when oil prices shot up and McCain started to pull ahead by promising to open up more of our country for drilling, Obama said that he, too, would support more access to domestic resources. It is now clear that this was one more lie in a series of lies.

Obama promised to consider the option of nuclear power, but he has completely turned his back on it. He promised to end earmarks, but he jammed through a bill with over 8,000 of them. He promised that for every dollar in new spending, he would cut spending by that amount, but his spending bills have been all new spending, with no cuts. He promised transparency, by publicly posting major bills on the internet so that the public could review them for five(!) days before the vote, but he shoved through a huge spending bill (and the SCHIP and other major bills) with no chance for journalists or the public to review them. He promised not to appoint lobbyists to his administration, and then did so repeatedly.

Our dependence on foreign oil will only deepen under Obama, no matter what lies he told about making us energy independent. — Gary Jason

The horseshoe nail — Today, as I approach my 91st birthday, I have many retrospective thoughts, some pleasant and some not. In human life, so much often depends on so little. Fewer and fewer people alive today will be with us to tell of their personal observations of historical events — observations that can deepen our understanding. In particular, I am reminded today of an apparently small event that changed the course of history.

One of the first political broadcasts I can remember occurred in July 1944 — 64 years ago, this month — during the Democratic national convention at Chicago. It was widely assumed that Franklin Roosevelt would be the nominee, although that would lead to an unprecedented fourth term as president. But what was most controversial was the question of who would be the party's nominee for vice-president.

Henry Wallace had been Roosevelt's vice-president since 194l, but Roosevelt was the "supreme ruler" and never paid much attention to his vice-presidents. John Garner, who had been vice-president during Roosevelt's first two terms, had said that the vice-presidency was "about as important as a bucket of warm piss." Roosevelt had never paid much attention to Wallace either, not even informing him of many of his major decisions.

But this time there was a difference: many of Roosevelt's associates did not expect him to live through another term, and for them the office of vice-president naturally assumed an enormous importance. It presented a great opportunity for left-leaning Democrats, who thought of Wallace as a potentially great president, especially from the perspective of his Soviet-inclined friends. In May 1944 Wallace had given a speech at Magadan, a remote location on the Pacific coast of the Soviet empire. Magadan was a center of the infamous system of slave labor camps, in which many thousands of coerced workers had died, many of them perishing while mining gold to support the socialist economy. Wallace, deluded by his hosts, extolled the Soviet labor camp system and praised Magadan for its "efficiency" as a center for labor camps, and for its "healthful fresh air."

Most radio listeners (there was no television then) had never heard of Magadan and took no note of Wallace's remarks. Some of them apparently felt sincerely that the Soviet system was superior to the American system of free enterprise. Thousands of them shouted at the convention, "We want Wallace!"

Roosevelt himself had remained in at his home in Hyde Park, New York, away from the convention, until word reached him that some delegates were opposed to Wallace as possible future president. Robert H. Ferrell, the Democratic Party chairman, took a voice vote of the delegates (which I heard on the radio); by a large margin they favored Wallace. It was clear to the listeners that Wallace would have a clear victory when the votes were counted.

But meanwhile, Roosevelt had been warned that Wallace must not be the nominee. Had the party chairman not ignored any "official voice vote," Wallace would have won. In a decision for which I will forever praise him, the chairman announced that the final vote would be postponed until

the following day — at which time the delegates were able to regroup, and a senator named Harry Truman, hitherto little known except for his personal honesty and fiscal integrity, received Roosevelt's approval by telephone and became the Democratic nominee for vice-president.

Few persons sensed at the time that this was one of the historic decisions of the century. Without the Truman vote, Wallace would have become president of the United States on Roosevelt's death the following April. The United States might well have become part of the expanding Soviet empire, and Stalin might have become in effect the "ruler of the world."

As things turned out, Truman was as suspicious of Stalin as Churchill was, and Stalin was left with something less than the dictatorship of all Europe. Much of what America salvaged from the war can be attributed to the doggedness and courage of Harry Truman. Seldom in history has the seemingly inconsequential decision of one man — in this case, the Democratic Party chairman who delayed a vote for a few hours — so decisively altered the history of the world. — John Hospers

Equality just isn't fair — In modern economic parlance, the terms inequality and inequity are sometimes used interchangeably to mean unfair. This is not good.

Used properly, inequality is a descriptive term, while inequity is normative. So, if the wealth of two people differs, that difference is an inequality. It is a matter of arithmetic. In order to be an inequity, that inequality would also have to be unfair. If it were the case that every inequality were, by its very nature, unfair, things would get tricky very quickly. To illustrate:

President Obama, among many others, is wealthier than I am. This is an inequality. Now, if an inequality is, by its very nature, unfair, then this inequality would have to be considered an inequity, which is to say, an injustice.

Mr. President, if you wish to stamp out this injustice, do as follows: (1) Add together my net worth and yours, (2) divide by two, (3) subtract the quotient from your net worth, (4) write a check for the amount of the remainder, (5) make it payable to me, and (6) hand it over.

But of course I'm kidding. Here's why. First, it would be unconscionable to take advantage of someone who actually held such an odd notion of injustice. I mean, every kindergartener knows that sometimes equality just isn't fair. Second, the president made his money through good, old-fashioned hard work, not unlike Lincoln splitting rails. It's his and he deserves to keep it. Third, the president's contributions to the soundness and growth of the American economy make my own efforts seem puny.

Hmm. On second thought, if the tax laws of the country were jiggered ever so slightly so as to compel him to hand over the money, I guess I would take it, but only with great reluctance and for the sole purpose of furthering the cause of social justice. — Scott Chambers

Let them wear sneakers — A recent report highlights a thorny problem for any and all would-be populists — class envy, the leveler, is blind to what nail it pounds back to flatness. It appears that America's First Lady, Michelle Obama, had the bad grace to appear at a D.C. food bank dressed in a pair of sneakers that retail at over $500 per. The hungry mob disapproved.

Mrs. Obama, through her reps, dug her "progressive" sneakers into the ground and stood fast; "they're *shoes*" was the firm reply to all the finger wagging. Yes, her ultra-trendy Lanvin sneakers are shoes — much in the same way that a Ferrari is a car.

I would suggest that Mrs. Obama use the White House's ample closet space to hang a few hair shirts to be worn at all future charitable functions — for the sake of appearance, if nothing else. — C.J. Maloney

Carter redux — I recently visited an old friend who's been through some trouble in his personal life: a death in his family and the death of his marriage. One of the ways in which he's coped has been to trade stocks actively. He says it gives him some sense of control in his life; and, he says, he's been successful. So, even though active trading is usually a money-losing strategy in the long term, I didn't hammer that point when I saw him. A wise man once told me not to interfere (in fact, he used a shorter and cruder verb) with people's coping mechanisms.

Our plan was to get lunch. But my friend didn't want to leave the TV news and the stock ticker. He was buying a drug company that makes a flu vaccine and wanted to hear what the president had to say about the possibility of the federal government stockpiling the drug in the wake of the swine flu scare.

My friend had a big high-def TV set up in his study and obsessed over the feed like the villain from a James Bond movie. We listened to the president talk. And talk. And talk. It occurred to me, while he blathered on about how people should wash their hands with hot water, that this was some serious micromanagement! Dan Ackroyd satirized Jimmy Carter for this kind of thing back in the early days of "Saturday Night Live."

Why wasn't the health secretary or a CDC spokesman saying this stuff? (In fact, one of the TV commentators eventually raised the same question.) After half an hour, I pried my friend out of his lair. The stock wasn't moving much. We left the transformative micromanager, the Jimmy Carter of the 21st century, to drone on about flu vectors. — Jim Walsh

Union dues — There has been such a flurry of leftist initiatives being shoved through by the Democrats in Washington that it is hard to keep track of them all. Indeed, those in power seem to count on the fact that when you have omnibus bills mandating thousands of new programs, the citizens will be unable to monitor what is being done. But a particularly vicious attack on school choice stands out.

The District of Columbia has had a notoriously dysfunctional school system for decades. A few years back, Congress allowed the District to run a modest voucher program as a test. Called the Opportunity Scholarship Program, it gave poor parents — 99% of whom were black or Hispanic — a $7,500 voucher for each child they chose to send to a private school. The program was modest in two senses: $7,500 is less than a third of what the DC public school system spends on average to educate a child; and only 1,700 vouchers were allowed. But the teachers' unions can't allow even such tiny competition as this, and they vowed to destroy it.

These unions are intoxicated with power. They contributed $50 million to Obama's campaign, and vastly more to

the congressional races. The result is a federal government that is most eager to do their bidding. Congress, led by Dick Durbin (D-IL), voted just last month essentially to kill the DC pilot program.

Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan was complicit in this nasty piece of work. Duncan, who (like his boss) is the master of the head fake — first feign openness to something, then do precisely the opposite — actually suppressed the latest report on the voucher test program, even as Congress was debating the program.

The report was mandated by Congress and overseen by the U.S. Department of Education. It showed statistically significant improvement in the academic performance of the voucher kids. They are reading at nearly a half-grade ahead of their peers, meaning the kids who applied for the vouchers but weren't awarded them, and so remained in public schools. (The voucher kids scored no better than their peers, but no worse, in math.) Add to this the fact that the voucher kids were significantly less likely than their peers who remained at public schools to have been *robbed* at school.

This is no doubt why there have been four applicants for every one of the available slots in this meager program. Voucher schools not only educate better; they are safer. The teachers' unions know this, and hate those schools with a passion that one wishes their members would bring to their own schools.

So not only are the kids in the rotten DC public school system going to have to stay there, but the pathetically small number who have temporarily escaped will be rounded up and sent back.

In all these tawdry dealings, Obama has been as mendacious as he has been hypocritical. He is hypocritical for denying 1,700 poor kids a chance to go to a decent private school, even while his own children go to the very best. (But then, his children have millionaires for parents.) And he is mendacious for saying during his campaign (to the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, which quizzed him on vouchers) that if he were shown evidence that vouchers work, he would accept them. He got the evidence, but he also got millions from the teachers' unions, so the kids got the shaft. It is hopeless to expect educational change from his administration. — Gary Jason

A Global Warning in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

The land of Hysterica trembles
at the plagues Lord Gassington preaches:
"Nature her forces assembles,
angered that man overreaches.
Your cattle will die; lice and comets,"
quoth the lord in earnest palaver,
"descending and swarming like hornets
will render your world a cadaver!
Time is short to escape from this mire,"
intoned he with solemn alarm.
"Lo, the astral projections require
that each must slice off his right arm!"
That shocked them at first, then they wondered,
"Lord Gas has an arm right and true.
Why hasn't this member been severed
for humanity, red, white and blue?"
"I'll answer your query with pleasure,"
said the lord, not giving an inch.
"My arm is a national treasure,
and I need it to wave, scratch and pinch."

— Jim Payne

Voluntary requirement — As founding treasurer and director of American International Group, my father is turning over in his grave at the shenanigans of AIG's finance arm and the entire company's subsequent government bailout. But the proposed Obama plans for the health insurance industry — and New Jersey's actual fiasco — have probably flipped him over so many times I have no idea which way he's pointing now.

As you may already know, Obama would like the federal government to offer cheap, affordable, and voluntary health insurance in the hope that the 47 million uninsured will suddenly see the light and join the plan. Problem is, according to Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, the government could price its policies so cheaply that it would crush its competitors.

Right now, according to The Economist, hospitals enjoy a 48% profit margin on privately insured patients but suffer a 44% loss on Medicaid patients. The privately insured patients cross-subsidize the government insured. If the privately insured stampede to join cheaper government insurance programs, hospitals will be squeezed and have to cut back. Expect European-style queues and rationing if the proposed program materializes.

But New Jersey, always in the vanguard of economic moral hazard schemes, is already bankrupting the health insurance business. By passing a law requiring that insurance companies deny coverage to no one, in spite of any preexisting condition, they've incentivized the population to defer or drop existing coverage. May as well wait till you get sick to buy insurance.

Of course, the elephant in the room is every state's statutory requirement that hospitals refuse treatment to no one, regardless of their ability to pay. If Nevada had a similar law requiring prostitutes to take on all comers, would we call it rape? — Robert H. Miller

One flu over — The little pandemic that couldn't seems to have petered out, and by the time this article is published, there is a very good chance that tit will be as consequential to America as killer bees and the millennium bug. In the meantime, the precautions that are just now going online will probably still be in place. Government always moves much slower than science or public sentiment.

I hope the panic won't soon be forgotten. Because right now there is a debate taking place on how America should prepare for the upcoming global warming epidemic. Scientists that were trained in the same classrooms and laboratories of the same universities as these health alarmists are prophesying the arrival another Horseman of the Apocalypse. The fellow alumni of these World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control prognosticators are debating what precautions we should be legislating to protect ourselves from the certain doom of global warming.

Meanwhile, scientists are now wondering about whether we are entering into a new ice age. Recent evidence indicates that solar output has been declining for the past couple years.

If the world might be entering a new Ice Age then global warming is not only not problematic, it might also be quite beneficial. (It's much easier to find a way to cool off in the summer than to grow vegetables on a glacier.)

I don't mind astrologers and psychics. There are a lot of people who enjoy hearing the advice of those who pretend to see into the future. The big danger is when we elevate these prophets into a position of power. Just like the ranting racist is amusing at the end of the bar, but dangerous in a seat of power; it is best to keep these illuminated persons locked up in laboratories, rather than testifying before Congress.

— Tim Slagle

Crunched by numbers — In early April, a Cato op-ed by Adam Schaeffer described the way in which congressional Democrats had buried a provision in the omnibus spending bill that will spell doom for the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, DC's voucher system for poor children. They did this despite recent reports that found voucher students were equal in math to public school students and strongly outperformed them in reading. All at 25% of the cost: $6,620 vs. $26,555 per pupil per year.

I want to focus on just one aspect of this: $26,555 per pupil per year for the privilege of attending the DC school system, one of the most dangerous and decrepit school systems in the country! Think about this: With 30 students in a classroom, that's just shy of $800,000 per year to educate *one class* of children. Keep that in mind the next time you're told the problem is that we don't spend enough money to educate our children. How can people continue to make that argument with a straight face?

— Ross Levatter

When elites go bad — On April 21, the Supreme Court heard arguments on the case of Savanna Redding.

Six years ago, when Miss Redding was a 13-year-old eighth grader, she was subjected to a strip search by school officials. Was she carrying, or suspected of carrying, a lethal weapon — a bomb, a knife, or a loaded gun? Nope. Rather, school officials thought she was carrying prescription-strength ibuprofen. I kid you not.

According to The New York Times (March 24), the search was ordered by an assistant principal when another child, caught with ibuprofen, claimed that the pills belonged to. Redding. The assistant principal said he had good reason, beyond the other child's accusation, to suspect that Redding was carrying drugs, for she and other students had been "unusually rowdy" at a school dance *a couple of months* before.

A strip search conducted on the basis of an accusation leveled by a child who was in trouble and was no doubt looking to shed or share the blame, together with an incident of alleged rowdiness that had occurred two months earlier. A *strip search*. For *ibuprofen*.

Miss Redding, understandably, has sought justice in the courts. So far they have ruled in her favor. A majority of the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals concluded that the school's actions violated "any known principle of human dignity." Yet one judge dissented, writing that "I do not think it was unreasonable for school officials . . . to conduct the search in an effort to obviate a potential threat to the health and safety of their students." Judge, speaking as a parent, I can tell you that the government need not strip search one of my daughter's classmates in order to keep her safe from ibuprofen, even (gasp!) if it's prescription strength.

The Justice Department, in a friend of the court brief, said that the search was unreasonable — but only because there was no reason to believe she was carrying ibuprofen. In other words, the federal government is saying that if she had been in possession of the pills, well then, by all means, strip away! The federals added that the assistant principal should not be subject to a lawsuit, because of previous case law.

So, in April, the case was heard by the Supreme Court. The justices' comments from the bench did little to comfort friends of personal liberty. Justice Stephen Breyer said he thought it logical that a child would use underwear as a hiding place. Unfortunately, Savanna's attorney merely disagreed with that contention. He did not say what should have been said: "Your honor, you don't strip search a child for a few painkillers."

Justice David Souter made the right point. "Having an aspirin tablet does not present a health and safety risk." Thank you, judge. But then Souter went on to say this: "I would rather have a kid embarrassed by a strip search . . . than to have some other kids dead because the stuff is distributed at lunchtime and things go awry." Well, okay, if there's a reasonable suspicion the kid is carrying heroin. But ibuprofen?

Justice Antonin Scalia took the line that if no drugs were found in the child's backpack or outer garments, then the undergarments were the next logical step. "You've searched everywhere else," he stated. "By God, the drugs must be in her underpants." So that tower of judicial restraint sees no problem in stripping a child to see if she's got some ibuprofen.

Chief Justice John Roberts actually chose to differentiate between the girl's bra and panties. Searching her bra, he said, "doesn't seem as outlandish as the underpants." So the top judge in the land might allow school officials to get to second base, but third — well, maybe not.

Generally I prefer not to criticize elitism, of which we actually have too little in America, but here we have a case of elitism gone bad — very bad. Supreme Court justices are among the most privileged members of our society. They are not subject to indignities at the hands of petty officialdom. In this case it seems clear that the justices lack empathy for a girl who was humiliated over a matter of a few painkillers — painkillers she did not in fact possess. I am particularly unhappy to see people like Roberts and Scalia coming down in favor of the nanny-nazi state. To those who know the facts of this case, it is clear there was no reasonable suspicion that Savanna Redding possessed any drugs. And I say again, the drug in question was not smack or coke or meth, but ibuprofen. Shame on the Court.

— Jon Harrison

Turtle power — My wife and I are avid technical rock climbers. Our favorite cragging area is Red Rocks Recreation Area, a BLM park outside Las Vegas, Nevada. It's a sandstone Yosemite and world-class destination for mountaineers. Every fall and spring thousands of climbers fly and road-trip to Red Rocks from all over the world. And demand has been increasing so rapidly that the one campground is now full almost constantly. Of course, at-large camping is prohibited and there is no overflow camping. Campsites are $10.

Anticipating the increased demand, some forward-looking

functionary, years ago, suggested expanding and improving the campground, located well away from the compelling geology in flat, creosote-bush-covered Mojave desert. The inevitable environmental impact statement was commissioned.

Enter the endangered desert tortoise. In spite of the fact that absolutely no sign of the reclusive reptile has ever been recorded anywhere near the campground, the improvement proposal has gotten nowhere.

Hoping to find a camp spot, my wife and I arrived early on a recent Sunday evening. We were amazed to find that not only was the campground full but much of the surrounding desert was strewn with tents and cars. We tracked down the campground host. He told us he'd instituted a new policy: no one was being turned away; they were taking on all comers. And he liked people, particularly climbers. He told us to park anywhere, pay our fee, and climb to our hearts' content. We couldn't believe it. We wondered about the poor desert tortoise impact study.

But of course, it was too good to be true. Two weeks later, the policy had been reversed by higher-ups, the campground was now full and restricted, and the campground host had nearly lost his job. So what's "good" for private hospitals (see "Voluntary requirement," above) isn't good for government campgrounds — even if people can pay. — Robert H. Miller

Coffee, tea, or me? — I did not hear the remark when it was first made. I read about it later. For those who do not follow world events by watching CNN, here is what happened.

On April 15, Tea Party protests were held around the country. At a few of them, tea bags were tossed, some over the White House fence. The following day, on CNN, David Gergen, referring to the Republican Party, said, "They're searching for their voice." To this, Anderson Cooper replied, "It's hard to talk when you're teabagging." Mr.Gergen laughed.

Get it? "Teabagging" refers to the lowering of the scrotum into an oral cavity. A quick perusal of the internet suggests, unsurprisingly, that it is a practice favored primarily by gay men.

What is one to make of this? Forgive me for taking this seriously, but possibilities cry out to be examined.

First, there is the possibility that Mr. Cooper was unaware of the meaning of the term.

It is possible. If he has said otherwise, I haven't heard it. He may have been innocently trying to coin a term that would succinctly describe the actions of the protesters. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that he did not so much as crack a smile when he made the remark.

On the other hand, to believe that the remark was innocent, one would also have to believe that he is unsophisticated, that he is ignorant of the rich variety of erotic practices in postmodern, urban America, that he is a rube who had simply never heard of this particular practice and the word that describes it so well. His misappropriation of the term would have to have been coincidental.

Fiddlesticks. I refuse to believe that Anderson Cooper is an ignorant rube. He is, after all, the son of Gloria Vanderbilt, a Yale graduate, and an heir to the Astor fortune. I do not know if he is wise, but he is almost certainly worldly. He knew what he was talking about.

To the second possibility, then: maybe he intended it to be a harmless little joke.

The line of reasoning goes something like this: sure, he knew what it meant, but it was not intended as a slur against citizens peacefully protesting the fiscal policies of their government. He has no animosity toward them. And it wasn't a sly partisan crack aimed at Republicans. It was just a silly pun, a throwaway line, not intended to be offensive.

This is also possible. But we need to pause here and test its plausibility by posing what will seem to many a rather tasteless hypothetical question. Bear with me.

If CNN were filming Fidel Castro having lunch with, say, Barack Obama, who appeared to be struggling to get a word in edgewise as El Comandante pontificated, and tea was served, is it at all within the realm of the possible that Anderson's whispered voiceover remark would be, "It's hard to talk when you're teabagging."?

Let me be the first to answer: of course not. The idea is absurd. I cannot believe that Anderson Cooper would make such a remark. Why? Because it is so obviously offensive. Yet we know that he did say those words on the other occasion. So, with the help of this hypothetical question, it can be safely inferred that Mr. Cooper's remark was not intended to be inoffensive.

(And if Mr. Cooper really did use that particular gag line when referring to two such beloved world leaders, would it be ignored, or brushed off as a harmless little joke? Not likely. Would David Gergen laugh? I have no idea.)

We are left with a third possibility, which is that Mr. Cooper knew exactly what his remark meant, that it was calculated mockery of the protesters, that it was partisan, and that, in terms of journalistic and social standards, it was far beyond the pale. And yet he said it anyway.

Why? Two explanations come to mind.

First, he may believe himself to be so powerful that he can flout journalistic and social standards with impunity and continue to be considered a highly respected journalist. He may believe that in 21st-century America his integrity, reputation, and credibility will not be ruined as word of his remark spreads. If that is what he believes, well, he may be right. But why would he engage is such high-risk behavior?

But it is the second explanation that solves the puzzle with all the pieces: He may have grown weary of the straitjacket of journalism. The strain of pretending to be unbiased and always having to ape fairness may have grown tiresome for him. Journalistic standards and ethics may feel to him like a closet that confines his creativity and doesn't allow his ego to spread its wings. In other words, he may be feeling the need for bigger things.

He probably wants to tell ribald jokes about conservatives, Republicans, and wingnuts. He wants to make fun of Christians and rednecks and gun nuts and hear the progressive mob roar with laughter. Leaving respectable journalism behind, he longs to say naughty things, outrageous things to America and get fame and fortune for saying them!

Here, then, is the only explanation that really connects the dots: Mr. Anderson Cooper wants nothing more in life than to be a sort of bizarro Rush Limbaugh.

Now, I wonder whether David Gergen would find that funny. — Scott Chambers

How is our skools doing? — Four recent articles allow us to reflect again on the state of education in America, its costs, causes, and consequences.

The first, "Few Gains are Seen in High School Test," appeared in The Wall Street Journal on April 29. Reporting on the latest results from the federal government's own tests — the National Assessment of Educational Progress — it provided grim news. Over the nearly four decades during which the government has been testing our K-12 students, a period when school funding has exploded, scores have been essentially flat. More money has brought no progress.

Well, to be precise, scores for 9- and 13-year-olds improved modestly from 1971 to 2008. But these modest gains get washed out when students reach high school. Among 17-year-olds, on a score scale that ranges from zero to 500, the gain in reading skills over 37 years was exactly *one point*. In math, the gain was vastly more impressive: a massive *two-point rise*.

This moved Obama's Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to observe that the results were "especially troubling." (But of course, we have to remember that this is the same cat's-paw of the teachers' unions who just played a key role in the termination of DC's voucher program.) The WSJ drily notes that colleges and employers are complaining that high school grads very often lack the skills needed to succeed in college and in real life — which as we know is altogether more challenging.

The second article, "Study Cites Dire Economic Impact of Poor Schools," is from The New York Times (April 23). It reports on the results of a study done by the independent consulting firm McKinsey & Company, which shows major gaps between students of different races and ethnicities (black and Hispanic students lag behind whites), students of different economic classes (poor kids lag behind rich ones), students of different regions (kids from some states lag behind others), and students of different nationalities (American kids lag behind kids from most other countries).

Thus far, the report simply discloses the obvious. One might wonder how much taxpayer money it took to enable the excretion of so much banality. But interestingly, the report estimates the cost of these achievement gaps. McKinsey puts it at about $3 to $5 billion dollars a day in lost GDP.

The third article, "Teach for (Some) of America," appeared in the WSJ on April 28. It's concerned with the curious response of poor public school districts to the availability of Teach for America graduates. Teach for America is a privately funded organization that pays for first-rate college grads to work in poor public schools. This year it had 35,000 applicants from highly ranked colleges. An amazing 11% of Ivy League seniors applied. The program pays $20,000 to train each grad to enter the classroom.

But rather than seeking out these high-achieving, highly motivated graduates, the public school interest groups (mainly, unions and administrators) limit the number of positions available for them to 3,800 for the whole country.

The rationalization is that Teach for America grads haven't taken the education courses that "normal" public school teachers take. As if ed courses offered expertise which couldn't be learned elsewhere. The real reason is that the interest groups are afraid of being shown up by bright young people who come from outside the Union-Educational Complex.

Finally, there was a story in the WSJ on April 28 about the over-supply of college grads in China, which vastly expanded its college system over the last decade. It built huge new campuses and increased enrollments by 30% year after year. This year alone Chinese colleges will graduate 6.1 million people.

There are problems with this expansion. Recent Chinese college grads have a high unemployment rate, the current recession having had its effect. Many are saddled with large college loans. And many colleges are not particularly good. Of course, the same points could be made about our system. But so can another point: the expansion of college education enables the transition from a manufacturing economy to an epistemic one.

China's story fits a narrative that all advocates of free choice in education need to keep telling. The story is uncommonly clear. It is that the world is transitioning itself from basic manufacturing to types of economic activity that are more knowledge-based, and that all the unionization, protectionism, and nativism in the world will not stop it. If America wants to keep its relative standing in prosperity, it must fix its broken educational system. Years of educational stagnation, with low test scores and high dropout rates, cannot be prolonged. We got by with this cesspool of educational failure in the past only because our largest competitors were hobbled by totalitarian socialist economies. But a generation ago the Communist bloc collapsed, and now the countries that once composed it are becoming formidable competitors. And they take education seriously.

But we can't fix the system by shoveling more money into it. We've more than doubled spending only to see test scores remain flat, with high school dropout rates hitting 50% to 75% in most of the major-city public school systems. We need school choice, honest testing of our students by a neutral third party, rigorous curricula, and faculty that face accountability for what they do. But the Union-Educational Complex will fight these reforms viciously, every step of the way.

— Gary Jason

Doesn't take a weatherman — I'm in a lousy mood since the weatherman just ruined my weekend. "Torrential storms, hail, and frozen cannonballs," she ranted. Reality — nothing but blue skies.

Have you ever heard a weatherperson apologize? "Sorry folks, that I ruined your weekend by mistaking a few zephyrs for a tornadic wipeout. I'm really sorry you cowered in the basement for two full days with your wife and kids and two cats in heat." Weather mavens (they like to call themselves climatologists, even when they're wrong) are as unrepentant as traffic engineers who put red lights at deserted rural intersections.

And where do they learn words like "tornadic disturbance," instead of tornado; and "thunderboomers," a term kindergarten teachers use on five-year-olds while buttoning up their raincoats. "Thunderboomers, kids! Button up snug! It's gonna be a ducky wucky, quack quack day."

The science of climate prediction began simply enough. A skinny guy, Bennie, in a bearskin diaper stared out of the cave entrance. "Gray day — not good for stegosaurus hunt," he announced to the anxious crowd behind him. "Very gray."

"Yeah I guess so, Quartzhead. You gotta roll that big stone away first," said one of the audience.

And once Bennie learned to roll that stone aside, his record improved significantly. Bennie was now a star. He learned to comb his hair with a wishbone and smile even when his empty belly made embarrassing noises that interfered with his presentation.

But why is nobody keeping score on Bennie's successors who are supported by radars, computers, and barometers? Economists and bookies are fired when their predictive batting average dips in the low 30%. If I owned a TV station, I'd keep a daily log on my weather guy. At the end of the year, I'd call him in. Review time. He'd be all red-eyed and sniffly and umbrellaless because he had called for a bright, fair morning. Wrong!

"Schlemiel," I'd say, "you were wrong 75% of the time, including your Christmas forecast that prevented thousands of families from visiting their old rheumy-eyed Mom and Pop on that day of Yuletide warmth. Also, you missed the Halloween snowstorm that entombed most of the kids in town. Just last week they found six more with their candy bags — smiles frozen on their little angelic faces. So I'm docking you 75% of your salary. Have a great year. Relax, spend ten unbroken hours on the Florida turnpike while your wife, beside you, reads last year's inaccurate predictions, out loud."

Once I lived in the Boston area. The weather, to this exiled Southerner, was always lousy except for three days in late July when the Snoqualmie glacier receded, maybe three inches. The weather guys never got it right. To the west, where many of the weather fronts originated, they had friends and professional comrades. They'd call Worcester.

"Hey Ron, what's the weather there?"

"Snowing like hell — it'll be on you in an hour or two."

A foolproof system. They also had pals north and south with radars and computers. They had an effective early warning system. Sentinels that almost boxed the compass. But not quite. Because to the east lay the boiling Atlantic, a hellish hotbed of tornadic, squallic, stormic, cataclysmic activity. (And sometimes thunderboomer bummers, too, kiddies.) They had no strategically placed associates, 50 miles out to sea, floating on their backs with cell phones. The picket line was incomplete.

What they needed was a $7 million weather boat, they said. We taxpayers bought 'em their boat — and we're still smothered under three surprise snowstorms. And they never apologized. I think they used the boat for water skiing.

— Ted Roberts

Stayin' alive — In light of the news that the Dems plan to ram through Obama's desired changes to our healthcare system in the "budget reconciliation" procedure — a gambit never used before, and one being used now because the Dems know that these changes wouldn't pass the Senate if put to an honest vote — two recent articles caught my eye.

First was an piece by Dr. Scott Atlas, professor at the Stanford University Medical Center and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, called "10 Surprising Facts About American Health Care" (National Center for Policy Analysis, Brief Analysis No. 649, March 24, 2009). Atlas points out that survival rates for most cancers are better in America than in European countries. For example, the death rate for breast cancer is 88% higher in the United Kingdom and 52% higher in Germany than in the United States. The death rate for prostate cancer is 604% higher in the UK and 457% higher in Norway. The survival rates for cancer are better here than in Canada as well.

The explanation is indicated in the second article, an editorial in The Investor's Business Daily (March 6). The IBD observes that one reason for the disparity in survival rates is that many drugs readily available to Americans are denied to Europeans by their national healthcare systems. For example, the UK's National Health Service will not supply Lapatinib (which prolongs the lives of breast cancer patients), Sutent (which prolongs the lives of stomach cancer patients), and Tarceva (which prolongs the lives of lung cancer patients).

In addition to noticing the greater availability of new medicines in America, both articles call attention to another drawback of state-run systems — the long wait times for patients needing major treatment. Atlas notes that British and Canadian patients wait about twice as long for elective surgery, for specialist consultations, and for radiation therapy, as do Americans.

Another interesting fact adduced by Atlas (I won't review them all), is that Americans have better access to new medical technologies than patients in the UK and Canada. For instance, if you look at CT scanners, we have 34 per million citizens, but the Canadians have only 12 per million and the UK only 8 per million. MRI machines? We have about 27 per million, while the Canadians and the British have only about 6 per million.

Most striking to me were the statistics that Atlas cites on the rates of innovation in our system. To cite one example: since the mid-1970s, more Americans have received the Nobel Prize for medicine or physiology than people from all other countries put together. That is an amazing fact seldom mentioned by those inclined to bash our healthcare system.

That system has its drawbacks, including high costs and the fact that many who want insurance cannot afford it, and therefore must rely on emergency hospital care. But the socialized schemes favored by the Left have worse problems: rationing not by cost (which at least funds continuing innovation in medicine) but by wait time, lack of innovation, and lower availability of new medicines and technology. But balancing costs and benefits is something that those on the Left are not interested in doing. They have a religious faith in big government, and a burning missionary zeal to impose what they view as equality on all institutions, no matter how many deaths may result.

— Gary Jason

Corporate comeuppance — Someday soon, let's hope, corporate *goniffs* will discover that they can't raise prices without risking failure, serious failure. Just as American automakers lost their futures to Japanese companies, so private American universities that are forever raising tuition will sometime find themselves unable to fill their seats. Prospective students will go to state universities or even Canada.

For now, may I hope that the new Yankee Stadium will suffer a setback? Whether fans prefer the new one, built across 161st Street from the traditional Stadium, won't be known for a while. But I know from experience that the old one was good

continued on page 45

The Start of Something Big?

by Bruce Ramsey

No, they weren't organized by Big Business, the Republican Party, or Fox News. The Tea Bag protests were something much more interesting.

On April 15, 2009, several hundred thousand Americans demonstrated in more than 700 cities and towns. These were the "tea bag" protests, named after the Boston Tea Party. The protesters were peaceful and even well mannered. They flew the American flag and the yellow Gadsden flag with the snake and the *Don't Tread on Me*. They hoisted such signs as:

Don't Leave Your Debt To Me

You Are Not Entitled to What I Have Earned

Change It Back: Yes We Will

Read My Lipstick: NO New Taxes

Pay your own @#$%^ mortgage!

Spread My Work Ethic, Not My Wealth

No More Bailouts

No New Taxes

Readers of this journal would have no problem deciding what these protesters meant. These were free-market conservatives and libertarians and their friends attacking the Obama administration's volcano of spending and corporate alms. They were making a preemptive rumble against new federal taxes, and often new state taxes as well.

The protests were about liberty. Said a protester in Olympia WA: "We're for individual rights and small, limited government." But connecting spending to the idea of liberty takes a dash of ideology, and the mainstream media didn't have that ideology, or maybe they had a different one. To them the talk of liberty was hypocritical.

At the Chicago protest a man holding a baby told CNN reporter Susan Roesgen that he was there because he heard "a president say he believed in what Lincoln stood for. Lincoln's primary thing was, he believed that people had the right to liberty, and they had the right —"

Roesgen interrupted him: "Sir, what does this have to do with taxes? Do you realize that you are eligible for a $400 —"

"Let me finish my point," the protester insisted. "Lincoln believed that people had the right to share in the fruits of their own labor, and that government should not take it."

"Did you know," she asked, "that the state of Lincoln gets $50 billion dollars from this stimulus? That's $50 billion, sir."

But before the man could reply she moved away, speaking to the camera. "I think you get the general tenor of this. This is antigovernment, anti-CNN. This is highly promoted by the right-wing conservative network, Fox."

The message: *these people are idiots who have nothing to complain about. They're getting government money!*

In Seattle, Hearst cartoonist David Horsey drew an image of a fat, middle-aged, scowling white man holding a sign saying, "Taxed Enough Already." Yelling in his ear was a hip young man: "Excuse me, but it's a fact that income tax rates are at their lowest point in decades, plus Obama just gave your family an $800 tax credit." In the next panel, the fat man says: "Obama is Hitler!"

The message: *these people are complaining about taxes when they're getting government money. And they are idiots, besides.*

It was true that in his first three months in office Obama offered a shower of rebates and grants to state governments. Many Americans were expecting to receive checks in the mail. But that was also the worry. The Congressional Budget Office was forecasting that federal spending for the year ending Sept. 30 would be 27.4% of gross domestic product — the highest share of the people's output going to government since World War II. Federal revenue would be only 15.5% of GDP, leaving an enormous gap to be filled with money creation and debt.

And further: the CBO projected that federal spending, which had been about 20% of GDP for most of the decade, would henceforth drop no lower than 22%. If Obama's tax and revenue proposals — his *early* proposals — were enacted, the federal share of GDP would rise back toward percentages in the high 20s.

Were there not tax implications of that? Big, important tax implications?

Having received a Treasury check, was the citizen obliged to be silent? (And what does *that* imply?)

The protesters were not idiots. But there was an effort to make them look that way. Enemies of their protests homed in on statements that were politically outlandish, or could be made to seem so.

New York Times columnist Gail Collins and Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson each made an issue of remarks by Texas Governor Rick Perry. After some Tax Day protesters yelled, "Secede," Perry made off-the-cuff remarks about how Texas had never learned to submit, that he knew how they felt, that things might get so bad that the state would have to secede again someday. Later he said he had just been trying to assert Texas's 10th Amendment rights, and that the Union was a wonderful thing.

Secession had never been a serious proposal, and everyone knew it. But it was outlandish enough to be portrayed as nutty and irresponsible right-wingism that needed to be denounced by civilized, good-government progressives.

Which also meant the protesters were nuts.

Noting protesters' signs about immigration, gay marriage, and gun rights, Robinson wrote, "The protests were all over the map, and thus hard to take seriously."

Hard to take seriously: the take-home thought.

Another jab aiming at the same conclusion was that the protests were not "grassroots" but "AstroTurf" — protests that didn't represent real people. The tactic here is to trace the protests to a rich sponsor and declare them to be reflective of cash instead of passion.

New York Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote:

> It turns out that the tea parties don't represent a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment. They're AstroTurf (fake grass roots) events, manufactured by the usual suspects. In particular, a key role is being played by FreedomWorks, an organization run by Richard Armey, the former House majority leader, and supported by the usual group of right-wing billionaires. And the parties are, of course, being promoted heavily by Fox News.

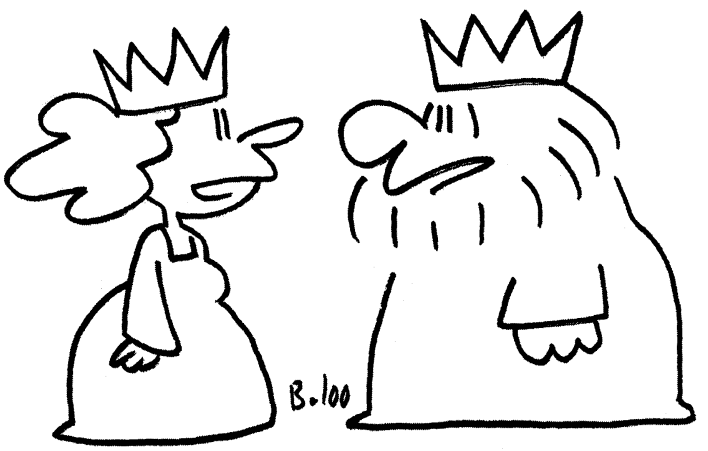
Added left-wing columnist Joe Conason:

> Most of the money that funded Armey's activism in the past was provided by tobacco, pharmaceutical, and banking interests — and there is no reason to think that has changed.

Think of what is being said here: that hundreds of thousands of Americans who don't really care about an issue can be made to protest about it through the influence of "tobacco, pharmaceutical, and banking interests," and "right-wing billionaires." This is a preposterous thought. And anyway, the protests were not focused on the interests of billionaires; they had nothing to do with tobacco or pharmaceuticals. They did have something to do with banking interests: they were *against* banks getting government funds.

Yes, the plans for protests were covered by Fox News (and were ignored by other major media). But news organs can't force an unwilling people to take to the streets. Nor were the protesters paid to go or ordered to go. Their signs were mostly not made at the print shop — and, as Robinson and others charged, were not always on message.

As for organization: of course the protests were organized. All nationwide protests — antiwar protests, for example — are organized. But they had not been started by fat cats. The first anti-stimulus event — dubbed a "porkulus" protest — had happened two months before, on President's Day, February 16, in Seattle. It had been started by a political novice, Keli Carender, 29, a fan of free-market economist Thomas Sowell who calls herself "a conservative with streaks of libertarianism." On February 10, Carender, an adult-school math teacher and stand-up comic, had used her blog to call for a protest a week thereafter:



"Do you believe in democracy?" "You bet I do — I've seen it *happen*!"

Date: Monday, February 16th
Time: 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Where: Westlake Park in downtown Seattle, 401 Pine St., in the open area by the big arch.
The idea is to use what we've learned about dissent over the last eight years. We need loud protests with lots noise and visuals. So, what should you bring?
Bring AS MANY PEOPLE AS YOU CAN! Bring your families, your friends, neighbors, bring everyone!
Bring SIGNS!! Get those craft making juices flowing and make signs and banners and pictures and paintings. Just imagine that you are a left-wing college student with nothing else to do and that should help you get started!

Talk-show host Kirby Wilbur on KVI-AM, the Seattle Fox affiliate, brought Carender on his morning radio show. Carender also got internet help from Steve Beren, twice the Republican candidate against Seattle's left-wing congressman, Rep. Jim McDermott; and from syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin, who had worked at the Seattle Times in the late 1990s. Malkin flew out from Washington, DC, and brought a big tub of pulled pork for the "porkulus" protest.

But at that first protest, 120 people showed up. It received almost no media coverage.

Carender collected email addresses from the people at the protest, and began networking on the internet. Then came another internet event. Outraged at the proposed federal aid to people who hadn't paid their mortgages, CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli made what has been dubbed "the rant of the year." Speaking on February 19 from the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, Santelli said that the system should "reward people who could carry the water instead of drink the water."

Santelli boomed to the traders on the floor around him: "This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills? Raise their hand!"

"Boo!"

Unwinding from his rant, Santelli said he was "thinking of having a Chicago tea party in July." Santelli's outburst went on YouTube and was quickly watched several hundred thousand times. As of April 25, it had been watched 1,045,115 times.

The movement went from there. And, yes, it was organized on the national level by Dick Armey's FreedomWorks, Tim Philips's Americans for Prosperity, and Eric Odom's DontGO Movement.

Americans for Prosperity is probably the most conservative of the three groups. Odom is a libertarian: he voted for Bob Barr, and he did the most to avoid connections to the Republican Party. Dick Armey is the former Republican congressman and House majority leader: he was noted for being an opponent of the minimum wage and of farm subsidies, and a supporter of Social Security privatization. He was also against the invasion of Iraq, when George W. Bush proposed it: Iraq had not attacked us, he said, and an invasion was not justified. He was talked out of that stand by Vice President Dick Cheney, and voted for the war. Later he complained that Cheney had lied to him.

"I consider FreedomWorks a very libertarian organization," says its president, Matt Kibbe. Not all the protesters were libertarians, Kibbe said, but he added, "It's always the most philosophical, informed, energized people who create movements."

Kibbe told Liberty that the organizers tested the concept with protests in St. Louis and Florida, saw that there was public sentiment behind them, and then planned the big protests for Tax Day. Most of the cost was staff time.

Other organizations took up the job at the state level. In my home state, Washington, the largest protest, in Olympia, was organized by the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a libertarian-leaning conservative group known for its fight against the political use of mandatory union dues. The group's effort was "mostly staff time," and mostly for internet work, said the group's in-house counsel, Mike Reitz. Much of the work was coordinating what was going on already. "Someone would call and say, 'I'm coming with 300 people.' "

The tax protesters were not idiots. But there was an effort to make them look that way. Enemies of their protests homed in on statements that were politically outlandish, or could be made to seem so.

Reitz, who attended the Olympia protest with his kids, said it was the largest protest Evergreen Freedom Foundation had ever organized. The group carefully allowed two politicians to speak: one Republican (a state legislator) and one Democrat (the state auditor).

Wilbur, the Seattle talk-show host, attended the protest in Microsoft's hometown, the Seattle suburb of Redmond. Wilbur lives near there, and he has been active in the Republican Party. "I saw maybe three people out of 200 I recognized from Republican politics," he told Liberty. "These are not Republican activists. . . . And I tell my Republican friends, 'Don't take these guys for granted.' "

Organizers told me that more than 1 million people protested on April 15. I was more inclined to believe a figure of 300,000, simply because 1 million seemed preposterous. But I don't know. The protests were said to have happened in more than 800 places — was *that* number correct? — and, as Wilbur told me, many were in rural towns. That a couple thousand protested in Manhattan is no big deal; that 200 protested in Okanogan, WA, population 2,352, is impressive.

The left-liberal commentariat does not see places like Okanogan. It sees Manhattan, and it sees Newt Gingrich speaking there; it sees anti-Obama signs, and it knows what it thinks.

It thinks of ways of not answering what the protesters are saying.

One way is simply to remind everyone that Obama won and his enemies lost.

You lost. Shut up.

This was very common.

Commentators noted that polls showed average Americans still supporting Obama. It was true; they did. They

also opposed the bailouts, and the commentators didn't mention that. That they supported Obama meant that the protesters could be ignored. Robinson used that argument. So did Conason.

Then there was the hypocrisy argument. These protesters were, obviously, Republicans. Why had these outraged Republicans not protested overspending and bailouts under George W. Bush?

It wasn't just the left that was making this point. It was made repeatedly on the libertarian website LewRockwell.com. Ryan McMaken wrote of attending the protest in Denver:

> I was too polite to ask any of the protesters questions like 'How exactly is it that you just suddenly realized that tax rates are high and that government spending is out of control?' Or perhaps: 'I like your little sign that says, "Stop the Spending!" How 'bout we save hundreds of billions immediately by bringing all the troops home?' "

On Bloggingheads.com, libertarian Matt Welch said: "I want to go there and ask people, 'Why weren't you out there doing this a year ago? Where were all these principled people when their people were in power?' "

In response to such accusations, the original Seattle organizer, Keli Carender, wrote, "I fully admit we are late to the game. I wish I had been on the ball a long time ago." Carender had voted for Bush and for McCain. But wasn't it better to be protesting now than *not* protesting now?

The left had chided Bush for overspending but had not been against overspending as such. It had been against Bush. Its accusations of hypocrisy were not about a position it actually held.

The libertarians did hold that position. But what political sense did it make for libertarians to bash the protests? Doubtless many of the protesters had voted for Bush: so what? Three key people who promoted the "porkulus" protest in my hometown — Wilbur, Beren, and Malkin — are supporters of the war. So what? The protests were not about the war. They were against the bailouts, the stimulus, the trillion-dollar increase in the federal debt, and the associated borrowing, fiat money creation, and eventual taxes. The protests were against a new and scary increase in the size of the state.

Then there was the hypocrisy argument. Why had these outraged Republicans not protested overspending under George W. Bush?

And libertarians oppose that?

Well, no; we don't oppose that. But these people are not *consistent*.

So what?

Some people are so focused on being right about everything that they can't cooperate with anyone who isn't just like them. Show these dainty libertarians an ally, and they wrinkle their noses. They see a hypocrite. But hypocrisy is a small sin, and one you can learn to overlook politely. This is not academia. This is politics — and in politics, what matters is who prevails.

What more can be learned from the Tax Day protests? Three obvious things.

First, a matter of tactics. Enemies will use any nutty or nasty things to label and dismiss the whole movement. Most particularly, anything smacking of racism — and a suggestion of secession by the governor of a former Confederate state can be portrayed as that — will be jumped on instantly by the left, which believes that racism is the secret cement binding all non-progressives together. Thus, for example, a lefty blog in my hometown pictured, without comment, Tax Day protesters with the signs:

Three key people who promoted the "porkulus" protest are supporters of the war. So what? The protests were not about the war.

Obamanomics: Monkey see, monkey spend

Impeach the Kenyan

Given American history, it's hazardous for anyone on the right to make a personal attack on a black president. It's poison to make an issue of his Kenyan ancestry. Whether Obama's birth certificate is in order is irrelevant now: it was filled out when he was an infant, it's been vouched for by the State of Hawaii, and the man has been elected president of the United States. People who make signs like "Impeach the Kenyan" should be made unwelcome.

The "monkey see" sign was held proudly by a child who probably did not know that it could be taken as a racist slur. His parents should have known, and so should the organizers. You don't allow signs like that. With 300,000 protesters, there will be a handful of such signs. Your enemies will find them if you don't.

Second, the protests showed that America has hundreds of thousands of supporters of a free-market economic policy. We saw this in the Ron Paul campaign, but might have wondered if it had ended there. Well, it didn't.

That is important. Protests rarely make a government turn on a dime, but they do have an effect. They intimidate the politicians who support a policy and embolden the politicians who oppose it. And that can be worth a lot.

Protests energize and organize. People meet others who think and feel as they do. They swap names and addresses. They form groups. Other groups recruit them. All the organizing groups were recruiting on April 15.

A third thing: Republican politicians.

This is a more difficult one. The Tax Day protests had not been created by or for existing Republican politicians. One blogger noted that in Wichita "an informal poll by a television reporter revealed that less than half the attendees were

continued on page 53

Street Fighting Man

by Doug Casey

We live in interesting times, but we are not necessarily cursed.

Longtime readers know my standard response to questions about the severity of the Greater Depression: it's going to be worse than even I think it's going to be. "Coming Collapse" books will undoubtedly accumulate into an entire genre in the next few years, as they did a generation ago. This time it's not just fearmongering, although things won't get as bad as in James Kunstler's book "The Long Emergency" and certainly not as rough as in the movies "Road Warrior" or "I Am Legend." But it's a good bet that a lot more is going to change than just some features of the financial system. Let's engage in a little speculation as to the shape of things to come.

I've long believed that this depression would not only be much different but much worse than the unpleasantness of the '30s and '40s. In those days, only a few people were involved in the financial markets; now almost anyone with any assets at all is a player. In those days, there were no credit cards, consumer debts, or student loans; now those things are ubiquitous. It's true that nobody will lose any money because of bank failures this time around; instead, everybody is going to suffer a loss from a collapse of the U.S. dollar, which is much worse.

In the '30s and '40s, the U.S. population was still largely rural in character, including people living in the cities. The average American was just off the farm and had a lot of practical skills as well as traditional values. Now he has skills mainly at paper shuffling or in highly specialized technologies, and it doesn't seem to me that the values of hard work, self-reliance, honesty, prudence, and the rest of the Boy Scout virtues are as common as they once were. In those days, the United States was a creditor to the world and the world's factory to boot; now there are perhaps $8 trillion outside the United States waiting to pour back in, and the country is now all about consuming, not producing. Even with what the New Deal brought in, there was vastly less regulation and litigation, leaving the economy with much greater flexibility to adjust and innovate; today, few people do anything without consulting counsel.

Of course things are immensely better today than 80 years ago in at least one important way: technology. I love technology, but unfortunately, improvements in that area do nothing to prevent an economic depression or many of the ancillary

problems that will likely accompany this one. In fact, it can be a hindrance in some ways.

So, accepting the premise of a depression, let's examine some of its likely consequences.

Civil Unrest

I've puzzled over who will go into the streets as the depression deepens and when they'll do it. Nikolai Kondratieff, of Long Wave fame, was of the opinion that the natives tend to get restless at economic peaks (like the late 1960s, when riots broke out all over the world) and at economic troughs (like the 1930s, when the same thing happened). His reasoning is not dissimilar from that of Strauss and Howe. At peaks, people are just feeling their oats, which can evidence itself domestically in riots inspired by rising expectations, and internationally in optional sport wars, like that in Vietnam. Such peak-time disturbances are troublesome but don't really threaten society. That's largely because when times are good, people feel they have a lot to lose and they believe things can get even better. In prosperous times, people don't usually feel like overthrowing the government or transforming the basis of society.

Not so at economic troughs. People believe they have little to lose, they're eager to hang those they believe responsible for their problems, and they'll listen to radical or violent proposals. We're now just entering what will likely be the worst economic trough since the Industrial Revolution.

But why do humans tend to riot when the going gets rough? How can they think that solves anything? Do they believe it's going to make their jobs or money reappear? Perhaps I ask that question only because I can't see myself rioting. You and I might discount the thought of Americans going wild, because we wouldn't likely join them. But we're not, I suspect, the average American. People, throughout history, have always been prone to violence when times get tough. Is there any reason that should change now?

Recently, there have been — really for the first time in this downturn — reports of large, angry demonstrations all over the world. The UK, France, Eastern Europe, now China. If a place like Iceland, as placid and homogeneous as any in the world, can blow up, then any place can. And probably will.

A rioter is typically an angry person looking for vengeance because he blames someone else for his problem. So far, rioters seem to be directing their attention at governments. Correct target, of course, but they don't have the rationale quite right. They're not angry because governments inflated the currency, promoted fractional reserve banking, and nurtured all the cockamamie socialist programs that caused this crisis. Not at all; they rather liked all that. They're angry only because their governments haven't adequately protected them from the consequences of what they did. So as conditions worsen, we can expect governments worldwide to pull out absolutely all the stops to show they're "doing something." And round up scapegoats to satisfy the mob and divert anger from themselves.

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I fully expect civil unrest to spread everywhere, simply because the depression will spread everywhere. It will be worst in places that have been most overextended, most debt-leveraged, most urban, and have the largest numbers of unemployed workers — the United States, Europe, and China.

In the last couple of generations, most rioters in the United States have been students who basically just raise some hell on their campuses and inner-city blacks who burn down their own neighborhoods. Maybe the students who've wasted a huge amount of time and money in gender studies and sociology will get angry as they figure out they're not going to have jobs when they graduate — forget about making $100,000 plus as an investment banker. Maybe blacks, who have apparently been hurt the worst by subprime lending and still may be the last hired and first fired, will take to the streets. Maybe. But I think it's more likely the turn of the Mexicans and other Latinos. They're the ones raided by *la migra* and stopped at checkpoints, whether they're legal or not. They're the ones who may be implicated in the wave of violence flowing up from northern Mexico. There is a real strain of revanchist nationalism throughout their community that hopes for the *reconquista* of lands the Anglos stole in the 19th century. And they have all the other problems you might expect with an ethnic underclass.

But will ordinary middle-class Americans riot? I don't expect it until later in the game. Union members will be treated well by the Obama regime. And most whites live in the suburbs; it's tough to get people who live in detached houses out into the streets. Ozzie and Harriet just don't seem likely to burn down their house, even if the bank owns it. Besides, a lot of the parents are on Prozac and their kids on Ritalin. Of course, on the other hand, most of the people who perpetrated mass murders over the last 25 years were on some type of psychiatric drug.

Is there a catalyst that could turn your neighbors into a mob? Two possibilities are gun control and higher taxes, discussed below. But my guess is that riots will be headed off by the police, who are far more numerous, militarized, and better equipped than ever before, and by the military itself. You may think the cops and the military (and today most cops are ex-military) would never turn on their fellow citizens, but you'd be wrong. Cops and soldiers are far more loyal to their colleagues and their organizations than they are to either some Constitution or, absolutely, the mob that's throwing bricks and bottles at them. They are also among the forces pumping for gun control.

Gun Control

This issue is potentially explosive. Although, sadly, gun culture in the United States isn't nearly what it was even a generation or two ago, it's still pretty strong in some regions. Most states make the open or concealed carrying of handguns a simple matter, and there's evidence lots of people are taking advantage of it. Personally, I find it hard to fathom the psychology of people who want to disarm society. From a strictly

practical point of view, the idea of having to engage in hand-to-hand combat, half naked, with an intruder in the middle of the night is most unappealing. Especially since the odds of that happening are going way up in the near future. Everyone should have a gun in his nightstand, at a minimum.

But that's only a fraction of what gun ownership is really about. A free person should have the right to possess whatever he desires. End of story. And only slaves, or those with a slave mentality, comply with no thought of resistance when they're told what they can or cannot own, especially if compliance means disarming themselves.

I've often wondered what would have happened in Germany after *Kristallnacht* if every Jew had been armed. None were, of course, because strict gun control had been imposed shortly after Hitler came to power, and like good little lambs, the population complied with the law. But my guess is that few would have defended themselves against the Gestapo anyway. Partly because they would have figured they were certain to get into serious trouble if they resisted, and partly because they couldn't imagine the fate that actually awaited them. It wasn't until the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1944, very late in the game, that people could finally read the writing on the wall and summoned the courage to fight.

If you follow these things, you'll note that there's been a lot of buzz about severe firearms regulation since Obama's inauguration. Bills are being discussed about things like a national firearms registry, reinstituting the so-called "assault weapons" ban, requiring secure locks on all weapons, prohibiting the import of ammunition, and levying a substantial tax on ammunition, among other things. No outright prohibition, because they know that would catalyze gun owners. But they keep dialing up the pressure, moving toward a de facto ban.

I'll guess there are at least 2–3 million Americans who adhere to a couple of succinct mottos: 1. You can have my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers, and 2. It's better to be tried by twelve than carried by six. This is a group that could catch fire at some point. But I don't think it's imminent, simply because the chances of outright prohibition of gun ownership are slim. The analogy of the frog in a gradually heating pot is apt. The taxpayer must also feel like a frog.

Tax Revolt

State and municipal governments all over the country are operating with rising outlays and radically declining incomes and so are running large deficits that add to their already massive debt. Since they can't print dollars, they'll raise taxes further, as New York and California have recently done. Most people don't have any philosophical objection to taxes; they accept them, considering them part of the human condition, like disease or death. That's unfortunate, of course, in that taxation is neither moral nor necessary. But such fine points of philosophy absolutely never enter the public debate.

What will be debated is the level of taxation. The last time we had widespread agitation on taxes was during the last serious recession, in the late '70s. The result was things like Prop 13 (which capped property taxes in California for some homeowners) and the Reagan tax reforms.

I expect there will be serious whining about taxes this time around as well, but little will come of it. To start with, like every other organism on the planet, government puts its own interests first; society comes in a distant second. Actually a distant third, after powerful individuals who are wired to politicians and bureaucrats, and groups that hire the right lobbyists. Every level of government is more desperate for money than ever. Your taxes are going through the roof, and you're going to see lots of new ones. Don't expect any support from *Boobus americanus*. About half don't earn enough to pay income tax. Most are net tax beneficiaries. And low taxes have somehow become associated with the late disastrous crack-up boom and the corrupt Bush regime. So a popular tax revolt looks like a real long shot.

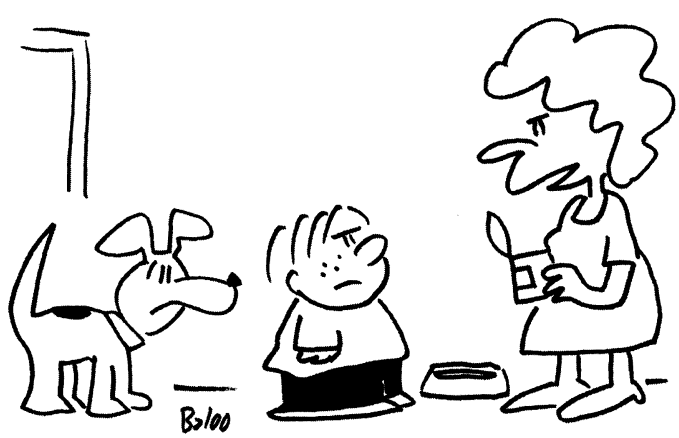
At the same time, a portion of the productive people in the country feel genuinely resentful at having to subsidize the losers and ne'er-do-wells. What are they going to do? I think they have only two alternatives. Tax evasion, which is both hard and increasingly risky, since the IRS will be hiring plenty of freshly unemployed financial workers. And expatriation. My guess is that scores of thousands of Americans are going to make "the Chicken Run" (as Rhodesians called it) in the next few years.

But the biggest danger to your personal freedom and your wealth, as well as to the United States as a whole, is likely to be war.

War

It always impressed me as odd that while Obama ran on a platform of ending the pointless and counterproductive adventure in Iraq, he wanted to ramp up the war in Afghanistan. What possible reason could anyone have for wanting to fight an optional war in what may be the most backward and xenophobic place on the planet? Even if every Afghan made a personal pledge of Death to America (which they eventually will, thanks to the occupation), who cares? Who cares if the Pygmies of the Ituri Rainforest or the Yąnomamö of the Amazon join them? It's strange that no one ever questioned Obama on this nonsensical and contradictory policy.

Now it seems he's very slow in leaving Iraq. I expect the reason is that the United States has built elaborate bases the size of small cities that they're loathe to leave, partly on general principles and partly because they might be needed to



"Feeding dog food to dogs is *not* ethnic stereotyping!"

attack Iran or Pakistan. The Obama regime is literally asking for trouble in both places. And partly because he knows that the collaborators set up to run the Iraqi government will promptly be deposed, and probably executed, by whoever might win the civil war that would ensue if the United States really left. The U.S. government is apparently set on having a stooge in charge of both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The National Security State has a life of its own. Renditions haven't been stopped. Guantanamo still operates, as do other overseas prisons holding thousands. Military spending not only won't be cut, it will likely rise.

Wars start for all kinds of reasons. But tough economic times probably rank number one as a cause. The 1930s were a natural overture for the '40s. Politicians like to find a foreign enemy to blame problems on. Theft of foreign resources can seem like a good idea. And part of the economic mythology fabricated by the malevolent and repeated by the ignorant is that World War II cured the last depression.

I've often wondered what would have happened in Germany after Kristallnacht if every Jew had been armed. None were, of course.

Will there be another 9/11? It's a good bet, but there's no way it will involve airplanes; the 50,000 zombies employed by TSA serve absolutely no purpose except to accustom Americans to being treated like prisoners. One possibility is the surreptitious placement of one or more nuclear devices in U.S. cities. As Pakistan disintegrates, their nuclear arsenal may fall into irresponsible hands. Or, perhaps, devices could be procured in a number of ways from Russia, India, Israel, or North Korea. Another, much more likely scenario is a repetition of what happened in Mumbai recently. A small force of dedicated and well-armed operatives could create unbelievable havoc in a U.S. city or in several at once. And probably will. Americans just don't appreciate how little people in the Islamic world like having aggressive, blue-eyed teenagers kick their doors down in the middle of the night, among other pranks.

You may be thinking that, with the American military the most powerful in the world, it's not about to lose a war. I question that. The bloated military is a major factor in bankrupting the United States, and a bankrupt country can't win a war. Its $6 billion carriers, $1 billion B-2s and $400 million F-22s are all built to fight a kind of enemy that no longer exists. They're sitting ducks for massive numbers of cheap missiles and jihadists that can swarm them where they're parked. The military wanted to fight World War I with cavalry and World War II with battleships. They're seemingly doomed to a repeat performance in the next major conflict.

In short, everything on this horizon looks very grim for a long time to come. Incidentally, the U.S. military is by far the world's largest single consumer of oil.

Peak Oil

There hasn't been much discussion of this since oil has come down from its July 2008 peak near $150 to its recent low of close to $30. Longtime readers know I'm philosophically quite reluctant to give credence to any theory that would seem to imply we can run out of anything. I come down firmly on the side of Julian Simon. Which is to say resources are essentially infinite, and technology and capital can solve almost any problem in the material world. That said, there are problems that need to be solved. One is presented by the geological theory of M. King Hubbert, who predicted in the 1950s that the production of light sweet crude in the continental United States would go into irreversible decline by the early '70s. He was correct. He also predicted that the same would happen on a worldwide basis in the first decade of this century. It now appears production has maxed out at about 80 million barrels a day and is headed down.

This isn't the time or place for a detailed discussion of why and how this is true. It's certainly not the end of the world, as some appear to believe. Just a major inconvenience. Practically infinite power is available from a wide variety of sources, starting with nuclear. The problem is that oil is a particularly concentrated, convenient, and (in the past) cheap source, so the entire world's economy has been built around it. It will take a decade or so to adjust to the much, much higher prices that will be needed to bring consumption into balance with production. And absolutely everything that relies on oil is going to become much more expensive — especially transportation (for obvious reasons) and food. Food is interesting in that mass production is highly mechanized and oil intensive, as well as fertilizer and pesticide intensive — which again rely on hydrocarbons. The oil-food problem is aggravated by so much of what we eat being shipped very long distances.

Anything is possible, of course, but I think the most likely scenario is simply a large reorientation in patterns of production and consumption as a result of $200 oil. This would be tough enough by itself. But it's going to put tremendous extra strain on the average American at exactly the time he's already under maximum strain from a shrinking economy.

Right now things aren't so bad, because energy prices are low. The depression has cut oil consumption and, conveniently, prices as well. That's taken a lot of pressure off the average American's pocketbook and at a felicitous moment. And prices may stay low for a year or so as people the world over economize. But oil consumption doesn't need to rise to put pressure on the price; from here, the main pressure is likely to come from falling supply, not rising demand. So oil prices are likely to start heading up, for strictly geological reasons, even as the depression grows deeper. That will prove most uncomfortable. And will have significant consequences for two mainstays of U.S. culture: cars and suburbia.

Collapse of Suburbia and the Car Culture

Suburbs are creatures of the automobile. I've been a car buff my entire life. I love cars for their technology. I love them because they're fun. But most of all, I love them because even more than the ship, the train, and the airplane, they liberate the average person to — cheaply and quickly — go anywhere he wants, whenever he wants. They've made it possible for people to break the mold of the medieval serf tied to the

community he was born into. I don't think cars are going to disappear, but the internal combustion engine is, as a result of Peak Oil, on its way out. I suspect battery power will start rapidly replacing gasoline and diesel. The problem lies in the transition, which is going to be expensive, considering the huge sunk investment in the current technology. There's going to be an interim period, when people can't afford to drive their pickups, SUVs, or practically anything else hundreds of miles a week to distant workplaces and kids' soccer games or on promiscuous shopping trips. But neither will they be able to afford a new electric car.

American culture revolves around the car. The car facilitated the growth of suburbs and exurbs, shopping malls and big boxes, most of which will become completely uneconomic with the rapid decline of the car. That's entirely apart from the suburbs and exurbs being exactly where people already can't make their mortgage payments. And can't afford to shop. They can't get by even at current bargain oil prices in the $40–$50 range. It's going to be much tougher when gas is $8 a gallon; if they can get a job, they're going to have to live within a few miles of it.

Entirely apart from that, people aren't going to be buying much stuff to store in the houses they can't afford. As George Carlin pointed out in his famous routine about "Stuff," that's what houses are for — storing stuff. And people are going to be liquidating what they have, not buying more, when they won't even have a proper place to store it. I'd hate to be in the furniture business over the next decade. Even if unemployment weren't going much higher.

Unemployment

The official numbers say unemployment is 7.6%. But just as the definition of inflation keeps evolving to accommodate a number that looks better than the reality, the same is true for unemployment figures. John Williams' Shadow Government Statistics (www.shadowstats.com) computes the figures the way the government used to — mainly by adding back in part-time workers and those considered "discouraged." They show 17.5% as the historically comparable unemployment figure.

Society has been living above its means for well over a generation, long enough to ingrain unsustainable patterns of production and consumption in the economy. Did everybody need a personal trainer 20 years ago? Was "shopping" a major recreational activity in the days before everyone had a pocketful of credit cards? Do all kitchens really need granite counter tops? I think not. As people cut down to the bare basics to enable themselves to rebuild capital, millions and millions more workers are going to have to find other things to do. And, while they're figuring out what, cut back their consumption drastically as well.

I suspect the readjustment will push unemployment to at least the levels of the Great Depression, which would mean going past 25%. But some will argue: "Yes, but we now have a safety net to catch the fallen. That will make it less serious." No, it will make it more serious and more prolonged as well. The so-called safety net consumes capital that could have been used productively. It decreases the urgency for each person of finding a solution to his own problems. And it has given people a false sense of security, leaving them to save less for a rainy day. The looming collapse of things like Social Security and Medicare will be a bigger disaster than all the banks failing. The Social Security "trust fund," which has been a swindle, a Ponzi scheme in slow motion, and a moral wrecking ball almost from its beginning, is going to go much deeper into the red. Before they collapse, Medicare, Medicaid, and their cousins will be expanded by some form of free care for the legions of the newly unemployed. Will doctors and nurses be made indentured servants (such as through mandatory voluntary community service) to provide care for everyone who may need it? Perhaps not as long as taxes can be raised further on the middle class.

The earth's climate has been changing constantly for at least 500 million years and has generally gotten much cooler over that time.

Sorry this has all been so gloomy so far. Now that the mood is set for recounting all the problems that are going to beset us, some of you are probably saying to yourselves: "Yes, and that's on top of global warming."

Global Warming

This is on just about everybody's list of Big Problems. Except mine. I'm not a professional climatologist, or even an amateur, so I lack any technical qualifications for commenting on the subject — like almost everybody else who does, prominently including Al Gore. But my guess is that in the next decade, the global warming hysteria (and that's exactly what I believe it is) will be viewed, with embarrassment, as one of the great episodes in the history of the delusions of the crowd.

Have you noticed that "global warming" is gradually being supplanted by "climate change"? The fact is that the earth's climate has been changing constantly for at least 500 million years and has generally gotten much cooler over that time. It has certainly warmed since the end of the last Ice Age, 12,000 years ago, and was much warmer at the height of the Roman Empire than now. It cooled during what became known as the Dark Ages, warmed again during medieval times (when grapes grew in Greenland and northern England), and cooled again during the Little Ice Age (which ended about 200 years ago). During the '70s, as you may recall, some magazines ran cover stories featuring glaciers intruding into New York City. And for the last ten years, it appears the earth has been cooling, although that's not widely reported. Change is a constant when it comes to the climate, and warmer is generally better.

Is the science "settled" on the subject? The very concept strikes me as ridiculous, in that science is rarely "settled" on anything short of it being proclaimed a law of nature. And, contrary to popular opinion, it seems most scientists with credentials in the field are either agnostic on the question or debunk the proposition of anthropogenic global warming. But the intellectual climate is such that most scientists are afraid

to question out loud the reality of warming. Since almost all funding today comes from politically correct sources, namely the government and foundations, the money goes to those who are known to be looking for the "right" answers. Science has been corrupted.

Of course man can change the environment. But our power to do so is trivial next to the sun, volcanoes, cosmic rays, and the churning ocean. None of those forces gets any mention in a popular press fixated on carbon, which has replaced plutonium as public enemy #1. Carbon may be the basis of life on earth, but it's supposed to be our new enemy nonetheless. The masses, who don't even know carbon is a "natural" element and think the periodic table is a piece of antique furniture, now feel guilty about breathing, because exhaled breath is a source of carbon dioxide.

At that point, the authorities will feel compelled to round up dissidents, constitutionalists, libertarians, and the other usual suspects.

Interestingly, a rise in atmospheric CO2 levels doesn't precede but follows, by several hundred years, phases of global warming. Everything you hear about saving the planet through carbon credits is as ridiculous and counterproductive as recent disastrous programs to turn corn into ethanol. In any event, carbon dioxide's effects as a greenhouse gas are completely overwhelmed by those of water vapor. God forbid anyone warns the public of the numerous dangers posed by compounds like dihydrogen monoxide (also known as hydroxic acid).

As a lifelong science buff, I find the whole subject quite interesting and am tempted to do an article on it. The reason I mention it here, however, is that the global warming hysteria, as opposed to possible cyclical global warming itself, has serious economic consequences. The chances are excellent that governments will direct scores of billions of dollars into further research, devising computer projections of catastrophe to come, and fighting the presumed warming. Much more serious are the laws they'll pass in the war against carbon (and methane, which amounts to a war against cattle and sheep), which could retard the economy by hundreds of billions of dollars. Most serious, in the long run, is the likely discrediting of science itself in the eyes of the common man once anthropogenic warming is exposed as a giant false alarm.

It's actually been quite a while since I've gotten an outraged letter. I expect and will welcome furious letters for denying Anthropogenic Global Warming. But writers, do me a favor, in the interest of intellectual honesty, and also because I always like to learn something new: give me a reference as to why you're a believer. Please don't include Al Gore or any tertiary news reports as evidence.

The Political Future

We can be quite confident the economic future is going to be grim. The military future, ugly and busy. The social future, turbulent. So is it reasonable to expect politics as usual? That would be rather anomalous. Especially since the trend towards much more state power, centered strongly on the executive, has been in motion, and accelerating, for at least four generations in the United States, even during the best of times. No surprises there. That is pretty much what observers of history from at least Plato on would expect.

In that America is recently deceased and only the United States survives, I see no reason that the trend won't continue accelerating, to be supercharged by the next Black Swan that might land. After the next real, fabricated, or imagined 9/11-style incident occurs or major war begins, it will be surprising if a state of emergency isn't declared. Perhaps martial law in the United States will, perversely, provide the impetus needed to "bring the troops home," in that they'll be needed more in the United States than in Fuhgedabouditstan or wherever.

I leave the practical implications of that entirely to your imagination. But to maintain what little will be left of domestic tranquility at that point, the authorities will almost certainly feel compelled to round up dissidents, potential troublemakers, "un-American" activists, constitutionalists, vocal malcontents, libertarians, and the usual suspects generally. It seems inevitable to me, and I'd prefer to be somewhere else when it happens. I'm loath to make outlandish political predictions, if only because the inevitable isn't necessarily the imminent. But if the United States survives the current crisis in its present form, I'll be surprised.

As always, there's a bright side. Obama will be a one-term president. And, as middle- and upper-middle-class Americans come to see the government less as a cornucopia — that's inevitable, because the cupboard is empty — they'll start to see it ever more as a predator. The government will become increasingly delegitimized in the eyes of what's left of the middle class. But what will they do? If they still have a home in the suburbs or a condo in the city, they're not going to burn it down like the poor. I'm not even sure they'll riot. But they will seethe with discontent. New affinity groups will coalesce. And they'll wait until something really catalyzes them. Is another revolution possible? Why not? The United States is just another country at this point.

I'm convinced that the nation-state, which is to say countries with governments based on geography, is on its way out fairly soon. And good riddance. Perhaps the United States will be among the first. What form of social organization will replace it?

In the near future, though, there will be a struggle between the best features of what little is left of America and the worst elements of humanity, whom we have in some abundance.

Emigrants and Sociopaths

Americans no longer appear to be a special breed. Of course, absolutely every nation likes to think it's a special, better breed — the Chinese, the Japanese, the British, the French, the Germans, absolutely everybody. It's a stupid but universal conceit, like the one putting God (presumably Yahweh) on their side during a war.

I used to fancy Americans actually could be a cut above simply because they're all the progeny of emigrants, and there are at least three reasons emigrants tend to be the "best" kind of people — at least from the point of view of someone who

values freedom. First, emigrants tend to be more enterprising than their neighbors at home, willing to leave everything they have to pursue opportunity. Second, they tend to work harder, since they know they'll get nothing they don't earn from strangers in a new land. Third, they tend to be anti-political, since political elites and conditions are usually what caused them to emigrate in the first place. Whether these things are because of a genetic predisposition or whether it's simply a cultural artifact within some families and groups, or both, I think it's a fact.

From the founding of the country, America has always had a strong emigrant ethos, and that's one of the things that has made it different and better. But all things degrade and revert to the mean with the passage of time. The country is now a fugitive from entropy.

Another reason for taking a pessimistic view is that — notwithstanding the point I made above — there's no reason not to believe there's a fairly uniform distribution of sociopaths across time and space, including in America today. All countries, in all eras, have them — but in good times, they stay under their rocks. Who would have guessed that the Germans of the last century, who had a well-educated, orderly population, much more than their share of writers, composers, philosophers, scientists, and plain middle-class shopkeepers, would have bred the Nazis? The Turks in the '20s, the Russians in the '20s and '30s, the Chinese in the '50s and '60s, the Serbs in the '90s, the Rwandans. . . . It would be easy to recount dozens of recent examples of perfectly ordinary countries that have gone bonkers. The fact is that your neighbor or your mailman, who pets his dog, hugs his kids, and plays softball on the weekends, might exhibit a much less appealing, indeed an appalling, side when social conditions change.

You've, of course, heard of the Milgram experiment, wherein researchers asked members of the public to torture subjects with electric shocks, all the way up to what they believed were lethal levels. Most of them did it, after being assured that it was "all right" and "necessary" by men in authority.

The problem arises when a society becomes highly politicized. In normal times, a sociopath stays under the radar. Perhaps he'll commit a common crime when he thinks he can get away with it, but social mores keep him reined in. However, once the government changes its emphasis from protecting citizens from force to initiating it with laws and taxes, those social mores break down. Peer pressure and moral opprobrium, the forces that keep a healthy society orderly and together, are replaced by regulation enforced by cops funded by taxes. And sociopaths start coming out of the woodwork and are drawn to the state, where they can get licensed and paid to do what they've always wanted to do. It's very simple, really. There are two ways people can relate to each other: voluntarily or coercively. The government is pure coercion, and sociopaths are drawn to its power and force.

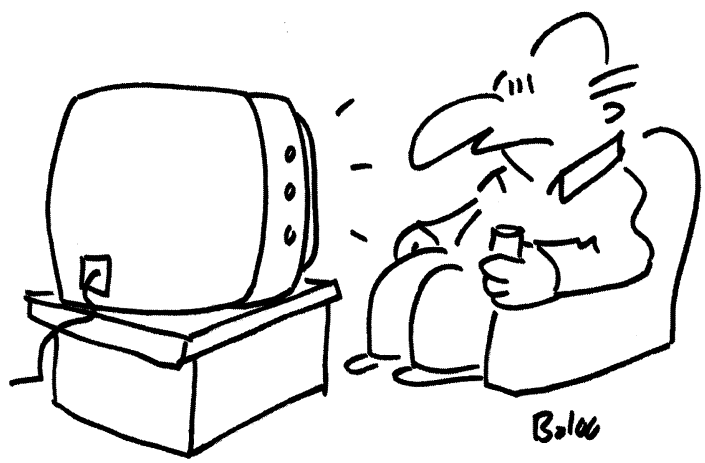
After a certain point, a critical mass is reached. The sociopaths who are naturally drawn to government start to dominate it. They reset the social mores of the country they control. And it's game over. I suspect we're approaching that point.

A Happy Note

There's no telling how bad things will actually get. The worst thing that could happen is a major war. But, barring that, what's happened in Zimbabwe, surprisingly, actually offers cause for some optimism. I was last there a couple of years ago, when, although it was a disaster, it hadn't descended into the absolute catastrophe that's going on now. Still, with draconian taxes, regulations, and hyperinflation, life goes on. Plumbers, electricians, and mechanics still repair things. Farmers still grow things — albeit on a much smaller scale. Stores still stock merchandise, even if there's not much of it. And I just heard yesterday from an ex-Zimbabwean that some of his friends there still play polo. And Zim is about as bad as it gets. But maybe it's also reason for pessimism. Why, out of the whole damned country, wasn't there at least one man with the courage to shoot Mugabe?

Look at Eastern Europe. After a horrible depression that lasted from about 1930 to 1990, the whole region blossomed in the space of a decade. It went from the grimmest dystopia, a veritable hologram of Mordor itself, to being almost indistinguishable from Western Europe. It shows how quickly things can improve, as long as there isn't a backdrop of purposeful stupidity. Try as governments may to destroy it, there's an immense amount of capital that the world has built up over the past few centuries. Individuals and small groups will continue building their capital everywhere, notwithstanding any kind of state action. The pace of technology should continue, if not accelerate.

As someone who always looks at the bright side, the final bit of good news I can offer you in this extraordinarily troubled milieu is that things are likely to be very interesting, even quite exciting, over the years to come. Notwithstanding the well-known Chinese curse, I'm not completely averse to interesting times. For one thing, you don't have to be adversely affected by them; they set up opportunities for greater profits than even the wildest bull market. They will also give some reality to what is probably my favorite rock song: The Rolling Stones' "Street Fighting Man." It used to be the bumper music for my radio talk show ten years ago. Both the show and the song used to outrage middle-class Americans nationwide. Turn up your speakers (as Ed Steer is often wont to advise in his daily blog, "And then there's this . . .") ❑



"Fighting broke out today between rival U.N. peacekeeping factions . . ."

Tombstones and International Trade

by Jacques Delacroix

An afternoon in the Bay Area leads to thoughts about free trade, the price of wheat, and French burial customs.

Here are two stories in one. The first story is about a near-hallucination, of the nonfrightening variety. The second is a cleverly disguised brief lecture on the theory of international trade and a savvy comment on the "buy local" movement. Yet the two stories are linked.

It was one of those bone-warming, sunny fall afternoons that I have only known in the San Francisco Bay Area. I had a slow day somehow, in the midst of a long period of hard work. I went to sit right on the edge of the bay to relax. The Marina Green, where people play soccer on Sundays, was at my back. Alcatraz Island was ahead and to the right, emerging from a light mist. Before my eyes, the unusually calm waters reflected the red gold of the late afternoon sun. I relaxed so well that I was soon in a pleasant, sensuous daze, nearly in a state of self-hypnosis.

I woke with a start, realizing that I had been staring vacantly at something odd right between my knees. I was sitting by the water, my feet resting on the large debris rocks that were used to create new land in the bay, a long time ago, on the occasion of an international exposition that celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914. What was so eerie that I thought I was dreaming was the half-erased but legible writing on two of the rocks, less than three feet from my face. The rocks were actually shaped, regularly cut, rectangular black granite stones. The inscription on one read, "Marie Le Pen, née [erased] décédée le 4 Avril 1842." On the second stone, you could barely decipher the words, "[Erased] Guillou, [erased] — dée, le [erased] 38, Saint-Brieuc."

Now, Saint-Brieuc is a middling-size port town on the English Channel, in the north of Brittany, the westernmost province of France. My grandmother had a house not ten miles from there, a house where I spent the only memorable moments of my childhood. "Le Pen" and "Guillou" are typical Breton names from that area; in fact, they are almost stereotypical names for the area. Granite is the common building material of the region. Almost all houses are made of it. "Décédée" means, of course, "deceased."

I was looking at the tombstones of women from an area I knew well, an area in France, of all places, while I was on the other side of the globe. The material and the inscriptions indicated that these two women had died at home, not in exile in America. I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I

was pretty sure that granite does not float. The question then was: how did the stones make it to San Francisco, thousands of miles from their place of origin?

Now, if you have read so far, it's worth your time to close your eyes for a minute and try to answer this simple question. (It took me more than a minute to answer it, I must admit.)

The dates on the stones are the starting point on the way to a solution: one woman died in 1842, the other, probably in 1838. Their simple rectangular gravestones, of the most common material, indicated that they were not rich. In the unsentimental, rather implacable French municipal graveyard system, you buy a burial plot for 20, 30, 50, or 100 years. Once your lease expires, you are out. Your bones, your gravestone, and all other personal accoutrements are removed to make room for others. Period! It's simple: the richer you are, the longer you are allowed to stay put. These two women, then, had not been wealthy. Hence, the grave markers must have arrived on the west coast of the United States sometime between the twentieth year following the burial, about 1860, and 1914. The next question was: Why?

If you crave paying six times more for organic local apples than for the same variety of nonorganic apples, bless your heart!

Stones used to fill up a watery area are obviously not worth importing deliberately. Besides, there are plenty of rocks in California; San Francisco itself is partly built on a granite substratum. Thus, the two tombstones must have been brought over by accident, or for some other purpose, and had only incidentally been dumped into the bay. They would probably have come by sea and around Cape Horn, since they had arrived before the opening of the Panama Canal, and they were not valuable enough to be freighted overland across the isthmus.

In the second half of the 19th century there were plenty of steam freighters, but there were still many sailing ships left. They were used to transport cargo that wasn't very perishable or in any other way in a hurry. Fast sailing ships cannot travel with their hulls empty; a crosswind would capsize them. They need ballast!

The two stones must have come from western France as ballast. They were dumped somewhere in San Francisco, near the bay, or in the bay proper, so that the ships could load something for the return trip. What then was the east-bound cargo?, I wondered.

California doesn't have any valuable minerals, except gold, of course, but there was never enough of that to keep filling ships. The last three-mast sailing ships carried up to 10,000 tons. That's enough for all the gold in California and most of the silver that trickled out. In any case, the Gold Rush lasted only a short time. Entrusting gold to sailing ships would not make sense when there were steamships and even trains that were much less hazardous.

What cargo, then, could travel slowly from the west coast of the U.S. to the west coast of France and still be price-competitive when it arrived? That is, even after all the expense of going down North, Central, and South America, around the Horn, up to Brazil, and diagonally north and east across the Atlantic to the English Channel? It must have been some kind of agricultural commodity.

Cotton comes to mind, because California now exports vast quantities of cotton to Europe. But that's relatively new. Large-scale cultivation of cotton didn't begin until California's Central Valley was irrigated, thanks to federal investment, in the 20th century. What is left, by process of elimination, is grains — probably wheat, because Western Europeans didn't use much corn until recently, and because other cereals were falling into disfavor in the 19th century (see below).

So here we have it: Sometime before 1915, possibly as early as 1860, little more than 10 years after the large white settlement of California, wheat was produced there so efficiently that it could compete in price in the European market with wheat produced in Europe itself, even after a slow 10,000-mile journey. It could compete despite the fact that the carrying vessels might have made the return trip partly empty and needing to take ballast aboard. Saint-Brieuc, the port town where (according to my explanation) the California wheat was unloaded, is itself in the middle of a wheat-growing region. Apparently, California wheat was able to compete with the wheat grown a mile or less from the harbor where the product was unloaded.

As I and my betters have pointed out many times, "globalization" — whatever exactly that means — is not a new phenomenon. But what of its social consequences, ask my concerned, militantly localist friends? Well, some French wheat farmers may very well have been displaced, beginning with those who were not very good to begin with, but including those who could not produce wheat efficiently for a variety of other reasons, not their own fault. In the middle run, it does not really matter why; less expensive wheat beats more expensive wheat of the same quality. That's what a high standard of living means: you don't have to spend a lot, or work long hours, for necessities.

Some displaced farmers went to work in industry, leaving behind what Karl Marx called "the idiocy of village life." Many adapted by switching to other agricultural products. Today, Brittany supplies much of Europe with fresh green vegetables and strawberries, both enormously more remunerative for small plots than wheat.

What we know for sure — because the French, for all their faults, keep good statistics — is that during the period when California wheat was conquering France (and much of Europe), its population was becoming richer and healthier year by year. That particular kind of globalization seemed to have caused no misery. It must have made bread — and, indirectly, chicken and pork — cheaper for all. It was a common phenomenon: the much-preferred wheat displaced inferior local cereals such as barley, which then become available to feed small farm animals. Everyone benefited, except perhaps the chicken and the pigs. Barley was not siphoned off from breweries, as one might fear, since beer production also grew

continued on page 53

The Books of Summer

Each year at this time, Liberty invites a number of interesting people to recommend books that they find interesting, for pleasant or challenging summer reading. The invitation says, "You may recommend one book, or many, and on any subject. The only requirement is that the books you recommend must be available for purchase." The idea isn't just to review a book; it's to express an enthusiasm that may possibly become contagious. The idea is to let people know about a good book they might otherwise miss.

Here are the results.

"Fellow Travelers" (Vintage) is a love story set in Washington, DC, against the backdrop of the McCarthy hearings. It is unusual in two ways. First, the lovers are gay. Second, it just might be the only novel about the 1950s that suggests that the communists were at least as bad as Joe McCarthy. No surprise, since author Thomas Mallon calls himself a libertarian Republican and assisted Dan Quayle in the writing of his memoirs. Mallon is best known as an essayist (for GQ, the New Yorker, and other magazines) and as the author of such historical novels as "Dewey Defeats Truman" and "Henry and Clara."

"Fellow Travelers" displays his dedication to historical research. He talked to a lot of oldtimers and did a lot of digging in newspaper files. The book includes historical figures such as McCarthy and his aides Roy Cohn and David Schine, as well as lesser-known characters from the period such as Sen. Charles Potter (R-Mich.) and his aide, Robert L. Jones, who went back to his home state of Maine to run a McCarthyite campaign against Sen. Margaret Chase Smith. (Yes, he really did; I looked it up.)

The novel's protagonist is an invented character — handsome Hawkins Fuller, an old-line WASP who has just enough family money to keep him in Park Avenue circles. He works at the State Department, which was regarded by anticommunists as a den of "cookie pushers" reluctant to stand firmly against the Soviet Union. He sets his sights on Tim Laughlin, a young Irish Catholic from the lower middle class who believes fervently in Bishop Sheen and the fight against communism. "Nazism and communism were the same thing; every man in the street knew it," he muses at one point. Only poli-sci professors thought the differences mattered. But as he pursues his affair with Hawk and gets a close-up view of McCarthy and his committee, Tim finds himself becoming "a believer in contradictions: that McCarthy was the devil doing the Lord's work; that Christ was Lord and yet His laws could be disobeyed."

For Tim the affair is tender and passionate, joyful and miserable, but always hidden. Homosexuality was not just against

the law, it was despised. And it could cost you your job. Scott McLeod's "Miscellaneous M Unit" (McLeod is another real character) was diligently searching out suspected homosexuals in the State Department, creating a Lavender Scare to accompany the better known Red Scare. Gays had few attractive options. Different people made different choices, and in the end Hawk and Tim choose very different paths.

If you like American history and politics, this is a fascinating book. Mallon is a graceful writer, and the historical accuracy makes it a great way to learn about both the facts and the feeling of the early 1950s.

In the last line of the book, set decades after the main story, Fuller reflects on "a world grown unexpectedly, and increasingly, free." Mallon elaborated in an interview: "If you asked me when I was 18 and I was going off to college, what were the two biggest political developments I would want to see in my lifetime, my internal answer — because I wouldn't have dared say the second part — would have been the collapse of communism and the liberation of homosexuals. By the time I was 40 both of those things had been in large part achieved." That's why this novel of a doomed relationship in a frightening time is not ultimately a bleak story. — David Boaz

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

The message of the pundits is that this is the summer of "presidential greatness," at least as defined by the legacies of Franklin Roosevelt and, to a lesser extent, Abraham Lincoln. It is likely that FDR was never so much in fashion, even during his lifetime. The hosannas continue to be heard across the conventional political spectrum, ranging from neoconservative Conrad Black to left-liberal Paul Krugman. For this reason, the appearance of Burton Folsom's Jr.'s "New Deal or Raw Deal? How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America" (Simon and Schuster) is a very welcome corrective.

Folsom, a seasoned professional historian who knows his subject inside and out, is well prepared to take on what John Flynn called the "Roosevelt Myth." He relies on extensive primary archival research at the Roosevelt Presidential Library and other places. Brick by brick, he demolishes the edifice so lovingly erected by Roosevelt worshipers over the generations, showing that New Deal policies not only needlessly extended the Great Depression but also systemically undermined Americans' economic liberties. Through his National Recovery Administration, Roosevelt both delayed recovery and had businessmen tossed in jail for doing nothing more than charging low prices. Most dramatically, Folsom describes in detail Roosevelt's long and unsavory record of unleashing the IRS on his enemies and converting New Deal programs into a personal political machine.

Another well timed reexamination of presidential power is Ivan Eland's "Recarving Rushmore: Ranking the Presidents on Peace, Prosperity, and Liberty" (Independent Institute). He surveys every president from Washington to G.W. Bush and comes up with surprising results, reversing the usual rankings of such people as Roosevelt and Wilson ("greats") and such people as Harding ("failures"). He makes a compelling case for believing many of the so-called "greats" were not so great after all when it came to preserving liberty, peace, and prosperity. Libertarians will especially appreciate Eland's method of giving high marks to such presidents as Cleveland, who championed limited government, free trade, and avoidance of foreign entanglements. Eland's choices are not often predictable. He makes a provocative case, for example, that Carter was a better president than Reagan, the alleged champion of small government.

My final selection is on a very different historical theme. It is Jim Powell's "Greatest Emancipations: How the West Abolished Slavery" (Palgrave-Macmillan). Powell treads on "forbidden ground." Historians almost universally agree that the Civil War was the necessary precondition for emancipation, but Powell argues that the more violence that was involved in the process, the worse the outcomes tended to be. Among other things, war led to a backlash that nobody could control, a backlash that subverted civil rights for decades. Readers will be interested to see Powell's reasons for believing that equal rights probably would have been achieved decades sooner if war had been avoided. He shows that other places (the British Empire, Brazil) offer lessons — valuable lessons, though often ignored — about how slavery could be peacefully abolished.

Powell provides a refreshingly abolitionist, yet antiwar, argument, which hasn't been heard in a long time. He marshals convincing reasons for concluding that the United States would have been better off if it had chosen the nonviolent alternative put forward by Lysander Spooner and others. Warning: apologists for the Confederacy will not find any solace in this book. — David Beito

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

Global warming is a somewhat intimidating topic, because the debate hinges on specific, nontrivial scientific questions. Unfortunately, there is also a great deal of open intimidation being exercised by members of the scientific community. I have repeatedly found myself in contexts in which truly outstanding scientists have asserted with apparently complete assurance that there is no question that global warming is occurring, that a major component relates directly to human activity, and that we are clearly risking catastrophe unless huge resources are immediately committed to correcting the situation.

For a somewhat more nuanced view, I highly recommend "The Deniers," by Lawrence Solomon (Richard Vigilante Books). Solomon establishes that the subject has not yet been clearly resolved, and he does so in a well-written, informative book. In my view, too many scientists with too much to gain personally have taken positions that are not defensible. It is time for concrete predictions that can be tested.

For example, "Will it be (on average) warmer or colder next year?" In fact, it got colder this year. As far as I can tell, this has not altered anyone's position on global warming. So how about, "How many of the next 10 years will have average temperatures warmer than this year?" These are simple questions. Getting the answers is somewhat complex, and the answers will not resolve the overall dispute. However, the

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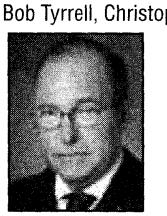
Nathaniel Branden said it best, "I feel an electricity here I haven't felt in years."

Why Las Vegas?

Conservatives (CPAC) meet in Washington DC, but we hate Washington and all it stands for. Doug Casey calls it "death star." We prefer Las Vegas, the world's most libertarian city.

Every year we attract a growing number of free-market speakers and authors. This year we've confirmed Larry Kudlow, Charles Murray, Steve Forbes, John Mackey, David Boaz, Brian Doherty, Doug Casey, Michael Shermer, Stephen Cox, David Friedman, Lawrence Reed, Floyd Brown, Dan Mitchell, Tom Palmer, Al Regnery, Bob Tyrrell, Christopher Ruddy, and Matt Welch.


Larry Kudlow


Matt Welch


Steve Forbes

Why Steve Forbes and John Mackey Love FreedomFest

My favorite story is **Steve Forbes**. Last year he was going to fly in, give a speech, sign some books, and fly back to New York. But when he saw the lineup of speakers, he decided to stay all 3 days. Attendees were amazed to find Mr. Forbes walking in the exhibit hall or sitting next to them in the workshops. And he's coming back this year -- all 3 days.

Libertarian CEO **John Mackey** also makes a point every year to take time from his busy schedule running Whole Foods Market to come for the entire conference. "I love FreedomFest," he told me. "Wonderfully interesting people and non-stop intellectual stimulation. I'm really looking forward to FreedomFest 2009."

Last year 1,427 individuals came from all 50 states and around the world (as far away as New Zealand), a 42% increase. This year we expect even a bigger crowd.

Representatives of all the top free-market think tanks and organizations make it a point to be there, including **Reason, Cato, Heritage, Fraser, FEE, and Hillsdale College. Liberty Editors Conference** holds their annual conference there. And **Laissez Faire Books** is our official bookstore. (C-SPAN films us every year.)

GREAT NEWS! Campaign for Liberty will be joining us: Meet **Congressman Ron Paul, Judge Andrew Napolitano**, and **Tom Woods**.

What's it all about?

Think of it as a Renaissance weekend where, once a year, we come together to debate everything from philosophy, history, science/technology, economics to geo-politics, healthy living, and money.

As Jerry Cameron of St. Augustine, Florida, says, "FreedomFest was like having access to all the greatest intellectual food in the world and you just couldn't eat fast enough to sample it all. I can't remember an event in my life that was more gratifying than this convention."

"Clear and Present Danger"

At every FreedomFest, we also hold our **World Economic Summit**, and this year commands your attention. Our theme is "Clear and Present Danger," with keynote speakers **Larry Kudlow, Steve Moore, Charles Gasparino, Tyler Cowen,** and **John Fund**, and an "All Star Forecasting Panel," with financial gurus **(Peter Schiff, Alex Green, Rick Rule, Fred Foldvary, Bert Dohmen)** who warned attendees in the past two years about the growing financial crisis, and what they are predicting now.

The theme for this year's event is **"Imagine the Possibilities."** This year we are planning 9 debates, including: "US Foreign Policy--isolationist or imperialist?.... Should hard drugs be legalized?...Keynes, Hayek, Friedman: Who Best to Solve the Financial Crisis?" See **John Mackey** take on the **Objectivists** in **"Randian vs. Conscious Capitalism"....Prof. Richard Vedder** take on **Al Norman** on "Wal-Mart, Good or Bad?"

Plus we're organizing a science fiction/fantasy mini-festival, highlighting the works of Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, and Ayn Rand.... **Prof. Steve Watts** on juvenal and adult fantasy in post-war America (Walt Disney's Fantasyland vs. Hugh Hefner's Playboy).... Sacred text project (Rabbis, priests, Sikhs and other true believers talking about the Bible, Koran, Tao Te Ching, etc.).... Professors showing how to write a classic.... **Prof. Art Benjamin** on the magic and mystery of mathematics.... and two Canadians tell us "Why 60 Million Frenchmen Can't be Wrong!"

Grand Finale: We Save the Best for Last

Attendees always love our grand finale, the Saturday night banquet. Last year's George Bush impersonator brought the house down—one attendee told us, "I haven't laughed this hard in ten years." This year, enjoy another induction ceremony of the **Free Market Hall of Fame**, an unforgettable surprise music group (you can "imagine" who it is), and a "Dance with the Stars" contest!

To paraphrase Ben Franklin, let's all hang out together in Vegas, or surely we shall all hang separately. Fly there, drive there, bike there, be there!

Yours for liberty, AEIOU
Mark Skousen, *Producer*

P. S. Good news! We just renegotiated our hotel contract, and Bally's is now offering us room rates at $74 per night!

For all the details, go to our newly designed website, www.freedomfest.com.
(And while you're at it, listen to our new theme song, "Freedom and Gold." It's intoxicating.)
Only $495 per person, $795 per couple.
To register, call Tami Holland at Toll-free 1-866-266-5101

scientists who exhibit such certainty would do well to consider whether or not they are willing to make clear, simple predictions that can be tested. Remember when everyone was certain that overpopulation was the major threat, or when it was clear that we were running out of oil?

Recently, I went through the experience of watching major components of my retirement fund evaporate. You may have experienced something similar. I had thought of myself as reasonably well educated. I had studied economics a bit — certainly not as assiduously as many other writers in Liberty, but

Roosevelt delayed recovery and had businessmen tossed in jail for doing nothing more than charging low prices.

I fancied myself at least literate. Upon reflection, I realized that I was pretty clueless about many of the details. I decided that I should try to understand what happened (which is almost always much easier than predicting it). I have now read five or six books of varying complexity. Some of the effort was enlightening, and much was just painful. If you find yourself in my position, let me suggest that you start with two books: "The Mystery of Banking," by Murray Rothbard (Mises Institute), and "Meltdown," by Thomas Woods, Jr. (Regnery). I found both books at the Ludwig von Mises Institute, which has an offering of books that is truly wonderful.

Woods' book is an attempt to clarify, from the perspective of Austrian, free-market economics, what happened in the recent financial crisis. His comments on the background events are clear and interesting. His two-page summary of the Austrian theory of the trade cycle is elegant.

"Edward de Vere? — give me a *break!*"

Rothbard's book is somewhat dated, but it is still an excellent place to begin learning about banking. His tutorials are clear, and he enlivens them with unorthodox conclusions that are always worth pondering (e.g., his position, which deserves discussion, that fractional-reserve banking should be illegal). I had never understood what was meant by "open-market operations," let alone their implications, although this is something I should have understood.

I doubt that these two books will assuage the pain of what is happening today, but they may help you endure it with more understanding. — Ross Overbeek

Ross Overbeek is a cofounder of the Fellowship for Interpretation of Genomes.

Laughter is proper to man, Aristotle wrote, and I'll not argue. I've long harbored doubts about the humanity of those unfortunates who do not know how to laugh, or when. This entry, then, is not for them. Primarily, it is for myself, to pass along authors who have made me laugh, in the hopes of finding others of kindred humor.

Along the great grotesque line that runs from Aristophanes to "South Park," there is no more outré, gonzo comedian than François Rabelais (1494–1553). His mock-epic tale of the giant Gargantua and his even more giant son Pantagruel overflows all boundaries, in form and content. There are many levels on which it can be read, and all of them are funny; check the "List of fictional works" entry on the novel in Wikipedia for a heaping sample. The Donald Frame translation (University of California Press) generally gets the plaudits, Burton Raffel's version (Norton) is very readable and cheaper.

At the opposite pole of decorum are the society horror tales of H.H. Munro (1870–1916), who wrote as Saki. His stories (complete in a Penguin paperback) are fey, malicious and graceful, whether inspired by the supernatural ("The Open Window") or just the idle cruelty of a traveling companion ("The Unrest-Cure").

You may notice that I am sticking with fiction; I figure that most libertarians in the market for a laugh already know to pick up P.J. O'Rourke, or follow him back to the source in H.L. Mencken. But how many think to pick up Mencken's favorite author, James Branch Cabell (1879–1958)? For someone who was officially denounced by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and who successfully fought off an obscenity charge, *and* who had a further revenge by writing his inquisitors into the book as prurient Philistine pill-bugs, Cabell is woefully unknown. Start either with his "Jurgen" (the "obscene" one, you'll know the passage when you hit it) or "The Silver Stallion," and laugh along with the Sage of Baltimore. They're in print by Overlook and Kessinger, respectively.

One last, and with it full disclosure: I am (slowly) writing a biography of this man, and one way or another my career will be bound up in his writings. But it would be a shame not to recommend to you R.A. Lafferty (1914–2002) and his tall tales, whoppers in which cities are destroyed and rebuilt three times in a night, or a love affair can continue through several layers of geologic strata. It's a brew of science fiction, frontier lie, and blarney that Lafferty offers up, and he pours it forth in a prose that casually shatters every rule about storytelling dished out

in workshops. "Show, don't tell?" But all the fun is in the telling, when you have the crookie tongue of the Irish, and the neverending vista of the midwestern imagination. Pick up his anthology "Nine Hundred Grandmothers" (Ace), or search out his novel "Okla Hannali" (University of Oklahoma Press), which details the 19th century through the eyes of a Choctaw giant and folk hero. — Andrew Ferguson

Andrew Ferguson is the critic-in-residence at the Institute for Impure Studies.

By now you may have seen the film "Watchmen," or read about it in these pages (Liberty, June 2009). Whether you've seen the film or not, if you have not read the book by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons on which the film is based, my top pick for your summer reading is that. The graphic novel takes place in an alternate 1985, at the height of Cold War tensions, in a world remarkably like the real world, except that it has superheroes. What would it be like, the book asks, if people really did put on costumes and become crimefighters? What kinds of people would do that? And how would they be regarded?

The book is deeply thought-provoking, raising questions about power, corruption, responsibility, and freedom, as well as questioning the nature of its own medium. If you have already read "Watchmen," and if you enjoy puzzling out such things, you may also enjoy reading some discussion of its themes, which you can find in two recent collections: "Superheroes and Philosophy," edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Open Court), and "Watchmen and Philosophy," edited by Mark D. White (Wiley).

If you have never read Herodotus, you really should, and if you're going to do it this summer, you're in luck, since by the time this sees print, Pantheon will have released the paperback edition of "The Landmark Herodotus," edited by Robert Strassler. Generally regarded as the first actual history book in the Western world, "The Histories" is Herodotus' account of the wars between the Persian Empire and the autonomous but allied Greek city-states, and Strassler's Landmark edition features a wealth of helpful features such as maps, annotations, and appendices by leading scholars. In stark contrast to

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Remember when everyone was certain that overpopulation was the major threat, or when it was clear that we were running out of oil?

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the insane and self-destructive Peloponnesian Wars of a generation later, the Greco-Persian conflict is an inspiring story of the way in which small communities dedicated to preserving their own autonomy cooperated to repel multiple attempts at conquest. The recent film "300" tells one small part of this tale, and both admirers and detractors of that film will be interested to learn more about the actual Battle of Thermopylae. You have probably heard the spurious tale of how the marathon run got its name, but here you will learn what really happened, and you'll be pleased to discover that the truth is even more interesting than the myth.

I have frequently recommended the work of Neal Stephenson in these pages, and if your preference for summer reading is for fiction, I will follow in my own footsteps and recommend his latest, "Anathem" (William Morrow). Stephenson has worked in both science fiction and historical fiction, as well as their overlap, and his latest is science fiction-alternative history about a world in which scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers are the ones who live in isolated monasteries. Stephenson often incorporates libertarian themes into his work, although rarely with any obviousness, and in any case he's an engaging and entertaining writer.

— Aeon J. Skoble

Aeon J. Skoble is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Bridgewater State College, in Massachusetts.

"He had a certain kind of greatness, but he kept it to himself. He never gave it away. He never gave anything away. He just — left you a tip."

In "Citizen Kane," that's what Jed Leland, Charles Foster Kane's former best friend, says of the great man who is the film's protagonist. The movie is preoccupied with the question of whether Kane was a "great American" or only a "big American."

Many libertarians ponder this question when they review the ranks of allegedly great and small figures in American political history. For me, some of the answers are easy. Washington was the greatest of them all — brave, yet judicious; nobody's idea of an intellectual, yet fully in command of the profound ideas on which America's tradition of constitutional liberty is based, and fully intending to apply those ideas, come what might.

Then there are figures who are seldom esteemed by any but the most bookish of libertarians — yet some of them were great people, nonetheless. The most lovable person in this category is perhaps Grover Cleveland. Again, he was nothing of the intellectual, but he was a brave man who understood the principles of limited government and applied them, no matter what. It is to people like Washington and Cleveland — and few presidents have been like enough to them — that we owe the present possession of our liberties. Allan Nevins' classic biography, "Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage" (American Political Biography Press), will never disappoint a libertarian reader — even though it was written by someone who was *not* a libertarian.

Now, Abraham Lincoln. He is a man worshiped by the world at large; he is a man who has been reviled (often with justice) by libertarians. He freed the slaves, but at what a price! He terrorized the Supreme Court, turned habeas corpus into a laughingstock, provoked a horrible war by refusing to make an open statement of his aims and policies, promoted, in his domestic programs, the old Whig version of activist government . . . what more shall I say?

I say that Lincoln is more interesting than any of his policies, or any of the hallelujahs or anathemas directed at him. No president can be more interesting than Washington, but Lincoln comes close, if only for his deep psychological conflicts; his union of insatiable ambition with despairing

lassitude, of high idealism with desperate ruthlessness; his unequaled gifts of charm, persuasiveness, and real folk wisdom; and a closely allied gift, the possession of superb literary skill, unique and unaccountable by his environment, training, or general reading.

If there is a key to Lincoln's peculiar, and mysterious, personality, it would be "Herndon's Lincoln" (University of Illinois Press), a biography published in 1889 by William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner. After 1865, Herndon devoted himself to collecting records and anecdotes of the Great Man, a friend whom he sincerely loved. Nevertheless, his book gravely offended Lincoln worshipers with its home truths about his strange life before the presidency. Herndon is a good writer — not a fine writer, but a strong and continuously interesting one. He never bores, and he never loses touch with Lincoln's strangeness and mystery, with the way in which the commonest, grossest actions of his life become questions, both about his own inner reality and about the life and meaning of his time and nation. Herndon was one of the many people to whom Citizen Lincoln left nothing more than "a tip," but Herndon knew what to do with it.

And speaking of presidents, I want to add recommendations of books about three of these gentry who will never qualify as "great" but are nevertheless much more interesting than they are usually given credit for.

One is a brilliant account of Warren Harding and the mess that historians have made of his reputation. It's "The Strange Deaths of President Harding," by Robert H. Ferrell (University of Missouri Press). In 200 pages of crisp, precise, amusing, beautiful prose, Ferrell disposes of the silly and demeaning myths that have surrounded Harding's life and death, and provides an intelligent and well-balanced reassessment. The "deaths" of President Harding are his assassinations by historians, and this book can be read as an education about how history can go wrong. Ferrell's work is one of the four or five best that have ever been written on the American presidency. It's worth at least half of a college education.

Contrasted with the modesty of Warren Harding is the pomposity of James Monroe, the popular chief magistrate who presided over the Era of Good Feeling, and who spent enormous amounts of time, bluster, and prevarication trying to get the federal government to pay him money that he imagined it owed to him. An instructive, and consistently amusing, book has been written about this, a book that illustrates what a mass of littleness a president may be. The book is "James Monroe: Public Claimant," by Lucius Wilmerding (Rutgers University Press). It's a book that ought to be better known. In fact, it's a hoot.

Less of a hoot but even more instructive is Lewis L. Gould's "The Presidency of William McKinley" (Regents Press of Kansas). This is an objective, scholarly biography — though much, much better written than scholarly biographies usually are. It is focused on McKinley's role as manager of the Spanish-American War and creator of an American "empire." We who are anti-imperialists often pay insufficient attention to how empires of various kinds are actually created. We scoff at the idea that they could ever be invented by people of intelligence, acting without a specific intention to rule the world or even to acquire any territory. Gould, himself a critic of imperialism, shows otherwise. The point, I suppose — *my* point, anyway — is the essentially libertarian idea that individual people are usually a lot more interesting than the political isms they are thought to represent. — Stephen Cox

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

Robert J. Norrell, a historian at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, is getting a cold shoulder from other historians. His newest book "Up from History" (Belknap Press) is the first major biography of Booker T. Washington since 1972.

The book is a big (500-page), detailed, and emotionally involving biography, set against the increasingly virulent racism of the post-Reconstruction South. It is a readable introduction to the life of a person, once famous, whose story has been lost to most of us.

Adding interest is the fact that Norrell has offended historians who like the old historiography, which had pretty much blotted Washington out of American history. Louis Harlan's 1972 biography (which echoed views of the famous Southern historian C. Vann Woodward) had painted Washington as an Uncle Tom and self-interested conniver who placated Southern whites and undermined other blacks' successes.

During his lifetime (1856–1915) Booker T. Washington became the most famous — and admired — American black man. His undisputed legacy was the creation of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and the pivotal event in his life was a speech in Atlanta in 1895 in which he said, "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." He offered Southern whites a soothing message of cooperation from blacks.

Norrell's analysis of Washington's actions reclaims his moral standing. For example, Norrell reveals that Washington made behind-the-scenes efforts to end lynching, racial discrimination by railroads and labor unions, and restrictions on voting. He gives a more nuanced view of the conflicts between Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, an important founder of the NAACP. Above all, Norrell argues that the rising tide of white supremacy forced Washington to demonstrate that blacks were not going to challenge the hegemony of whites. Norrell contends that it is "anachronistic" to blame Washington for failing to be a civil rights advocate a la the 1960s.

Here you will learn how the marathon really got its name, and you'll discover that the truth is even more interesting than the myth.

But historian Ralph Luker says that Norrell presents Washington as a "model of leadership," which he finds distasteful. Another historian, Joseph Lowndes, says that Washington's policy was "more of a choice than a constraint" — implying that a true leader would have aggressively challenged the tightening Jim Crow noose (not a phrase used lightly, since during some of the years in question there were 200 lynchings in the South). These people commented on a

left-wing blog, the Talking Points Memo Cafe, which had a week-long chat about Norrell's book. (I also participated in the discussion.)

So, these days, modern and (if I may say) politically correct historians are arguing that Booker T. Washington was either cowardly or greedy to propose a conciliatory position with whites. Yet they are in the odd position of arguing that race relations in the South (in a period of lynchings, mounting discrimination, vastly disparate funding of education, and vicious racial stereotypes) should not have deterred Washington from overt challenges to the white power structure. Since he was, instead, accommodating, they treat him disdainfully (and many, it appears, just ignore him).

The backdrop of Norrell's biography is the extremely dangerous environment for blacks during Washington's life. (An even fuller description can be found in Norrell's 2005 book "The House I Live In: Race in the American Century" [Oxford University Press].) If the picture is correct, then Washington's "choice" of policy was indeed highly constrained; another policy might have destroyed Tuskegee or Washington or both. No one has actually denied the accuracy of this picture, as far as I know. Those who condemn Washington have simply deleted it from their analysis — and deleted Washington, too. But Norrell brings him back. — Jane S. Shaw

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

In past reviews of favorite books, I have neglected to mention one of my favorite authors, the ever-prolific Mark Skousen, whose works I have enjoyed immensely. Skousen recently brought out another delightful book: "The Big Three in Economics" (M.E. Sharpe).

This volume nicely complements some of his earlier work, which gives us laymen an historical introduction to economics. Here he focuses on three major economists, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Meynard Keynes, surveying their distinctive economic philosophies with his characteristic clarity and panache.

Skousen rejects the traditional academic view that likens the history of economic thought to a swinging pendulum, with Smith representing the rightward swing, Marx the leftward, and Keynes the enlightened, moderate center. Instead, Skousen suggests a totem pole image of achievement, with Smith at the top, Keynes in the middle, and Marx at the bottom.

Skousen gives lucid and even-handed summaries of each thinker's major work. For example, he credits Smith with a brilliant refutation of mercantilism, and with his seminal idea that the division of labor drives economic growth, and GDP is the proper measure of a nation's wealth. However, he notes that Smith's ideas had their flaws, such as the distinction between so-called productive and unproductive labor, and — most importantly — a usual adherence to the erroneous labor theory of value. Skousen's treatment of Keynes is equally balanced.

Politically correct historians argue that Booker T. Washington was cowardly or greedy to propose a conciliatory position with whites.

In attention to his extensive discussion of the three central figures, Skousen covers a number of other important economists as well.

My only disappointment concerns Karl Marx. Now, I'm just the layman here, but I was hoping Skousen could explain exactly why Marx is considered a great economist. He was influential, to be sure — Lenin, Stalin, Castro, and Pol Pot saw to that. But what elements of his economic thought have enduring value? His predictions (as Skousen notes) have proven thoroughly wrong, indeed, ludicrous. The core tenet of his economic theory — the labor theory of value — was as wrong as it was unoriginal. So what made him a great economist?

The three contributions with which Skousen credits him — economic determinism, class analysis, and a stress on "modern" issues such as alienation and income inequality — seem to me either dubious or in any case not the concern of economics as a modern science.

As for economic determinism: no one disputes that economic structures influence other social institutions — family, law, government, religion, and so on. But is it the sole influence? And don't the other institutions influence the economic ones? All of them causally interact in a chaotic, unpredictable way. Religion influences economics and vice versa; law influences economics and vice versa; religion influences family structure and vice versa; and so on. Endless intertwining feedback loops make talk of ironclad causal historical laws something beyond stupid.

Class analysis? Perhaps I have had to listen to too many PC academic discussions about whether it is "really" gender, or race, or social class that "determines" "consciousness." But it strikes me that these discussions have proven remarkably sterile when it comes to interpreting literature or

"I invested in a completely new economic system for the country, but the instructions are in Japanese."

understanding science and philosophy (for example). Just how has class analysis improved economics?

Skousen mentions Marx's discussions of "contemporary" issues such as alienation, greed, income inequality, gender, and the environment. But these issues were discussed long before Marx (who did have a degree in classics, so was familiar with Plato and Aristotle, and was aware of Rousseau's writings on the environment, Mill's on feminism, and so on). Where does any of this constitute a contribution to economics as a modern science?

But this is a minor quibble about an excellent and informative book. We all wish we could write as well as Skousen.

— Gary Jason

Gary Jason is a contributing editor of Liberty.

An ideal world, modestly conceived, wouldn't differ too much from this one. The nature of things, and of their creator, would be the same — but humor and justice would be a little more prominent in the way they'd be arranged.

In that modestly ideal world, you would drop off your five-year old nephew at his friend's birthday party, where Al Franken would make a balloon for him. At the corner bookstore, you'd find a prominent display of "Ball Two," an erotic baseball thriller by George F. Will. Enticed by the cover, you might buy a copy.

Sin and nuisance would continue, and you would have every horrible experience you've ever had in reality; but this time, every lousy person, every Election '08, every Buddhapest and "Shock Doctrine" and "straight shooter" would have an unexpected value. They would meet a light in your mind that would convert them into knowledge, if not outright pleasure.

That distinguished politician from New York will make his usual scene on C-SPAN. Except now you will understand why: *rudeness is the weak man's imitation of strength.*

Your cousin will declare herself to be a better, humbler person. Yet you will know: *humility is not the renunciation of pride but the substitution of one pride for another.*

Even that free-spirited English teacher who forced you to question authority will suddenly make sense: *though dissenters seem to question everything in sight, they are actually bundles of dusty answers and never conceived a new question.*

The whole parade of lies, snickers, and delusions — by the time you realize your own baton-twirling role in it — will become for you a glorious striptease of human vanities. Just as it was once for Eric Hoffer, the "longshoreman philosopher" whose legacy has suffered unjust neglect since his death in 1983.

Best known for "The True Believer" (Harper) — a slim, timeless study of mass movements and fanaticism — Hoffer was for most of his life a dirt-poor California tramp whose seminal literary influence was Montaigne; a gentle agnostic whose favorite book was the Old Testament. Hoffer was a rugged individualist in the truest sense, and perhaps the finest American master of the aphorism that means more than it says.

"The Passionate State of Mind" and "Reflections on the Human Condition" (Hopewell), composed entirely of aphorisms, are the two Hoffer titles that never leave my bedside. The suspicious mind's utter lack of skepticism, the way in which solitude sometimes feels like an escape from the self, the likeness between secrecy and boasting: these are among the paradoxes not merely cited but explained, in terms of the dramas and delusions that produce them. Anyone wishing to dust his mind with some new, cliche-killing questions should read these books immediately. – Alec Mouhibian

Alec Mouhibian is an author based in Los Angeles.

This surely will be the most unlikely book review you've ever read in Liberty. My recommendation is "Beat the Reaper," by Josh Bazell (Little, Brown). You might not be able to imagine why anyone would recommend this book. But I do, enthusiastically.

We're at a horrible Manhattan hospital with one of the interns, Peter Brown. He's having his typical lousy day, but this one gets worse than usual. A patient fingers him as Pietro "Bearclaw" Brnwa, a former hitman for the Mafia. The patient mentions this to someone on the phone. So our "hero" needs to disappear quickly in order to Beat the Reaper. But he has some ethical concerns for a couple of his patients, concerns that require him to stick around for awhile.

The action is grisly and the street language totally graphic. And yet . . . and yet, this is the most exhilarating book I've read in years. Don't dismiss it because it sounds sordid or wacko. The author, a doctor himself — I don't know about the rest of it — has an exciting career ahead of him, and this book is a really great read. There's even a chance for moral redemption, which may or may not pan out.

Just get it. And read it. I know I'm right.

— Andrea Millen Rich

Andrea Millen Rich heads Stossel in the Classroom, John Stossel's project to develop critical thinking among high school students by introducing challenges to conventional wisdom.

I first read William Saroyan's "My Name is Aram" (1940, Harcourt) a collection of short-stories about a young Armenian-American boy, when I was about twelve and a young Armenian-American myself. I had developed some literary ambitions by then — the sonnets I wrote to imaginary mistresses very often depended on words like "eschew" and "exacerbate" — so you understand that I was disappointed to find Saroyan, that famous Armenian man of English letters, to be so ordinary, so childish, such a simpleton.

It was ten years before I returned to Saroyan, and this mostly because — having achieved a few of my literary ambitions, and eschewed several others — I was expected to talk about the man with the huge moustache. He had won the Pulitzer, after all, and an Emmy, and there was no Armenian writer more famous and more anthologized than he. The guilt had accumulated over the years, and so I sought atonement in "The Human Comedy" (1943; Harcourt), the story of a telegraph boy from Ithaca, a fictional town in the non-fictional San Joaquin Valley of California, John Steinbeck territory.

And yet again: William Saroyan was so ordinary, so childish, such a simpleton.

But something must have happened in the past ten years, because the ordinary, the childish, and the simple were suddenly charming to me. I was on page three and already "The

Human Comedy" had returned me to my childhood — to the kingdom of smaller things, the time when clouds carried prophesies and death did not exist. I found myself in the San Joaquin Valley, that great, fertile expanse of nothingness between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the jurisdiction of a boy named Ulysses. "There it was, all around him, funny and lonely — the world of his life," Saroyan writes. "The strange, weed-infested, junky, wonderful, senseless yet beautiful world."

I could not know "nostalgia" when I was 12; I had not lost anything. Now I felt it, but I confess that I felt it in such a strange way, because this "nostalgia" was ushering me back to a childhood I never actually had. I did not grow up in the San Joaquin Valley. I never did witness the miracle of a gopher emerging from the earth. And yet I felt this "junky, wonderful, senseless yet beautiful world" in me. I even missed it. And I knew that everyone, especially every writer, deserves some version of it — a San Joaquin Valley of the imagination, where people are neither from Los Angeles nor from San Francisco.

The world of William Saroyan is the freest world I've known, a place where laws and literary theories do not afflict us, where the only point of life is to learn from the living of it, where no one cares to make an impression, where people are themselves the symbols of greater things and all of life is a mystery: a boy finding an egg in the nest. "He looked at it a moment," Saroyan writes, "picked it up, brought it to his mother and very carefully handed it to her, by which he meant what no man can guess and no child can remember to tell."

Reading these lines, I knew that I, too, had forgotten some great secret, and in that moment I almost knew what it was — a vague memory of my uncle taking me to a basketball game — but the more I tried to analyze it, the more I drilled into the past with my tools, the more distant and unknowable everything became. — Garin Hovannisian

Garin K. Hovannisian is a freelance writer living between Los Angeles and Erevan, Armenia.

Reflections, *from page 22*

enough. (So was the public park that the new one replaced.) Most games sold out, even when the Yankees stumbled, as they often do.

What is known in advance is that the new Yankee Stadium is smaller and that tickets will become more expensive. When Rudy Giuliani was asked recently why the proposed new stadium (and the loss of McCombs Park) was never submitted to the voters, he frankly acknowledged that they would have turned it down. Given the unfavorable sentiment already building, I would suggest that if Yankee Stadium *bis* doesn't attract enough customers, future schemers will be scared to try anything similar.

Long a Yankees fan, I might switch my allegiance to the New York Mets, were they not also building a new stadium across the street from the old one, albeit with less fanfare and yet only slightly further away from the planes that suddenly come over home plate from nearby LaGuardia Airport. That leaves us New York baseballists who lack automobiles with the option of minor league teams, the Brooklyn Cyclones and the Staten Island Yankees, both in smaller stadia and reasonably priced. They'll prosper until they too jack up their prices.

— Richard Kostelanetz

Behind the veil — I happened to be in Cairo for the most recent bombing. In fact, I'd spent the entire day the day before at the Kahn al-Kahlili bazaar with my son, mostly not buying soapstone pyramids and gaudy sheets of papyrus and plaster-of-Paris scarabs.

I was racked out in my hotel room, watching Egyptian television, when somebody at the Kahn al-Kahlili decided to send a 17-year-old girl to Paradise, instead of back home to France, and 24 other people, a lot of them kids on the same class trip as the girl, to the hospital. To make sure nobody overlooked the consecrated nature of the event, the bomb was left in the only place in the whole bazaar that bordered a mosque. And it went off during evening prayers.

Pictures afterwards, even grainy internet pictures, showed ghastly spatters, dark pools, and shreds of something that looked a lot more solid than clotting blood desecrating the square in front of the Al-Husseini mosque.

As far as I could tell, nothing on Cairo television that evening mentioned anything about the bombing. But, then, I couldn't tell very far because the set in my hotel room just carried whatever programming it could pluck out of the Cairo air, which was all in Arabic except for a single, bad American movie about a black prizefighter and his beautiful young blonde manager. I imagine that the movie, along with its Arabic subtitles, provided a good way for young Cairenes to bone up on inner-city American scatology. The ads were familiar, too, even to someone who doesn't speak Arabic.

You've seen them. One that comes to mind is about the lady who shows up at a friend's house, only to learn that the friend knows more about toilet-bowl cleaners than she does. This discovery is followed by a sisterly trip to the bathroom. A close-up of a dirty toilet. The dumping of two liquid cleaners into the bowl. The magical way each liquid coats exactly 50% of the ceramic. The flush that leaves half the bowl dirty, the other half prepped and ready to conduct underwater surgery in.

There were other ads, too. Most of them involved babies and small children and wet mops. And mothers wearing hijabs around the house.

That's the part that sticks in my memory: how thoroughly these ladies were swathed in cloth: cloth over their hair and around their necks, and down the fronts of their modest sweaters. These were not cute scarves such as you might see on Sophia Loren, sporting along some Neapolitan highway in a Fiat Spider. These were serious, mummy-tight wrappings that left only the pinched oval of the face showing. The toilet-bowl ladies were even more shrouded up. They were decked out in burqas, head to toe in matching blue cloth, as if they shared a husband who did the family shopping.

This wouldn't have seemed creepy if the ladies had been out in public, but they weren't. They were mothers in their own kitchens, forced to hide themselves in front of their children — friends meeting in private who couldn't so much as show their hair to one another. And there was something else you would never see in an American ad. The cameraman-lady was there with them. On camera.

In fact, the camera panned around to give a glimpse of the entire television crew, to prove that, even in an advertisement filmed on a set in front of an entire production staff, nobody in the fantasy house was anything but purest female. And none was wearing anything other than regulation burqas. It was like a private synod of the Blue Sisters of Suppression. Clearly, the husband bought in bulk.

This wasn't just some adman's dream of the perfect world. It was the same on the street. I spent a lot of time walking around Cairo, and not one Egyptian woman showed more flesh than Darth Vader with his mask pulled off. The ones who sported hijabs and full-length overcoats in the beautiful spring weather were the wild-and-crazies. Their modest sisters were decked out in full nun regalia.

This is not what I remember from the last time I was in Cairo. What I remember from six years ago is that some ladies were covered with enough cloth to become major product spokeswomen. But others had on hijabs with sweaters and skirts. Or Sophia-Loren headscarves. And plenty were just wearing sweaters and skirts. But not now. Now, something seemed to be pushing these international, worldly, almost-Mediterranean people back to the Middle Ages.

Another ad suggested what that something might be. This ad had no actresses, no voiceovers. Just light piano music and images. But what images! Piles of rubble tumbling up through the air to form into undamaged buildings. Blasts sucking back into intact windows. Smoke billowing to the ground and disappearing.

At first, I didn't pay much attention.

Then I paid a lot of attention. The ad reminded me of Kurt Vonnegut's lines about watching war movies backwards so he could see explosions form into bombs, then tumble up to airplanes and be carried back to England or America to be taken apart and scattered underground in mines so they would never hurt anybody again.

At the end of the ad, in English for some reason, the first words of any sort scrolled across the images: "You can change everything. Bring Gaza Back."

I have been informed by the editor of this worthy journal that some observers might find reasons for Middle Eastern countries to circle their cultural wagons that don't have anything to do with what recently happened in Gaza. Those observers may be right, for all I know. Getting through the Enlightenment is always a bitch. It cost 600,000 American lives in our Civil War and a century of religious murder and strife in Europe. The Enlightenment isn't going to go away. The Islamic world will have its struggles reaching the other side regardless of anything we do.

Furthermore, said editor is under the impression that gender customs in society don't require outside help to evolve. And, as far as I know, the toilet-bowl ladies weren't even in Gaza when the bombs and tanks and soldiers fell on the people there. Nor were their sisters whom I saw in the street. Past that, people in the Middle East have always had a penchant for covering their women in cloth, so a lot of those ladies would have been pretty-well bagged up regardless of anything that happened across the border.

But my God, 60 years of watching helplessly as neighbors are expelled from their homes in an endless, rolling land grab, of looking on while people you care about are embargoed, starved, deprived of medical supplies, attacked with tanks, and blown up from the air, that's going to make any culture harden its values.

It took a single morning of terror in Washington and New York for our government to ditch traditions going back to Magna Carta and begin imprisoning without trial, and torturing without conscience, people who, in some cases, seem to have been no more than bystanders. It's a good thing we didn't catch a 17-year-old French girl in Afghanistan, or she might have wound up in Guantanamo, too. Or maybe we did, and nobody told us about it.

Now I know people do bad stuff to one another all the time. And what's going on in Palestine and Gaza may not even be the worst. But here's the thing. The evil in Rwanda was done with the blessing of the Hutu. Our government didn't drag us into it. The evil in Cambodia was done with the blessing of the Khmer Rouge, not in our name. But it's very hard to think that what's happening in Gaza and the West Bank could have lasted anywhere near as long without the acquiescence of the United States.

I don't know what the State Department has said in private to try to make it stop, but actions speak louder than diplomats, sometimes. And in the Middle East, America's actions are screaming to high heaven. For two generations our ambassadors have wrung their hands while weapons made right here in the United States have been unleashed on hospitals and orphanages; our politicians have clucked and mumbled excuses while waves of soldiers crossed national borders and destroyed property, killed peaceful citizens, and invaded private homes; our delegation to the United Nations has vetoed resolutions attempting to question any of it and, then, our leaders have congratulated themselves on being "honest brokers" and the authors of "peace processes" none of them ever takes the first step to enforce.

For more than 40 years those who represent us to the world have grinned like imbeciles while the decency of our people, the financial resources, the material wealth, and the political cover of our great and powerful nation have been perverted by a foreign country into killing and maiming, into ghettoizing and beggaring entire populations for reasons that hold no relevance to us.

America is the only country in the world with the power to put an end to this evil. The fact that we don't not only betrays our beliefs, it squanders our good name and endangers our nation. It drags us into a dispute not of our making and not in our interest. And leaves it to impoverished Cairenes to make up for the moral blindness of our leaders. — Bill Merritt

Remembering Jack Kemp (1935–2009) — Generally reluctant to vote Republican, I would have nonetheless supported Jack Kemp for president simply because of his passionate positions on free enterprise and race relations. Having been a small quarterback protected by linemen mostly black, he couldn't fall for racial prejudice. I always relished hearing him speak.

Though some obituaries mention that he graduated from the predominantly Jewish Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, where his classmates included the musician Herb Alpert and the baseballer Larry Sherry, none acknowledged that during

continued on page 53

Reviews

"State of Play," directed by Kevin Macdonald. Universal, 2009, 127 minutes.

Slapping the Driveway

Jo Ann Skousen

"State of Play" is a good old-fashioned newspaper thriller in which the curmudgeonly journalist solves the case using wits, not guns. The film is fast-paced without being manic, the story full of satisfying twists without abandoning credibility.

Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) is an old-school journalist in a new-school market. He eats vending machine junk food while chasing down a story, drives a 20-year-old Saab, and writes on a clunky computer with a 15-year-old monitor. He won't file a story until he is sure it is accurate. His journalistic nemesis is Della Frye (Rachel McAdams), the smart young blogger for the paper's new website, who posts stories hourly instead of filing them weekly and never has a pen on hand. The two team up on an intense story (written by Tony Gilroy) that involves murder, politics, sex, and corruption — who could ask for anything more?

In many ways, "State of Play" is a comment on the State of Journalism, a paean to old-fashioned newspaper reporting in an age when print journalism is dying. Shots of the Watergate complex subtly remind us of 1972 and the pinnacle of investigative journalism. A key scene of the film even takes place in a parking garage. Ah, those were the days!

When Congressman Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck), Cal's friend and former college roommate, is implicated in the apparent suicide of a beautiful young research assistant, Cal vows to find the truth and clear his friend. With the congressman's reputation about to be destroyed by the blog-now, ask-questions-later generation of journalists, Cal urges Collins to "build a plausible alternative story" to counter their jumped-to conclusions while he tracks down evidence that will clear him. The plot widens to include two other, seemingly unrelated, murders and a healthy dose of corruption.

Della is ready to file her story at every turn, and managing editor Cameron Lynne (Helen Mirren) urges the same, cynically explaining, "We print the story now. If it's wrong, we'll print a retraction tomorrow. And we'll print a correction the day after that. The public will read every story — and they'll read it in our pages. The new owners are interested in sales, not discretion!" But Cal is determined to get the story right.

Soon PointCorp, a private military company providing soldiers to fight in the Middle East, a company that Congressman Collins is investigating, is implicated. Naturally. Modern Hollywood bad guys have to be financed by a giant corporation, and throwing in the military connection makes them that much worse. Ironically, when America is actually being nationalized and socialized faster than we can say "Bailout!", the characters in this film are horrified that Homeland Security might be privatized, with billions of dollars being directed to PointCorp to handle domestic emergencies, terrorism, and surveillance issues.

Frankly, I was ready to stand up and cheer for PointCorp, or any movement toward private solutions to our nation's security problems. But that's a different story. Meanwhile, I was almost shocked when the lead cop responded to the reporters' theory by saying, "So you think a corporate conglomerate is behind all this? I've only ever seen that on TV."

Ben Affleck contributes a solid performance as the congressman, and

Robin Wright Penn is fine as his lovely and long-suffering wife. Jason Bateman is superb in his small role as public relations CEO Dominic Foy, with just the right mix of moxie, polish, and sleaze.

Crowe and McAdams work well together as the investigative team, with their personality conflicts focusing on the differences in their ages and experience rather than on their genders. Similarly, the role of editor Cameron Lynne, originally played by Bill Nighy in the BBC television miniseries "State of Play," was given to Helen Mirren without changing a word of the dialogue. We crossed the gender bridge long ago, so it's refreshing to see a film in which gender simply doesn't matter.

The towering character in this film, however, is the newspaper itself. Be sure to stay for the final credits, and watch the process by which the story is finally printed and distributed. It's a beautiful but dying art. But print journalism's strength is also its weakness: more time is taken to investigate and write a print story than a digital story, and it will include more background and detail. But more time is also required to deliver it to the reader, and by that time it's already yesterday's news.

The sad truth is that, by the time Cal's story reaches the front page of the Globe, the talking heads in the electronic media will have been scooping him for hours, repeating their headlines every 15 minutes with live footage of the eventual arrest. If it's juicy enough, YouTube will pick it up, and millions more will see it that way. But that's all it is — headlines. The newspaper veteran has done the work, but the coiffed blondes on cable will get the story. Meanwhile, three hours after Cal's story slaps the reader's driveway, it will be wrapping the garbage or lining the cat's litter box. This well-crafted film is a salute to a dying institution. ❑

"The Soloist," directed by Joe Wright. Dreamworks, 2009, 117 minutes.

Chords and Discords

Jo Ann Skousen

"The Soloist" begins in the way that "State of Play" ends: opening credits roll as newspapers are printed, bundled, and delivered. The papers are a blur of color as they whiz through the machinery, a tribute to the pressmen who invented the processes that have sped up delivery of the news. It isn't so very long ago that letters were fished individually from the upper and lower cases of a printer's workshop and set individually into pages that were inked and pressed onto newsprint. Not long from now, newsprint itself may be obsolete. From town criers to internet bloggers, the process of telling stories has changed, but the desire to hear those stories has not changed. What we all want is to hear a good story.

There's a difference between a reporter and a columnist. The reporter investigates, follows the leads, checks the facts, and presents the story in as unbiased a manner as possible. At least, that's the goal. A columnist, on the other hand, wants to engage the reader's emotions with stories that incite humor, outrage, joy, or pathos. The columnist is always on the lookout for human interest stories that can be turned into 700 words for a weekly column.

Steve Lopez is such a columnist for the L.A. Times. He writes a weekly column entitled "Points West." A couple of years ago, while experiencing a particularly dry point in his career, he happened to hear the strains of a violin in a park. Following the sounds, he met a homeless man with two strings on his violin and multiple voices in his head. Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, Jr., turned out to be a former Julliard virtuoso who dropped out when the voices in his head made it impossible for him to continue in school.

Lopez wrote an article about the man, and a friendship developed. The friendship became a series of articles, the articles became a book, and the book became a movie starring two of the finest and most versatile actors in Hollywood today: Jamie Foxx as the schizophrenic musician and Robert Downey, Jr., as the columnist with a heart. The result is an earnest and powerful look at mental illness, homelessness, journalism, and the transformative power of both music and friendship.

The film aspires to be an Oscar contender, and this is certainly the type of film that the Academy favors. But occasionally director Joe Wright tries a little too hard, as, for example, when he gets his actors to step on each other's snappy dialogue during scenes in the newspaper office. Director Robert Altman perfected this natural style of delivery, and many directors have tried to imitate it. Altman's characters speak naturally, listening to one another and jumping in, as we do in a two-way conversation, when we catch the gist of what the other person is saying, and then stopping when the other person does the same to us.

But the problem with this film is that the actors don't wait for the "gist." They interrupt each other during important points of dialogue, listening for their cues but not really listening to each other, and consequently not allowing the audience to listen either. Instead of feeling natural, this is merely annoying. Fortunately, there are few scenes in the newspaper office; and outside, where

Foxx and Downey interact with each other, the scenes are close to brilliant.

One of the most difficult challenges in making a movie like this is how to portray schizophrenia from the inside, showing the audience what, in this case, Ayers actually feels, not merely what Lopez sees. Wright shows it in a variety of ways, through the use of kaleidoscopic color, grainy photography, soaring music, and especially through skillful use of the theater's sound system, isolating and overlapping the voices in Ayers' mind so they come at us from the left, the right, behind, and in front, projecting the confusion and panic Ayers feels.

He also demonstrates the euphoria Ayers experiences when he is playing or listening to music. While playing Beethoven under a highway overpass on a cello donated to him by one of Lopez's readers, Ayers sees psychedelic music in his mind. Pigeons begin flapping; images from GoogleEarth demonstrate the infinite eye of God; a full orchestra joins the soundtrack, and as the music crescendos, the birds fly up. I couldn't help thinking of the scripture and hymn, "He will raise you up on eagle's wings." Ayers has said that Beethoven is his God; fittingly, his music soars on wings. Later, Lopez tells his editor and ex-wife, "I've never loved anything the way he loves music."

A third way in which Wright demonstrates the experience of mental illness is by using non-actors to portray the hundreds of mentally ill people who live on the streets of L.A. Using cello and music lessons as bait, Lopez lures Ayers to the LAMP Community, a nonprofit homeless center and health facility in L.A.'s skid row, a place that Lopez describes as "a lost colony of broken, hopeless souls." (LAMP is a real organization that provides permanent housing and basic services for people with severe mental illness, no strings attached. I hope the movie leads to a well-deserved boost in donations.)

In a scene that is pure documentary, Wright pans the LAMP plaza, focusing on several non-actor residents. One of them, a woman, explains repeatedly to whoever will listen, "Lithium stops the voices. The voices comfort me. If you stop the voices you stop the comfort. Lithium stops the voices." Some of the most intense scenes of the movie occur as Lopez moves through the crowded streets and plazas of LA's skid row, trying to look brave and nonchalant but clearly moved by the conditions he sees, and never knowing whether he is safe.

Lopez cares about the gifted but troubled musician he has befriended. He wants to help him live a safer life by moving him off the streets and into an apartment. He urges LAMP's director to prescribe medications that will ease the schizophrenia and allow Ayers to return to a more normal life. "Just two weeks," he pleads. "What if two weeks of meds could change him?" But the director barks back, "What he doesn't need is one more person telling him he needs medication! What he needs is a friend. Don't betray that."

Lopez's columns about Ayers and LAMP eventually reach City Hall. In a voiceover from one of the columns he intones, "Every now and then the hearts, minds, and wallets of the people open at one time," as Mayor Villaraigosa pledges to spend $50 million to help people on skid row. Lopez exults, but I groaned. Yet again the press promotes a public solution to replace a private one.

Several scenes later, the police arrive and begin arresting hordes of previously peaceful street residents for such crimes as "possession of a shopping cart" or "possession of a milk crate." That's one way to clean up an area, but I don't think it's what Lopez had in mind when he suggested that these people needed some help. Score one for the filmmakers after all.

When everything has been said and done, Lopez acknowledges that there

Notes on Contributors

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are no easy answers. He wanted Ayers to exorcise the demons in his head, play with a symphony, sleep on a bed, live in a room with a roof and a door — in short, be like "everyone else." What Lopez learns is that some things can't, and maybe even shouldn't, be fixed. But they can be transcended. "The simple act of being someone's friend can change his brain chemistry," Lopez reports. Today Ayers is living a safer, and apparently happier, life. In the end, Lopez tells us, "Loyalty will carry you home." ❑

"Young @ Heart," directed by Stephen Walker. Fox Searchlight, 2008, 107 minutes.

December Song

Jo Ann Skousen

Like newspaper columnists, film documentarians are always on the lookout for a great story. The difference is, they have to begin filming the story before they know how it's going to end, or even whether it's going to turn out to be a story worth telling. But a gifted documentarian can sense a story as it begins to develop, and knows where to take the cameras so they will be in just the right place, with just the right focus, at just the right time. Such is the case with Stephen Walker, a British documentarian who smelled a good story in "Young @ Heart."

Walker was astonished by the sell-out concert of a singing group composed of senior citizens whose average age is 81. Their shtick? They sing rock, punk, and heavy metal songs. The film about them is much more than a "making of" concert documentary; the story itself is pure gold.

Bob Cilman is the enthusiastic, upbeat, no-longer-young-himself musical director whose gray hair betrays the 25 years he has been directing the Chorus. He demands professionalism from his singers as he puts them through the paces of learning such difficult songs as "Schizophrenia," James Brown's "I Feel Good," and "Yes I Can" (try getting your head around a lyric that simply says, "Yes I can, yes I can can, oh yes I can" about 93 times with various rhythms and various numbers of "cans"). One of the reasons it works is that Cilman directs the concert on stage and performs along with the singers, helping them stay on time with the often intricate rhythms.

Of course, this is a documentary about old people, and old people have health problems. Sometimes serious ones. And sometimes they die. If Cilman keeps this in mind as he selects his soloists and rehearses their numbers, he doesn't let it show. It must be a great and dreadful occupation, producing a concert so full of life when death is always lurking around the corner. But despite the performers' age and health problems, Cilman expects them to be on time for rehearsals and to sing with gusto. "I don't want to lose my solo," one member explains seriously when he comes to rehearsal just a day after being hospitalized.

These people do not particularly enjoy the songs they perform. They often wrinkle their noses and roll their eyes at some of the material Cilman selects. Their own musical backgrounds range from opera to church choirs to dance bands; they like songs with lovely melodies and harmonies and lyrics. But they have learned an important principle of the free market: supply does not create its own demand; demand creates its own supply. Nobody wants to hear a bunch of old people singing old songs. But they love hearing these old people singing contemporary songs in a new way, as evidenced by the sellout crowds wherever they go.

The popularity of their concerts does not result simply from the anomaly of watching old folks sing punk rock. Young @ Heart brings a fresh interpretation to songs that are familiar to their audiences, but not to themselves. Because it's harder for them to memorize at this stage of life, they have to think more about the sense of what they are singing, and that deeper understanding of the lyrics comes through in their performances. Moreover, because of their classically trained technique, they enunciate better; the audience understands the lyrics of familiar songs, perhaps for the first time. Their different stage of life can also bring an entirely different meaning from the one intended by the composer. For example, Sting's song "Every Breath You Take (I'll Be Watching You)" tells a whole new story when it is sung gently by a chorus of nurses to an old man hooked up to an IV.

The magic of the movie is in the singing itself, and in the real life stories of the singers. Walker takes his film crew into their homes, their cars, even their bathrooms, pulling together scenes that are heartwarming, funny, and wise. The film would have been tedious if it were just constructed as a behind-the-scenes concert documentary. Instead, Walker turns several of the songs into staged music videos with the chorus members strutting their stuff in a bowling alley while they sing "Stayin' Alive" or ending up in a field surrounding a tour bus while singing "Road to Nowhere." The music videos are just plain fun, and you can see how much fun the members had being part of the filming.

One of the most poignant scenes in the movie occurs when Cilman decides to present a concert for inmates at the local jail. These men are spending what should have been "the best years of their lives" incarcerated. You can see it in their faces as they hear the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "Forever Young." They may be old when they get out. But as they watch the enthusiastic chorus, older still but full of life and singing with joy and animation, it seems to give them renewed hope that they, too,

can be forever young. Several of the inmates unashamedly wipe away tears as they sit in the sunshine, listening to the concert.

The song that will stay with you the longest is Coldplay's "Fix You." From early rehearsals to final performance, the lyrics and the performers tell a poignant story of dreams deferred, friendships lost, and memories dimmed in a way that Chris Martin and his young mates, talented though they are, simply can't achieve: The gentle chorus reinforces the power of friendship and hope, even as life draws ever closer to its end. ❑

"Crank: High Voltage," directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor. Lionsgate, 2009, 85 minutes.

Overload

Todd Skousen

"Boorish, bigoted, and borderline pornographic." "Tasteless, trashy, and over the top." "Big, loud, and brainless." These are the words reviewers are using to describe Jason Statham's new action-crammed flick "Crank: High Voltage." My reaction to their criticism: "All right! My type of movie!"

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not just some stereotypical American male who demands big explosions and hot chicks to enjoy a movie (although I admit it doesn't hurt). I thoroughly enjoy movies of all kinds. But sometimes I'm in the mood for a video game without my thumbs getting sore, and that's what the new genre of fast-paced, mindless, assassin-oriented films is all about. When I found out that Chev Chelios (Statham) of the original "Crank" was not dead after all and that a sequel was on its way, I was excited.

"Crank: High Voltage" — or "Crank 2" as I prefer to call it — starts out with about the most ridiculous premise a movie could have. At the end of the original "Crank," Chelios, retired hit man and all-around badass, has just fallen about half a mile out of a helicopter, bounced off a car, and landed face down on the ground. The credits roll on a closeup of his head. Fortunately for him, the car must have been a nice plastic "green" car instead of a steel gas guzzler, leaving him almost completely unharmed. As "Crank 2" begins, a group of Triad organ harvesters scrape him off the pavement and move him to their lab to pull out his superhuman heart. When Chev wakes up to find an electric heart in its stead, he's understandably upset. He's got to get that heart back quick, and he has to keep his electric heart charged up while he does it. So begins the 85-minute rampage that is "Crank 2."

As preposterous as this premise is, it's no more unbelievable than the first "Crank," in which Chelios has been poisoned and must keep his heart pumping with adrenaline to stay alive. To do so, he engages in scene after scene of heart-pumping races, chases, and shootouts. In "Crank 2," his new heart requires continual jolts of electricity. But therein lies the problem of "Crank 2." It's not really a new movie. It's just "Crank" redone — the same preposterous ideas rehashed, except with more blood, more explosions, and more nudity.

In "Crank 2," directors Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor take everything fans loved about the first movie and raise it to another level. In the first movie, Chev injects himself with epinephrine to keep his heart pumping; in "Crank 2," he electrocutes himself with jumper cables. Same game, different board.

Instead of a shootout in a gangster's club, in "Crank 2" there's a full-on

bloodbath at a strip club — including a stripper's silicon boobs getting shot and quickly deflating. Instead of Chev having a brief public sex scene to keep his adrenaline up, there's a nearly full-on porn scene on a horse track about midway through the film. The premise behind that scene: static electricity from friction will keep his heart going. Just a bit of a stretch.

The film can be fun if you're willing to suspend your disbelief completely. It's just that about halfway through, you realize that they aren't really trying to tell a story at all. This is just plain shock theater (pun intended). And to that end, the film succeeds. The problem is that being shocked isn't the same as being entertained. For me the entertainment officially ended when for absolutely no reason at all, the movie turned into a Godzilla-style fight sequence. It was so shocking and strange that it almost became boring.

That's not to say that there isn't anything good about "Crank 2." Neveldine and Taylor have proven that you can turn a low-budget movie shot on hand-held cameras into a summer blockbuster. They also have a knack for paring everything down to nonstop, in-your-face action: sex, violence, and rock 'n' roll stripped down to the core. That's what I loved so much about the first "Crank." But that movie had some substance and a plot holding the action together. "Crank 2" is like asking for a second piece of cake and getting only a giant plate of icing.

When you look back at some of the great action movies of the late '80s, you find that they always have an emotional storyline at heart. In "Commando," Schwarzenegger's daughter is kidnapped. In "Death Wish," Bronson's wife is murdered. Even in Liam Neeson's recent movie "Taken," in which Neeson takes out board after board — I mean scene after scene — of video-game-style bad guys, his sappy relationship with his daughter is the substance that allows us to care when he starts kicking ass. "Crank 2" has none of that. It's more like watching a stuntman's highlight reel.

When the guns stop blasting away and the boobs have finally been covered up, you wonder what was the point. That's when a burning Jason Statham — literally on fire, skin melting as he walks — comes up to the camera and flips the audience off. Roll Credits. That sums up the movie pretty well. It's a big F.U. to us for coming to watch it. Of course, if you want to be shocked and slightly entertained, I say go for it. But personally, I'd rather watch Van Damme do splits in "Blood Sport." ❑

Booknotes

Patchy intel — Truth may be stranger than fiction, but the government can be stranger than truth, as a couple of short books amply demonstrate.

"The Men Who Stare at Goats" (by Jon Ronson, Simon & Schuster, 259 pages) is a novel about high-ranking U.S. military officers who set up a facility to attempt psychic killing of "one hundred de-bleated goats" in furtherance of national defense. The goats are only the beginning, as the story expands to include Uri Geller, Manuel Noriega, a couple of the 9/11 hijackers, Art Bell, the Heaven's Gate cult, the CIA's infamous MK-ULTRA program, and the torturers at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo (who dragooned Barney the Dinosaur into the torture squad), and what all of this has to do with the Army's First Earth Battalion.

An author whose real-life characters are staples of conspiracy theories could easily become heavy-handed and dull. Ronson instead lets the characters tell their own parts of a story that may or may not be as weird as it looks. It is certainly entertaining.

In "I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed By Me" (Melville House, 136 pages), Trevor Paglen has collected images of uniform patches worn by American black ops personnel. "[T]he military has patches for almost everything it does," he writes. "Including, curiously, for programs, units, and activities that are officially secret."

This is a good coffee-table book; it's mostly pictures, though some of the programs associated with the patches are discussed in Paglen's book "Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World." There are explanations in various degrees of detail for each patch, depending on what is known about it. Among them are several patches associated with Area 51; a patch from the Rapid Capabilities Office, with a Latin inscription that translates as "Doing God's work with other people's money"; and a patch depicting a goat sprawled in an unfortunate power relation to an aircraft rapidly approaching from the rear, under the inscription "GOAT SUCKERS." Our black-budget tax dollars at work.

I don't know what it is with the military and goats. — Patrick Quealy

Reflections, *from page 46*

the early 1950s many of these Fairfax students were the children of European refugees, Holocaust survivors, or communists. Some of their parents worked (or had worked, until blacklisted) in the film industry, residing in Fairfax because they weren't wealthy enough to live in Beverly Hills. (This inside dope comes from red diaper babies I knew long ago.) Little is said about what effect Jewish leftwing culture might have had upon Kemp, who was a WASP jock at Fairfax.

Knowing what I did about Fairfax High, I always regarded Kemp as a crypto-Jewish activist who quaintly called himself "a bleeding-heart conservative," clearly to distinguish himself from heartless cons and neocons. Though he cofounded the NFL Players Association (aka union) and later directed it, Kemp nonetheless realized, as did Ludwig von Mises before him, that free-market economics could better realize socialist ideals of spreading prosperity, especially among America's minorities. Too bad he's gone, because no Republican now resembles him. — Richard Kostelanetz

The Start of Something Big?, *from page 26*

Republicans." Still, given politicians' love of crowds, it was predictable that elected Republicans would offer themselves as speakers. In Texas, Gov. Perry did; in Kansas, Sen. Sam Brownback did; in South Carolina, Gov. Mark Sanford did; in New York, former House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich did.

Republicans were not always well received. In South Carolina, the crowd booed Rep. Gresham Barrett because he had voted for the Troubled Asset Relief Program.

In Chicago, organizer Eric Odom turned down a last-minute request by the Republican national chairman, Michael Steele. Odom wrote: "We respectfully must inform Chairman Steele that RNC officials are welcome to participate in the rally itself, but we prefer to limit stage time to those who are not elected officials, both in Government as well as political parties. This is an opportunity for Americans to speak, and elected officials to listen, not the other way around."

The Republicans are compromised and their label damaged. Why associate with them? That was the argument. Then again, if the protesters' ideas were eventually to prevail, which party did they expect support from? The Democrats? If Republican politicians came to the events, publicly praised them, and maybe even made promises at them, wouldn't that be a start?

I think Odom was probably right, for the moment: don't let the Republicans co-opt the movement. But don't kick away a supporter because you disagree with him on the war, or because he voted for McCain.

The "tea bag" protests of April 15, 2009, were not purely a libertarian thing. But they were about opposing the growth of government, and that is essentially a libertarian thing. It would be foolish to join one's enemies in dismissing it. A movement this big does not come along often. It has power, and it might do some good. ❑

Tombstones and Trade, *from page 36*

at vertiginous speed during the same period. Life expectancy rose fast, while infant mortality steadily declined.

There is a fetching economic sequel to this story. Today, Saint-Brieuc is an important global center of food production, in particular of wheat flour biscuits. I don't know why, and I am not necessarily crediting California wheat for this source of local prosperity, but it doesn't seem to have hurt much.

To wrap up: this has been a story about facts and their logical implications only. As a libertarian, I believe entirely that your money is your money, that you may spend it in any way you wish. If you crave paying six times more for organic local apples than for the same variety of (nonorganic) apples from somewhere not next door, bless your heart! The local apples may even taste better if they really reach your table faster. If you want to pay 50% more for local organic peaches than for equally organic Mexican peaches, go right ahead! Be aware, though, that Mexican growers buy stuff from American producers — lots of stuff, it turns out, if you care to look it up. And isn't it true that they have to earn money by selling someone peaches in order to pay for the things they buy from your neighbor — or, possibly, your employer?

At any rate, please, please, don't go all sanctimonious on me. I have already conceded that you are entitled to your folly. ❑

Letters, *from page 6*

Two Observations

1. Stephen Cox repeats, in "The Great Man Speaks" (April), Obama's statement that "Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath. Mr. Cox takes Obama to task, and rightly so, for saying "Americans," as if Martians could take that oath.

But no one (including those who wrote, and should have fact-checked, the speech) seems to notice or care that Obama's statement simply isn't true. Only 43 people have taken the presidential oath, including Obama, even though Obama is the 44th president.

This oddity stems from the fact that Grover Cleveland served two nonconsecutive terms, and thus was both the 22nd and 24th presidents. But our 44 presidents (or, more accurately, 44 presidential administrations) include only 43 people.

2. Cox in his "From the Editor" piece notes that, during a power outage, one resident of his condo complex complained about not being able to watch TV. Another resident (unbelievably, to Cox), suggested he watch a DVD instead.

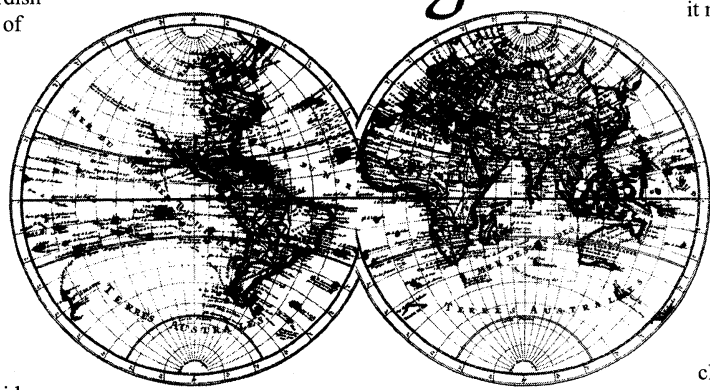
During law school in Chicago, I experienced several power outages that rendered TV impossible. In fact, TV was impossible for me because I didn't own a TV. However, I still watched plenty of DVDs, power outage or not. How? I watched them on my laptop computer, which has its own self-contained power source.

This probably is not what the resident was suggesting, and he probably was every bit as clueless as Mr. Cox suggests, but I just wanted to chime in that it wasn't *necessarily* a stupid comment.

Cheers on another great issue!

A.J. Sharp
Los Angeles, CA

Terra Incognita



Tel Aviv, Israel

Innovation in diplomatic relations, passed on by the Israeli media consortium, the *Yedioth Group*:

After weeks of preparations for the largest sex event of its kind in Israel, organizers were forced to cancel it this week due to public pressure and threats exerted on the owner of the venue where the sex fest was to take place.

The event in question, which was scheduled to take place on "International Orgasm Day," aimed to bring together some 250 participants seeking to promote world peace through multiple orgasms reached by masturbation or sex.

Batman, Turkey

New frontier in intellectual property disputes, reported in *Variety*:

The mayor of Batman, an oil-producing city in southeastern Turkey, is suing director Christopher Nolan and Warner Bros. for royalties from mega-grosser "The Dark Knight."

Huseyin Kalkan, the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party mayor of Batman, has accused "The Dark Knight" producers of using the city's name without permission. "There is only one Batman in the world," Kalkan said. "The American producers used the name of our city without informing us."

Tallahassee, Fla.

Considering a point of order, from the *Miami Herald*:

The act of bestiality is a step closer to becoming illegal in Florida now that a Senate agriculture committee voted to slap a third-degree felony charge on anyone who has sex with animals.

The legislation would target only those who derived or helped others derive "sexual gratification" from an animal, specifying that conventional dog-judging contests and animal-husbandry practices are permissible.

That last provision tripped up Miami Democratic Sen. Larcenia Bullard. "People are taking these animals as their husbands? What's husbandry?" she asked. Some senators stifled their laughter as Sen. Charlie Dean, an Inverness Republican, explained that husbandry is raising and caring for animals. Bullard didn't get it.

"So that maybe was the reason the lady was so upset about that monkey?" Bullard asked, referring to a Connecticut case where a woman's suburban chimpanzee went mad and was shot.

Washington, D.C.

The Lavender Menace waxes, from the *Washington Times*:

Democratic gains in the past two elections have created the possibility Congress will let gays serve openly in the military. "Homosexual activists are overconfident because they have not yet seen a counterforce emerge as occurred in 1993," said Robert Knight of the Media Research Center.

"But as the threat grows stronger, we will see groups forming and the resistance building," he said. "Americans go about their business and are not activists until they have a Pearl Harbor moment. That has yet to happen, but it will."

He added that most Americans "are unaware that gay activists have the military in their gun sights."

Canberra, Australia

Humble suggestion for MADD's next crusade, lifted from the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*:

Politicians in Australia's most populous state could be breath-tested for alcohol before voting on laws after a series of late-night incidents that have embarrassed the center-left government.

"Honestly, if you are going to have breathalyzers for people driving cranes you should have breathalyzers for people writing laws," said MP John Kaye.

Attleboro, Mass.

Fiscal responsibility in the *Attleboro Sun-Chronicle*:

A 74-year-old blind woman has been told a lien will be put on her South Attleboro home if she doesn't come up with a penny she owes on an outstanding utility bill.

The city is holding firm on the amount due. City Collector Debora Marcoccio, who called the whole situation "ridiculous," said the city will not waive the balance. "If there's a bill, it must be paid," she said.

Harrisburg, Pa.

Relaxation of a state monopoly, detailed in the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*:

Pennsylvania's Liquor Control Board is spending more than $173,000 to try to make workers friendlier and more well-mannered at the nearly 650 stores it operates. The board says it wants to make sure clerks are saying "hello," "thank you" and "come again" to customers shopping for wine and spirits.

It has hired Pittsburgh-based consulting firm Solutions 21 to help coach store managers so they can instruct their clerks on issues such as how to greet customers and where to stand.

Nigeria

A solution in search of a problem, from the Lagos desk of the BBC:

The number of motorcycle taxis in big cities has exploded in recent years, causing concern about road safety. Often untrained and illiterate, the drivers are considered a menace by many motorists. Fatal accidents are common. Road safety authorities say almost every collision in Nigeria's cities involves a motorcycle.

Local government authorities often give motorbikes to jobless young men, saying it gives them a way to make a living.

Salzburg, Austria

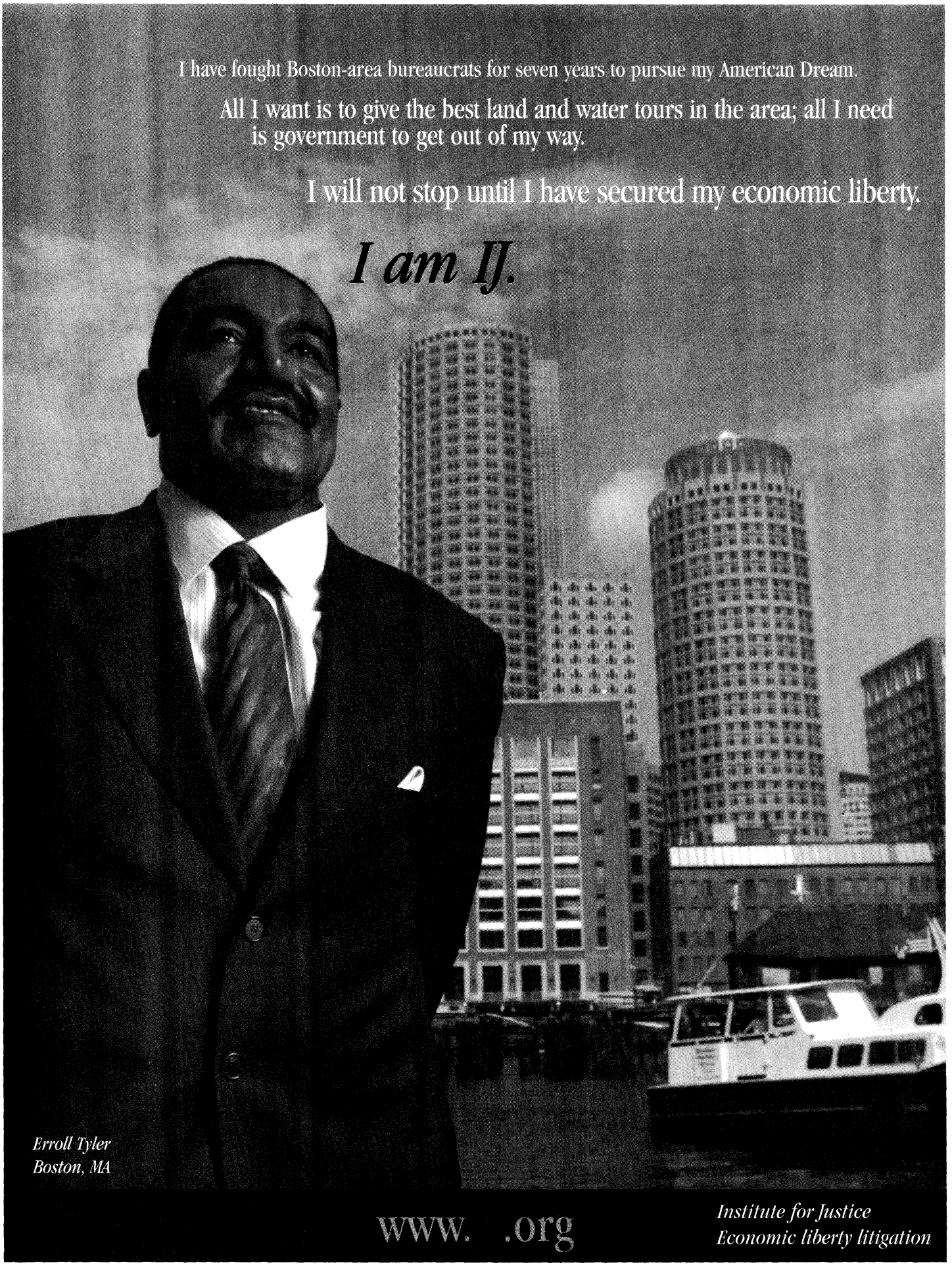
Promising new field for the EEOC, from the *London Daily Mail*:

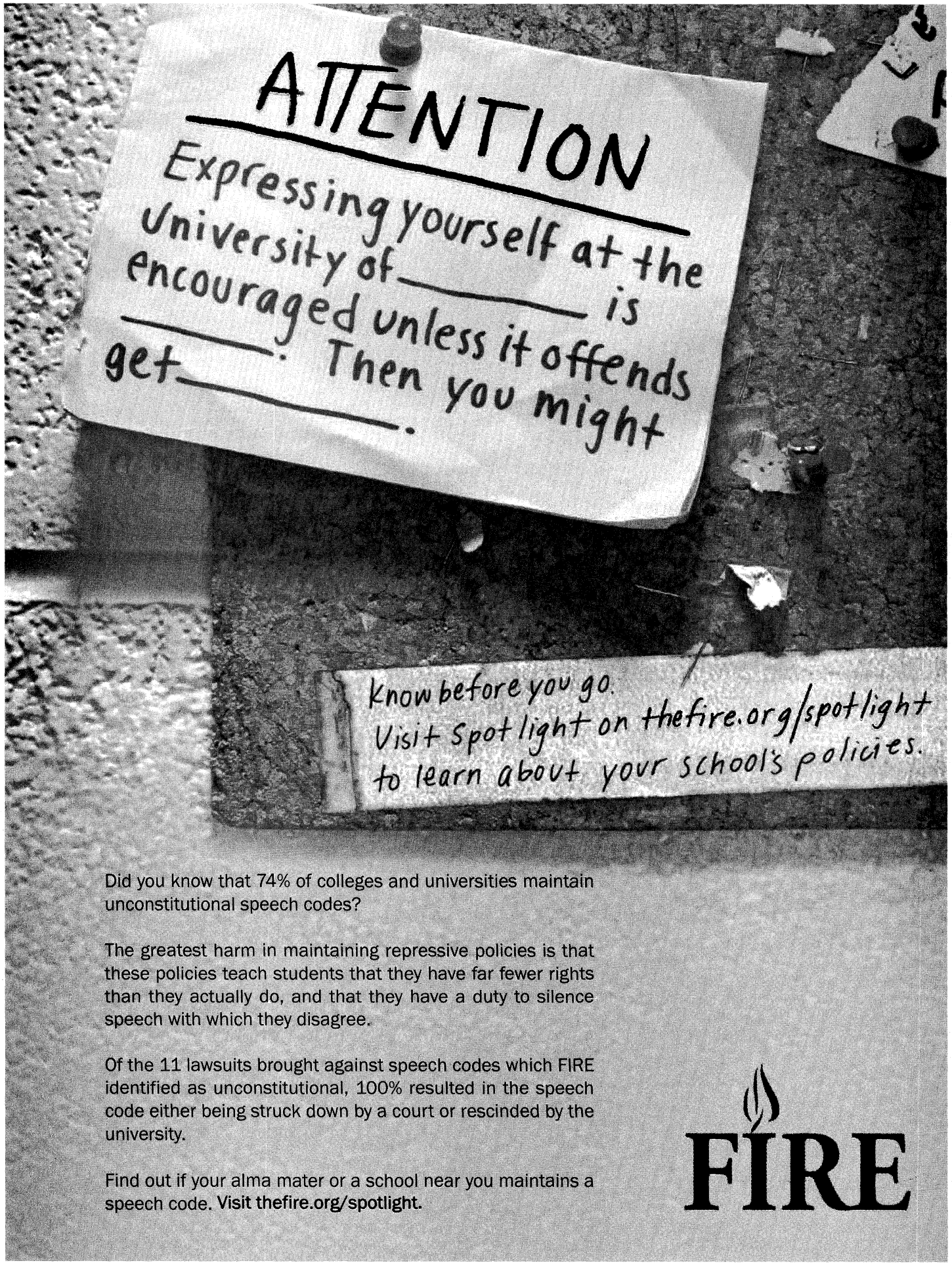
A Salzburg insurance company posted an advertisement in major newspapers seeking employees for sales and management that were born under certain constellations, claiming statistics indicated that they were the best workers: "We are looking for people over 20 for part-time jobs in sales and management with the following star signs: Capricorn, Taurus, Aquarius, Aries and Leo."

It was followed by a wave of protests from equality groups and led to an investigation by the country's antidiscrimination authorities.

Special thanks to Russell Garrard, Tom Isenberg, and William Walker for contributions to Terra Incognita.

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


I have fought Boston-area bureaucrats for seven years to pursue my American Dream.
All I want is to give the best land and water tours in the area; all I need is government to get out of my way.
I will not stop until I have secured my economic liberty.
I am IJ.
Erroll Tyler
Boston, MA
www. .org
Institute for Justice
Economic liberty litigation



Did you know that 74% of colleges and universities maintain unconstitutional speech codes?

The greatest harm in maintaining repressive policies is that these policies teach students that they have far fewer rights than they actually do, and that they have a duty to silence speech with which they disagree.

Of the 11 lawsuits brought against speech codes which FIRE identified as unconstitutional, 100% resulted in the speech code either being struck down by a court or rescinded by the university.

Find out if your alma mater or a school near you maintains a speech code. **Visit thefire.org/spotlight.**

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