Liberty

September 2009 $4.00

Surviving Obama

Libertarianism: A Force of Nature

by Alex Z. Modzelewski

Bastiat on the Bay

by Michael Christian

Tabasco Diplomacy

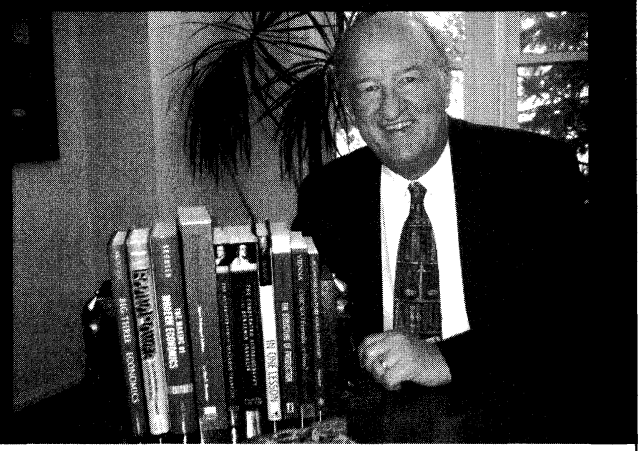
by Jacques Delacroix

Also: *Leland B. Yeager* explores the history that didn't happen, *Stephen Cox* diagnoses our country's plague of illiteracy, *Jo Ann Skousen* takes in Pixar's latest gem . . . plus other articles, reviews & humor.

09
0 74470 80199 3
US $4.00 / Canada 5.95

"A university should be a place of light, of Liberty, and of learning." — Benjamin Disraeli

Win EVERY Argument With SKOUSEN'S "TOP TEN"



"Mark Skousen has emerged as one of the clearest writers on all matters economic today, the next Milton Friedman." —*Michael Shermer, Scientific American*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mark Skousen has dedicated his life to exposing popular fallacies and applying sound principles in business, government, and personal finance. He has a unique background: He has taught academics (Columbia University), worked for the government (CIA), run a non-profit organization (FEE), and operated several successful businesses, including FreedomFest, his annual show in Las Vegas. He is the editor of *Forecasts & Strategies*, an award-winning investment newsletter, has written for *Forbes* and *Wall Street Journal*, and is a regular contributor to CNBC and Fox News. In honor of his work in economics and finance, Grantham University renamed its business school, "The Mark Skousen School of Business."

1. **"Economic Logic"** (Capital Press, 2009, 2000): New 3rd edition, updated for 2009, the only "no compromise" free-market textbook with micro and macro chapters.

2. **"The Making of Modern Economics"** (M. E. Sharpe, 2009, 2001): A bold, new history of the great economic thinkers, with lots of anecdotes and pictures. Banned by Marxists and Keynesians! "I champion your book to everyone. An absolutely ideal gift for college students." —William F. Buckley, Jr.

3. **"EconoPower: How a New Generation of Economists is Transforming the World"** (Wiley, 2008): "Wonderful!" —Art Laffer

4. **"The Big Three in Economics"** (M. E. Sharpe, 2007): The electrifying story of the three most influential worldly philosophers: Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes. "I love Mark Skousen's new book—so interesting and well written!" —Jeremy Siegel, Wharton School

5. **"Vienna and Chicago, Friends or Foes?"** (Capital Press, 2005): Clash of the Titans! This is Skousen's controversial book about the debates between the Austrian and Chicago schools of free-market economics. "Entertaining and highly readable!" —Milton Friedman

6. **"The Structure of Production"** (NYU Press, 2007, 1990): Skousen's magnum opus, now published by NYU Press in paperback with a new 30-page introduction. "Should be a required text at our leading universities" —John Whitney, Columbia Business School

7. **"Investing in One Lesson"** (Regnery, 2007): His first financial book in ten years. "Destined to be a classic" —Alex Green, Oxford Club

8 & 9. **"The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin"** and **"The Compleated Autobiography by Benjamin Franklin"** (Regnery, 2006). Volume 1 is the original *Autobiography* covering Franklin's life from 1706 until 1757, with a new introduction by Skousen. Volume 2 is *The Compleated Autobiography*, covering the final 33 years of Franklin's career, all in Franklin's own words. "Ingenious and inspired!"
—David McCullough

10. **"Economics of a Pure Gold Standard"** (Foundation for Economic Education, third edition, 1996). Skousen's Ph. D. dissertation at George Washington University (1977).

"Mark Skousen is an able, imaginative, and energetic economist — a tireless advocate for freedom."
—*Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate*

"Mark Skousen is America's finest economist. He has a genius for explaining complex issues in a clear way and connecting ideas. He is the Henry Hazlitt of our times." —*Steve Mariotti, President, National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE)*

THE ENTIRE "SKOUSEN LIBRARY" ONLY $199!

To buy these books separately would cost over $322, but you can now buy all ten books, "The Skousen Library" for only $199, plus $10 shipping & handling. Your books will be shipped in a special US Postal Service **"Priority Mail"** box, and Dr. Skousen will autograph the "Compleated Autobiography by Benjamin Franklin" with a rare Franklin stamp.

TO: Eagle Publishing
One Mass. Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001

____Yes, please send me the Skousen Library of Top Ten Books. I enclose $199 plus $10 for S&H ($209). (If you order outside the United States, please add $30 extra, or $229).

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Email (not rented) _____

Credit Card # _____

Expiration _____

OR CALL TOLL-FREE

1-800-211-7661

Inside Liberty

September 2009
Volume 23, Number 8

Features

Reviews

About Your Subscription

Q: When does my subscription expire?

A: Please look to the right of your name on your mailing label. There you will find (except in some cases when receiving your first issue) the number of issues left in your subscription, followed by the word "left," as in "3 LEFT."

Q: I've moved. How do I change the address to which my magazines are sent?

A: Write us at the postal or email addresses below. Be sure to include your previous address, your new address, and a telephone number or email address where we can reach you if we have questions. It's best to send us your current label and your new address. Allow 6–8 weeks to begin receiving Liberty at your new address.

Q: I'm receiving duplicate copies of Liberty. What should I do?

A: Clip the mailing labels from both copies and send them to the postal address below. We'll make sure you receive all the issues you've paid for.

Q: How can I buy gift subscriptions for friends and family?

A: Call the toll-free number below. We'll be happy to assist you.

Q: Is Liberty on the Web?

A: Yes. Selected articles from each issue are published online. Visit our website at libertyunbound.com.

To subscribe, renew, or ask questions about your subscription

E-mail: circulation@libertyunbound.com

Write: Liberty Circulation, P.O. Box 20527, Reno, NV 89515

Call toll-free: (800) 854-6991 during regular West Coast business hours

Outside the U.S., call: (775) 828-9140

Letters

In the Dugout

I normally prefer Andrew Ferguson to Joe Biden, but the vice president is likely telling the truth about growing up a Yankees fan (Reflections, June). I've done a lot of work and briefly lived in the Scranton, PA area, and a very large proportion of the local residents favor New York City in their sports affiliation, especially the Yankees and the football Giants. Things do get more interesting after Biden's family moved to Delaware in 1953; as Ferguson accurately notes, the St. Louis Browns had not yet moved to Baltimore, but at that point Philadelphia had two baseball teams: the low-achieving National League Phillies and the more-accomplished American League Athletics, who did not move to Kansas City (and later Oakland) until 1955. The A's were major competitors of the Yankees at points, and there likely was a fair amount of acrimony directed at Yankee fans in Delaware for that reason.

In any case, that probably was the last time Biden did not seek popular acceptance; Ferguson is completely wrong when he says a power-grubbing mind turns a deaf ear to criticism and scorn. In fact it adapts, becoming an echo of others' original thoughts, without regard to integrity or consistency.

Nathan Wurtzel
Chantilly, VA

Ferguson replies: I am grateful to Mr. Wurtzel for seizing on my lax thought, though I don't believe that I am *completely* wrong. What I should have said is that a power-grubbing mind cares only about the criticism and scorn of others *until* enough power has been grubbed that those others can safely be ignored — see, for instance, the economic policy of the present administration.

My thanks as well for the interesting background. I will, of course, continue to regard Yankees fandom, especially among those born outside the Bronx, as a character flaw — albeit a much less serious flaw than, say, choosing the life of a politician.

Immoral Altruism

Michael Dunn's response to Charles Barr's article "Freedom vs. Fairness" (April) posits that while we should have no legal obligation to come to the aid of others, for example an orphaned child, it is an evidence of "libertarianism's moral emptiness" to deny that we have a moral obligation to help any such a child.

Any person familiar with Objectivism would likely spot the flaw in this argument, and the slippery slope that statists would seize upon and exploit — that is, if we have such an unambiguous moral duty to help others, why shouldn't we use government to compel those amoral slackers who don't see things our way to fulfill their duty to act altruistically toward others?

I would argue that we do not have a moral duty to help any and every orphaned child — that such "altruism" is in fact immoral, collectivist thinking, because it demands we sacrifice our enlightened self-interest for something we

Letters to the editor

Liberty invites readers to comment on articles that have appeared in our pages. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity. All letters are assumed to be intended for publication unless otherwise stated. Succinct letters are preferred. Please include your address and phone number so that we can verify your identity.

Send email to: letters@libertyunbound.com

Or send mail to: Liberty, P.O. Box 20527, Reno, NV 89515.

Liberty (ISSN 0894-1408) is a libertarian and classical liberal review of thought, culture, and politics, published monthly except February by the Liberty Foundation, 4785 Buckhaven Court, Reno, NV 89519. Periodicals Postage Paid at Reno, NV 89510, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Liberty, P.O. Box 20527, Reno, NV 89515.

Subscriptions are $29.50 for eleven issues. International subscriptions are $39.50 to Canadian and Mexican addresses. Email subscriptions are available; visit www.libertyunbound.com for details.

Please do not call with proposals for articles. Rather, download our writer's guide, which includes manuscript submission guidelines, from our website, www.libertyunbound.com. For information about advertising with *Liberty* contact Ronald Burr, Burr Media Group, (703) 893-3632, rburr@burrmediagroup.com.

value less. That doesn't mean we can't, as individuals, value acts of charity to carefully chosen other individuals because it makes us feel good or noble or kind (or gets us to heaven — whatever motivates you), but in that case it isn't a sacrifice because we what we receive from the act of charity amply repays us for what we've given.

But, for the sake of clarity, let's give some concrete examples where Michael Dunn's perceived moral obligation to help any and every orphaned child might give even a bleeding heart liberal pause:

- The child is orphaned because he killed his parents in cold blood.
- The orphaned child stands to inherit massive amounts of wealth, far more than you have.
- The orphaned child would be manifestly ungrateful for your charity, and has a long history of robbing those who have tried to help them in the past.
- You are living on the edge of destitution, and giving aid to that orphan would wind up greatly harming your own children.
- There are so many orphans begging for your aid (tens of millions in India, for example), that helping them all would drive even the wealthiest person into destitution.
- You're someone like Bill Gates who is running a startup company that will immensely benefit society, including orphans, if it comes to fruition, and that siphoning off badly needed operating funds to help the orphan will in the long run result in greater harm than investing the money in the startup.

And so on. The point I'm trying to make is that a truly free society — a truly moral society — is based on voluntary, uncoerced relationships and transactions, and that society leads to the best overall outcomes. And, while it may seem counterintuitive to the nonlibertarians Barr is proposing to attract, such a society isn't and cannot be organized around the principles of

From the Editor

Driving to my office this morning, I marveled — as I often do, whenever I'm in a good enough mood — that I got there without being killed in traffic. No, it's not that I'm such a bad driver; it's just that I would expect everyone else to be.

The guy who's operating a grossly defective vehicle. The woman who's worried about her impending divorce. The 17-year-old who's thinking about the things that 17-year-olds think about. The gentleman who's going 45 on the freeway, because he's very old and he thinks that's the only safe speed. The lady who's chatting on her cellphone. The man who's pounding the wheel with fury, because he can't stand all those other drivers. And the many, many people who just aren't very bright. We're all on the freeway together — yet curiously, almost nothing goes wrong.

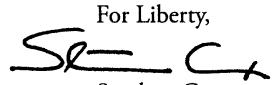
Sometimes it does, and the results are awful. Usually, however, they aren't. My last traffic accident was four years ago. It cost my insurance $1,200. A family of Russians ran into me when I was stopped at a light. I asked them why they didn't stop. "Well," they said, "as you see, we have no brakes." I had to admit that was a good reason. Yet I repeat, that was four years ago. The fact that we are shocked to see a really serious traffic accident means that something is working, and working very well.

That something is the ability of almost every individual to take care of himself, almost all the time, and get himself to his individual destination. Almost everyone manages to do that. And when individual people do that, the highway as a whole functions well. We all get to our destinations, more or less on time.

Now I want you to imagine what would happen if the government decided to operate all the cars, hire all the drivers, and make sure that no accidents could ever take place. You see my point, and you see the difference between where we're headed on I-5 each morning and where we're headed on the great, expensive, broken, dangerous, dirty highway of government control.

You see the difference, and so does this magazine.

For Liberty,



Stephen Cox

compulsory fairness and altruism — rather, it must be organized around the principle that leads to freedom, the principle of noninitiation of force — and that means tolerating individuals that liberals consider selfish jerks, however wrongheaded that assessment might be.

Jim Henshaw
Kailua, HI

Credit Where It's Due?

Stephen Cox, in "Word Watch" (July), writes, "On May 19, millions of California taxpayers went to the polls and voted to keep taxes at historic highs . . ." I presume that he was writing about the six related ballot propositions, 1A through 1F, the only propositions on the May 19 ballot.

Yes, millions did vote to keep the high taxes, but nearly twice as many millions voted to have spending cut, instead. Of Propositions 1A through 1E, the most-nearly-favored one, 1B, had a negative vote of 62.6%, and the least-loved, 1E, got 66.4% in negative votes. The only proposition of the six to pass was 1F, which denies raises to government officials' salaries in any year that has a budget deficit. That one passed with 73.9% of the votes.

Californians are not entirely stupid, although sometimes they do approve stupid things, like the bullet-train bill that got voter approval not very long ago, and the infamous Proposition 8, which denied homosexual couples the legal title to marriage.

Right now, the "Governator" and the legislature are busily working with deepest insincerity to cut spending and balance California's budget. They'll probably get what they wish, failure.

May I suggest that Professor Cox be a little less rash to presume a stupid vote in California, and that he take his time, maybe enjoy a cup of *Kaffee mit Schlagober*, relax, and wait for the election returns, next time?

Kenneth H. Fleischer
Los Angeles, CA

Cox responds: Mr. Fleischer's comments are very much appreciated. He brings up an age-old argument, one that I frequently have with myself. Who are the real voters — the ones who turned down the propositions on the May 19 California ballot, or the ones who, in the immediately preceding election, approved a gargantuan loan scheme to build a bullet train from L.A. to Frisco — exactly when all sane people realized that the state was broke?

Who are the real voters — the people who recalled Gray Davis, our last moron governor, or the people who reelected our current moron governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, together with an immense majority of radical-liberal state legislators for whom the term "moron" is a ridiculously complimentary expression?

Everyone who wants to reform our bizarre political culture must maintain a hopeful attitude about the voters' ultimate good sense and good will. If we lose that attitude, we may as well go out and shoot ourselves. But I keep recurring to a remark I heard, as a child, on the old "Maverick" TV show. It was an adaptation of a remark that Lincoln purportedly made in 1856: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, and *those are pretty good odds*."

Reflections

Sonya's short term? — There is a jarringly obvious angle of Judge Sotomayor's nomination to the Supreme Court that has unaccountably been ignored: her medical history.

When I noted to my wife, who is an internist, as well as to a friend who is an endocrinologist, that Sotomayor was diagnosed at age 8 with juvenile diabetes, the immediate response from both was that the judge would not likely live very long. My friend even opined that she would not live to full retirement age of 66.

The rule of thumb is that diabetes shortens life expectation. A healthy white 54-year-old American woman could expect to live to nearly 80. But as a diabetic Hispanic-American, Sotomayer can expect that these statistical years of life will be cut from 26 to about 16, tops.

There are exceptions, of course, and I wish her no harm. Still, Sotomayor on the Supreme Court should probably be seen as a short-term investment. — Erwin Haas

Disease vector — Though swine flu has yet to do much harm in the United States, it is not only Mexico and parts south that are suffering. The virus has spread quickly among the tribal villages of far northern Manitoba, accounting for one-quarter of that province's sick. The urgency of the situation is compounded by many of the affected communities lacking a source of running water, making impossible the hygienic procedures necessary for containing the flu.

As one might imagine, getting vaccines to such remote locations is a daunting logistical challenge, and a demonstration of how poorly suited bureaucratic structures are for tasks such as delivering emergency aid. One might think, though, that the many layers of government devoted to ensuring Canadian health care could at least coordinate an airdrop of a case of hand sanitizer. But healthcare paternalism is way too advanced up north to roll back now; the Toronto Star (June 25) reports that "Health Canada had delayed sending alcohol-based hand sanitizers to some First Nations communities for fear some residents might drink it."

So here we have a simple and cheap method for dealing with the virus among one of the poorest groups of people in the country, kept at bay by the fear that this method will speed the demise of chronic alcoholics whose lives already have less expectancy than those infected with the flu. The utter predictability of it all is telling; yet another giveaway that healthcare boards have far less interest in the public weal than in the perpetuation of their own power. — Andrew Ferguson

Evidence be damned — It's interesting to see the political correctness with which free-market advocates respond to current statist interventions in the American economy. Even on talk radio and Fox, commentators express reservations about the stimulus plan and the government takeover of various industries but then indicate that time will tell whether any of these plans will work. Our president's intelligence is invariably mentioned as a preface to any criticisms of his policies.

If a patient were to tell me that he had been advised to rub dirt into a fresh wound, as a physician, my response would not be, "Well, I come from a different school of thought on wound care, so I'm pessimistic about the outcome of your treatment. But I guess we'll find out in a few weeks whether I'm right." Rather, I'd say, "All science and experience on the subject indicates that rubbing dirt in your wound is foolish, and bound to make your condition worse." So why aren't the same standards applied to economic arguments when the evidence is just as powerful?

Too many people see the present debate as one conducted among experts from different schools of thought. It is the obligation of anyone possessing any knowledge of classical economics to unequivocally describe our policymakers as either fools or charlatans, and their intellectual backers in academia and the media as quacks.

— William Mostow

Idiocracy — On June 19, 2009, when Treasury Secretary Geithner sat before the Senate's Appropriations Committee, Sen. Inouye (D-HI) asked the following question:

> The American people, Mr. Secretary, lack basic financial literacy. Without a sufficient understanding of economics and personal finance, individuals cannot appropriately manage their finances, evaluate credit opportunities, successfully invest for long-term financial goals, or even cope with difficult financial situations. One of the root causes of the current economic crisis was that people were steered into mortgage products which caused risks that they could not afford. Mr. Secretary, the proposal indicates that the Consumer Financial Protection Agency will add important financial educational responsibilities. . . . How will the CFPA interact with the Financial Literacy and Education Commission and the President's Advisory Council on Financial Literacy?

Senator Inouye asked this detailed question of Secretary

Geithner because he is strongly concerned about the (extremely poor) economic literacy of the American people — so concerned that he wants to make sure the newly proposed Consumer Financial Protection Agency properly coordinates with the President's Advisory Council on Financial Literacy and the already extant (though apparently not yet hugely successful) Financial Literacy and Education Commission.

Sen. Inouye, however, has no interest in the extremely poor *political* literacy of the American people. This is why he did not ask Secretary Geithner the following question: "The American people, Mr. Secretary, lack basic political literacy. Without a sufficient understanding of politics and public choice, individuals cannot appropriately manage their government, evaluate politicians, successfully distinguish statesmen from demagogues, or even begin to stop us from mortgaging our descendants' futures by massively expanding our borrowing against future earnings. Mr. Secretary, the proposal indicates that no Taxpayer Financial Protection Agency is being created to provide important political educational information. How can we ensure that American voters remain in the dark about the nature of what we do here?" — Ross Levatter

Correlation and causation — I was born in Michigan. I now live in California. Those two states are currently the biggest screwups on the economic landscape. Was it something I did?

No, probably not. In Michigan, it was something that was done by the car companies, the Auto Workers union, and the welfare-queen management of the state's largest city. In California, it was something done by the state governors, Republican and Democratic, and the state legislature, solidly Democratic. Specifically: in five years, state revenues rose 25%, but state expenditures rose 40%. Hence, California is broke.

Now what do the prestigious, but soon themselves to be bankrupt, big media have to say about this? They are mounting an unremitting campaign to repeal Proposition 13, the measure that California voters approved in 1978 to limit the size of property taxes.

Let me say this in another way. California has astronomical state income taxes. It has astronomical sales taxes. It has astronomical business taxes and business regulation. And it still bankrupted itself by overspending its income. So along come all the modern and institutional liberals, and some postmodern and institutional conservatives, and propose that the way out of the problem is to raise another tax that the government can then outspend.

Now, precisely how will that solve the budget problem?

— Stephen Cox

Truth and purple prose — In a widely-quoted interview, popular investment newsletter publisher Marc Faber told Bloomberg:

> I am 100% sure that the U.S. will go into hyperinflation. The problem with government debt growing so much is that when the time will come and the Fed should increase interest rates, they will be very reluctant to do so and so inflation will start to accelerate.

Now, hyperinflation generally means price increases of

Word Watch

by Stephen Cox

It's morning in America. The birds begin to sing, the sun transcends the clouds; all over the continent, readers of Liberty rise from innocent and refreshing sleep to begin a new day of fun and profit.

A healthy breakfast, a fond goodbye to spouse and kids, a happy look at the stack of recent books from which the evening's entertainment will be drawn, a successful search for briefcase and car keys, and then . . . you discover that you have just enough time to check out the stock reports. So you flick on the TV. The wide screen fills with artificial light; you see an attractive young woman sitting behind a desk. Her mouth opens, and she says, "Thus, at the end of the day, it begs the question, what's the timeframe for this jumpstart of the economy? Thumbs up or thumbs down on the money markets?"

To which a ten-cent face in a thousand-dollar suit replies, "Well, Amber, you know it's not over till the fat lady sings, but the president's best and brightest sure have a tough act to follow when they try to fill those big shoes of the infamous Alan Greenspan."

"Right, Mr. Dreckfuss. But now some sources are already saying that we literally haven't yet seen the light at the end of the tunnel, yet."

"You've hit the target on the nose, Amber. You know, it's exactly like Mother Nature. . . . She's always up to somethin'! Sh— , I mean, *things* happen. You can't live with her; you can't live without her. Know what I mean?"

"Sure do! Well, hopefully we'll get through it. Thanks for joining us, Mr. D. Next up — a Santa with a heart of gold! And has anybody seen the body of Dolores Scrant? The neighbors are beginning to wonder! Just stay tuned; it's all right here on CNN!"

Well, that's enough of that, you decide. The screen goes off. Yet you know that things have changed. You know that you're no longer on a planet where life makes sense and words have meanings. You've entered another world, the world of nonsense, blather, yap, yap, yap; and unless Providence intervenes, you will wander that world throughout the day. Every broadcast, every email, every business memo, every sports report will surround you with dead and rotten expressions, expressions that somehow, because of some unanalyzable quirk of social physics and biology, have become the lifeforms of the planet you are forced to live on, at least ten hours of every dreary day.

Let's call it Planet X, because no single name could do it justice. In this remote, desert world, creatures who bear a striking resemblance to modern humans endlessly recite fragments of human language, with no more understanding of what to do with them than you would expect from your average Cro-Magnon. Where do these phrases come from? One theory is that they originate from old broadcasts of "I Love Lucy," which for the past six decades have been surging out from earth toward any lifeforms able to monitor them. God knows what they've done to

over 1,000% a year. It happened most recently in Zimbabwe, where a toxic mix of crooked politicians and bad policies produced inflation that was over 200,000,000% in 2008. Yes, over 200 million.

Faber may have been going in for a little George Soros-style America bashing there. He may have been trying to stir up controversy and sell some newsletters.

But the sad thing is that artificially low interest rates do tend to cause inflation, the Federal Reserve does seem intent on a policy of keeping interest rates very low.

It won't take sub-Saharan fiscal madness or Weimar Republic-style "wheelbarrows full of cash" to hurt value in the United States. A year or a year and a half of double-digit price jumps will do the trick. — Jim Walsh

America the hungry? — You've no doubt seen the public service announcement on television that states that in America one person out of eight is currently going hungry. A voiceover by President Obama tells us that food banks just can't keep up with the demand.

True, the economy is bad. But we have something called the food stamp program to help people out. It was recently renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and it currently provides benefits to over 30 million Americans. That's about 10% of the population. Then there's the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program (WIC), which provides mothers, expectant mothers, infants, and small children "found to be at nutritional risk" with free food.

On top of the government programs we have churches and other charities providing free meals for the homeless and others. So how can it be that one in eight Americans — 12.5% of the population — is going hungry?

A few more statistics: 99.5% of American households own a refrigerator; 99% own a TV; 89% own at least one car. As of 2005, 76% owned a computer (the percentage has probably gone up since then).

Given all of the above, I find it hard to fathom that something like 12% of Americans are going hungry. I believe the figure originated in a news story from last fall. If the report is true, it would appear that we have an enormous number of people in this country who are so stupid that they can't locate the free food that's available. Or we have millions of people who prefer to go hungry rather than lose their cable and internet service. Or perhaps the report is not true. Then we have a big load of bullcrap being dumped on us by the government, the media, and the ubiquitous "advocates for the hungry."

Can somebody please tell me which it is? — Jon Harrison

President derides privates — President Obama made the derisive comment, "If private insurers say that the marketplace provides the best quality healthcare, if they tell us that they're offering a good deal, then why is it that the government — which they say can't run anything — suddenly is going to drive them out of business [under his government healthcare scheme]? That's not logical."

Well, maybe it's because private insurers can't always expect the taxpayers to bail them out when too-generous and

---

the civilization of Phi Alpha Centauri.

Some researchers observe, however, that a few of the most popular expressions of Planet X are of much more recent origin. They theorize that some semihuman creature — a politician, perhaps, or an unemployed talk-show host — landed on X sometime around the year 2000, and transmitted his or her lingo to the unsuspecting population.

That would explain the prevalence, on Planet X, of usages that Earth would never have tolerated, back in the "I Love Lucy" era. Back then, people who heard someone say "beg the question" either knew that it was a technical term in logic (meaning, roughly, "reasoning in a circle") or simply disregarded it, recognizing that they didn't understand its meaning. Strange, but true: people in the past didn't just give an expression whatever meaning they thought it should have. When they heard the word "infamous," they didn't immediately decide that it meant "very famous." If they didn't know what it meant, they left it alone, or they went to something called a dictionary and looked it up, so discovering that it means "lacking in good fame; despicable." "A day which will live in infamy" was not a day that, you know, whatever, there must of been something famous that happened on it.

In those days, teachers were paid very little, and must therefore have been completely incompetent. Nevertheless, they taught their students to look up all the words they didn't understand. So when students heard the word "thus," many of them looked it up. They discovered that it wasn't just a word you stick onto a sentence to mean "I'm still talking here." No, it actually had a meaning. It indicated a cause-effect relationship. If you wanted to use that word, you needed to do a second or two of thinking. You needed to decide whether the cause-effect relationship existed. I know, this sort of thing can be hard.

It's much harder, though, to spend a day on Planet X, where unaccountable things are always happening, and no one even notices. This is a place where fat ladies are always about to sing (what, I wonder), though they never do. This is a place of weird religions, where people revere anything that happened "back in the day," without ever specifying when that great Day was. And this is a place for weird transformations of normal entities. Dead people always "look natural"; fanatics are always "activists"; busybodies are always "concerned citizens"; racial and intellectual exclusion is always "diversity." On Planet X, people possessed of a greed for power (politicians, and agitators for racial or religious causes) are "community leaders" and "public servants," said to be motivated by "high ideals"; while people who are more concerned with *making* money than *taking* it are scorned for thinking only of "the bottom line." Srangely, their critics seem to be engaged in the same pursuit. They often say things like, "The bottom line is, we've got to have enough money to make our school system viable," or, "The bottom line is, we need to fulfill the full potential of the American dream," or, "The bottom line is, equality is still an audacious hope in this country."

It is impossible to get through a day on Planet X without hearing such expressions. And they aren't used — consciously, at any rate — as aimless patter, mere verbal wallpaper, like "sincerely yours" and "how are you today?" There is an actual intent to communicate. But to communicate *what?* Most of the phrases used on Planet X are difficult or impossible to translate. "In this country" has an air of mystery about it, as if the referent

inefficient plans end up costing the companies more than they can collect in premiums.

Maybe it's because private companies are constrained to figure the long-term possible costs of seriously ill customers and increasingly expensive new medical technologies before they underwrite high-risk customers and customers with existing conditions, then charge appropriately high premiums in order to stay solvent.

Maybe it's because private companies cannot count on making future customers and taxpayers pay for the excess costs incurred today.

And maybe it's because private companies cannot make some customers (taxpayers) pay more just because they are better off, in order to subsidize those who are less well off.

Only government can get away with that. — John Kannarr

Flatland — In the tax reform debate, those who favor the flat tax have a decisive advantage: many countries now actually have flat tax systems, and we can therefore ask what observation shows us about what the likely consequences would be of adopting such a system here. Unless you are a devout Kantian with a "damn the consequences, full speed ahead!" attitude, consequences are of interest.

In this regard, the prestigious National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) published last year a detailed study of the effects that the adoption (in 2001) of a flat tax had on the Russian economy. The study, entitled "Myth and Reality of Flat Tax Reform: Micro Estimates of Tax Evasion Response and Welfare Effects in Russia," is by Yuriy Gorodnichenko, Jorge Martinez-Vazquez, and Klara Sabirianova Peter, and is available on the NBER website.

As the authors note, Russia's adoption of the flat tax was noteworthy. The tax was quite low — only one bracket, set at 13% — and it was the first really large economy to change from a graduated to a flat income tax. (There are now 23 countries with the flat tax, and four more close to adopting it.) The following year saw Russia achieve a 5% real growth in GDP and a whopping 25% real growth in tax revenues collected. So Gorodnichenko et al., tried to get a precise fix on what portion of these favorable effects can rightly be attributed specifically to the new tax policy.

Measuring the level of tax evasion in any country is inherently tricky. But the authors devised a clever way of doing so, by measuring the gap between reported earnings and actual household spending as an indicator of tax evasion. They compared these data immediately before and after the institution of the flat tax.

The study found that the flat tax resulted in a significant drop in tax evasion, and not surprisingly, that the greater the drop in tax rates, the greater the drop in tax evasion. Moreover, they found that this increased compliance with the law could not be attributed to any changes in Russia's tax enforcement policies.

The authors also found that the adoption of the flat tax resulted in a real gain in economic productivity, although that gain was small, compared to the gain in revenue from decreased tax evasion. As you know, the specter always evoked by opponents of an equitable flat tax is that it would not produce the same revenue as our current, hideously complicated system.

With incomes in the upper tax brackets, the authors estimate (by looking at the rise in consumption as a proxy for increased productivity, including people's working more hours) that the increased productivity was from 2.7% to 5.5%. But adding in the lower income brackets, where people did not see their tax rates fall under the flat tax, the estimate ranges from 0 to 4%. As the authors put it, "In summary, the response of after-tax income [after the flat tax was introduced] can be decomposed into windfall gains (4–5%), productivity effect (0–4%), and tax evasion effect (10–11%). Although the reform provided more resources to households and could have increased labor supply, the main effect was improved tax compliance. The government lost some revenue due to lower tax rates, but it gained substantially more revenue from enhanced reporting of income."

The upshot is that we now have solid observational sup-

---

were some nation that could not be named, for fear of a political crackdown. Other expressions, such as "dream," have a definite, though occult, meaning. This one may signifiy "a superannuated social program from which I expect to make some money." Still others suggest a logic that is, to put it mildly, paradoxical. Consider "senior citizen," which seems to mean that there are *junior* citizens, too — but it couldn't, because that would violate the principle of "equality." "Equality," one of the most common expressions on Planet X, is even more paradoxical. Occasionally it means, "Everyone will get the same reward, no matter how anyone behaved," but usually it means, "There must be conditions guaranteeing that our group will come out on top."

"Viable," though . . . That's a puzzle. It's clearly a favorable expression, but how it differs from "good," "nice," "wonderful," "cool," "sweet," "incredible," "awesome," or "chill" has never been determined. Another thing that's yet to be determined is the spatial relationships on Planet X. On this planet, one is supposed to be simultaneously "on the cutting edge" and "solidly in the mainstream." Streams, on X, are solidly immobile. And that isn't the only odd physical property of the place. People are always balancing things that couldn't be balanced elsewhere. State budgets, for instance, are "balanced" whenever the unfunded liabilities are excluded, while leftist critics complain that these budgets are being "balanced on [someone's] back." Anyone is free to fill in the "someone" — "educators," "the mentally challenged," "elders," "the children" . . .

"The children" are the usual candidates. It seems that this planet's "kids," "youth," "young people," or "young adults" are preternaturally greedy and stupid. Virtually all government measures and popular enthusiasms are "for the children," and attempts to educate these creatures consume most of local governments' money.

Nevertheless, Planet X is a world that is clearly less devoted to people than to machinery. Nothing ever just grows or develops here; it has to be "pumped up" or "ratcheted up" by the government. This is especially true of the god of this world, who is called The Economy. This god "has issues": he is lazy, jumpy, resentful, and spiteful, with a strong tendency to depression and panic attacks. Ordinarily, The Economy can be found "slumping" or "drooping" or "lagging" "in the doldrums." Constant

port for the view that a flat tax will produce major revenue gains through decreased evasion, and lead to some, though lesser, productivity gains as well. — Gary Jason

The Save the Big Three Foundation — It is my understanding that the new energy bill making its way through Congress promises a prize for the inventor of a car that will get 70 miles to the gallon. What has happened to America? There has always been a prize for people who develop technologies that can do things more efficiently; it's called *profit*.

Unfortunately, profit is now a bad word in America. It is something that we should never put over people, something that should be ignored when writing a moral business plan. I don't understand why motivation for prizes is considered more appropriate than profit. A prize is still a profit, it is just a profit awarded to only one worker. Meanwhile, all the other inventors are expected to work for no compensation.

Contests have always been a sneaky way to get more for your buck. It is common for comedy clubs to run contests for the "Funniest Person in [your city here]" because the club owner can get a lot of stage time filled for a very small investment.

In the private sector, prizes are occasionally illegal, because they can be vehicles for fraud. Rather than sell a house, one could sell raffle tickets that would net far more than the value of the home.

The law often looks the other way when the proceeds go to a good cause. But I hardly think that a government-owned motor company qualifies as a charity. And if it does, it is a charity that should fail. — Tim Slagle

Riding the dog — President Obama's $100-billion high-speed rail plan faces an unexpected threat. It is called the bus.

At least 14 bus companies compete directly with Amtrak's high-speed trains between Boston and Washington, offering more than a thousand mostly non-stop trips per day each way connecting Boston, New York, Washington, and intermediate cities. Between them, these buses carry far more passengers than Amtrak in the same corridor.

Although they take a little longer than Amtrak, many offer leather seats, free WiFi, and electrical outlets at every seat, all for far lower fares. While Amtrak charges $49 to $169 to ride from Washington to New York, a bus on the same route will cost from $1.50 to $25.

Because they aren't subsidized, intercity buses are ignored by most policy makers. While the congressionally created Surface Transportation Policy Commission offered many reasons why American taxpayers should subsidize trains, it never mentioned intercity buses. Yet nationally, intercity buses carry at least two and a half times as many passenger miles as Amtrak.

After declining for four decades — partly because of government-subsidized passenger trains — intercity buses were reinvigorated when a Chinese entrepreneur named Pei Lin Liang started carrying passengers between Boston and New York for $25, half of Amtrak's and Greyhound's lowest fares. More "Chinatown buses" soon entered the market, leading to a fare war that drove prices down to $10.

This led two companies from Britain — which privatized and deregulated its public transit services in the 1980s — to jump into the market. Megabus (owned by a British company named Stagecoach) is providing 88-seat double-decker buses in the Boston-to-Washington corridor. Bolt Bus (part owned by Greyhound, which in turn is now owned by another British company called FirstGroup) offers more legroom than ordinary buses. Both carry passengers from New York to Boston or Washington for as little as $1.50.

Intercity bus ridership is now growing by nearly 10% per year, with new lines throughout the Northeast, Midwest, South, and far West — exactly where Obama wants to run high-speed trains.

Obama's main justification for high-speed rail subsidies is the supposed environmental benefit. Yet without any subsidies, but an incentive to fill as many seats as possible, intercity buses spend only a third as much energy and produce only a

ratcheting by government agents is needed to "revive" him, "stimulate" him, and remove the "toxins" he gets from eating real estate loans.

His worshipers are similarly lazy, depressive, and mechanical, though given to peculiar binges in which they "kick back" and "party," if they're young, or "devour" a book, if they're old and intellectual. Nothing ever comes of this. The books leave no spoors; the parties leave no trace on the emotions. When the creatures of Planet X make love, they "hook up" — or, if they happen to be very genteel, "get married" in ceremonies prescribed by the "bridal industry." Quarrels ordinarily ensue, in which the happy couple goes "toe to toe," either "picking nits" or bringing major issues "to a head." Thus the language of biology complements the language of mechanics.

Sometimes the biological is a bit too biological. People who attempt to evade quarrels by behaving in an amicable way are often accused of being "suckups" or "brownnosers" by their morally fastidious friends. This language is accepted as normal in polite circles; grandmas and little children use it all the time. But anyone who goes on radio and starts to specify its literal meaning is looking for a whopping fine from the federal government. Worse, he's looking at a torrent of anger from outraged moralists — the fate that greeted the hapless District of Columbia official who infuriated the city council by using the word "niggardly." The only difference was that he used an innocent word in an innocent way, and the council was too dumb to realize it.

What will be the end of Planet X? Right now, most of its inhabitants are persuaded that it will die in the fires of "climate change." A few years, months, or minutes ago, they were persuaded that it would be destroyed by war. After all, "war is not healthy for children or other living things." Many people like to think that the planet will be destroyed by collision with an asteroid, which, though smaller than a shotglass, will "pack the punch of ten billion bombs the size of the bomb that leveled Hiroshima."

I think the planet will die when the last clear and comprehensible statement has made been made by the last literate human being. She will shout, "Look out! There's smallpox in that vial!", and the beings around her will reply, "Huh? *Why* can't we smile?" Call it language change.

third as much pollution per passenger mile as Amtrak.

Obama should take a lesson from Britain. Privatizing Amtrak and deregulating transportation will do far more for mobility and environmental quality than throwing money at high-speed rail. — Randal O'Toole

It's a process — The Leviathan is a transformational creature. It consumes good ideas and defecates ridiculous laws.

A generation ago, Milton Freidman proposed a system of tradable pollution credits that would allow noxious industries to compensate other firms, and ultimately, everyone else, for the messes they made. The proceeds generated by trade in the credits could be used to clean up pollution or to pay people for living with its effects. This was an intriguing idea for using market mechanics to address the externality of a clean environment. Policy makers gradually embraced the concept; but their embrace changed it into what we know today as "cap-and-trade" regulation.

In June, the House of Representatives narrowly passed H.R. 2998, a bad piece of cap-and-trade legislation that — rather than using market mechanics — would place various regulatory constraints on industrial activity in the United States. President Obama supported the bill, which passed the House by a vote of 219 to 212. Despite the narrow margin (or, as seen from a bureaucratic perspective, because of it), the bill's passage was described as a political "win" for the wretched Nancy Pelosi. After the vote, she muttered: "We passed transformational legislation which takes us into the future."

Like much of this madwoman's political agenda, H.R. 2998 is unpopular with most Americans. Proof of this: some 44 Democrat congressmen voted against their transformational leaders. The bill's main sponsors, California's Henry Waxman and Massachusetts' Edward Markey, are two of the most reflexive statists in Congress. They don't deliberate on legislation; like pigs at the trough, they simply consume anything of value that comes before them.

Six months before, President-elect Obama had made catechistic pledges to create *just such* misguided law. The only challenge came in changing the old buzzword ("global warming" legislation) for a new one ("climate change" legislation). Seems the globe wasn't cooperating with the hysterical agenda of Beltway fanatics. It wasn't warming as drastically as their earlier flim-flam had threatened.

Still, passing this crap did involve some parliamentary drama. The original bill had come out of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, but a week before the House vote, that bill was replaced by H.R. 2998 — which would be voted on as an "amendment in the form of a substitute." Then, just hours before the vote, Waxman's House Rules Committee released a report that added a 300-page amendment to H.R. 2998's existing 1,200 pages — another cynical "win" for a career pol. This meant that the peons in the House were voting on a 1,500-page bill they hadn't read. Neither had their staffs. In this way, H.R. 2998 emerged from the same statist cesspool as the Patriot Act and last year's main economic stimulus package.

What does the bill do? It mandates a 17% cut in "greenhouse gas emissions" by 2020 and an 80% cut by 2050, unlikely goals that are supposed to be made more likely by prices set on various forms of pollution by a "modified" cap-and-trade system. It also decrees that, by 2020, at least 20% of U.S. electricity will come from "renewable" sources and increased "energy efficiency." No market mechanics to finesse that — just government edict. Over the coming decade, lobbyists and lawyers will keep busy determining what all the phrases in quotation marks mean.

Yet another triumph of politics. And a far cry from what Friedman had in mind. — Jim Walsh

Paymaster-in-chief — The Obama administration, being one of the most statist in American history, just loves appointing "czars" to run various sectors of our increasingly nationalized economy. The sole job qualification for a nominee to rule over one of these fiefdoms is that he or she should be a lawyer, and preferably one having absolutely no experience whatsoever in that industry.

The latest is the announcement of a new Pay Czar. This bird's job will be to set compensation levels for all executives working for companies receiving federal "bailout" funds — a rapidly increasing number of companies, indeed! The man chosen for this exalted job is Kenneth Feinberg, a lawyer whose main previous governmental experience was in administering the federal compensation fund for 9/11 victims. Whether he will allow the companies that receive the bailout money enough leeway to hire executives talented enough to actually turn these companies around is anybody's guess.

The theory here is that since the public has contributed money to the companies, why, naturally, the public (read: the federal government) should control them. Of course, the government is controlled by the Democrats, so when the suggestion was made that the czar set the level of compensation for the executives of labor unions representing the employees of those same businesses, why, it was immediately dismissed as crazy.

Now, prominent Democrats have made no secret of the fact that they would like to extend the concept to any publicly traded company. Barney Frank in particular has long lusted after that power. The general idea is that filthy, greedy capitalists are earning too much money and need to have their salaries capped.

This all prompts the question, "why stop at business executives?" There are plenty of other filthy, greedy people earning too much money. Probably the most obvious are entertainers. Think of all the movie stars who rake in millions and millions of dollars for making pictures you don't like? Worse yet, think of all those singers who record music you don't appreciate. Hannah Montana (a.k.a. Miley Cyrus) is reputed to be getting close to a net worth of a cool billion, and she is barely an adult. Why isn't Barney Frank bellowing about capping her salary and the salaries of all other singers — say, setting the amount of money a singer can receive at five times the average salary of a music store clerk? Wouldn't that be *fair*? We need a music czar!

Ah, but we have to remember that entertainers, like union officials, are typically big supporters of the Democrats. So don't look for that czar any time soon. — Gary Jason

A bridge not far enough — Did you know that the Ambassador Bridge — the only bridge that connects Detroit to Ontario — is privately owned? I was surprised to discover

this information about a major artery of transportation, but after all, news of successful private ownership often travels slowly. No one seems interested in reporting it.

Now the owner wants to build another span because of congestion, but Michigan and Ontario want to get together and build their own bridge. Michigan, in particular, has so much spare change lying around that building a bridge would be a mere trifle. (Sure!)

So the two governments are putting all kinds of roadblocks in the owner's way, despite the fact that he has already created the approaches on the Windsor, Ontario side.

I'm sure that much of the congestion was caused, in the first place, by the miserable customs and immigration stops on both sides of the border. God, don't you hate the government? — Kathy Bradford

A matter of degrees — If you rattle around enough, you strike up some unlikely friendships. One of the most unlikely friends I have, at least unlikely to somebody brought up in the '50s, is a fairly high muckety-muck in the Chinese government. High enough to have the ear of Hu Jintao, if he wants it. And a good enough friend, I think, that if I ever needed to get a message to Mr. Hu, he could deliver it. Like millions of other people I have, in fact, two degrees of separation from the president of the Peoples' Republic of China.

Why I bring this up is that there's another person, a person I'm not so close to — a mysterious Dr. Romeo who, apparently, resides somewhere in the wilds of Virginia. That's about all I know about him. Google as I may, review the correspondence in my email files as I will, I can't discover where Dr. Romeo went to med school, how long he has been in practice, or what his specialty might be. I can't even track down a first name for him. In fact, I'm not even sure that Dr. Romeo is a he. He may very well be a woman. But, whichever restroom he (or she) uses, he is the doctor assigned to me by the State Department to decide whether I am fit enough to live on the government's dime in out-of-the-way corners of the world.

You might think that, as the physician assigned to my case, Dr. Romeo would want to examine me. But if you do think such a thing, it's because you don't have a lot of experience with federal healthcare. All communication with Dr. Romeo is mediated through third parties.

The third party that I have formally dealt with is one Judy A. Sutton, FSHP FNP MPH, and, for all I know, Dame Commander of the Order of the Garter. She is Dr. Romeo's Medical Clearances Deputy and, in the past, if I needed to find out something medical from Dr. Romeo, I emailed my questions to Ms. Sutton. From time to time, I imagine, Ms. Sutton sits down at her computer, reads through stacks of emails, and trots the questions she thinks worthy of Dr. Romeo's time down the hall to his office. After a while, Dr. Romeo gives her the answers, she trots back to her computer, paraphrases the answers in return emails, hits the "send" button and, presto!, medicine accomplished.

I say "in the past" because, apparently, this process has proven much too nimble and effective for Federal Medicine to continue to use. From now on, I have been told, I am to send my concerns to a *third* government person, a person in an entirely different federal agency who, I presume, does not reside within trotting distance of either Judy A. Sutton, FSHP FNP MPH, and potentially DCOG, or Dr. Romeo. As I see it, the job of this Third Federal Person is to repackage my concerns for Ms. Sutton. She, when she reviews her emails, will trot the questions she deems worthy down the hall to Dr. Romeo, get the answers, trot back, and paraphrase Dr. Romeo's answers in an email to the Third Federal Person, who will, then, email the gist of Ms. Sutton's response to me. This puts me at three degrees of separation from Dr. Romeo.

At this point it will have occurred to the perceptive reader that Your Correspondent has a more intimate relationship with the emperor of Red China than he does with the government doctor who is supposed to know enough about the current state of his health to decide where he can and cannot live for the next few years.

I don't want to jump into hasty generalizations here, but this might be the kind of thing that gives federal healthcare a bad name. — Bill Merritt

Ebony and ebony — The first black president remains popular despite dubious economic policies, while the first black governor in New York state is unpopular, notwithstanding his more responsible economic policy and sympathy for his near-blindness.

What's the difference? It's not race, for sure. Nor is it significant that one was elected, while the other inherited his position when his superior resigned in disgrace.

To my mind, one man is strong on promises, a bullshitter essentially with great self-confidence in his verbal charm. We know from experience that nearly all bullshitters eventually disappoint. They really do. — Richard Kostelanetz

Stars and prison stripes — In a recent article for Reason ("Putting Stars Behind Bars," April), William Anderson and Candice Jackson make note of federal prosecutors' increased proclivity to criminalize poor sportsmanship among America's more famous athletes. While this may seem like a lunatic trend to anyone not born under the Stars and Stripes, even a few native-born Americans are starting to notice that America's politicians incarcerate people at a record-setting pace; much-maligned dictators such as Castro and Chavez don't even come close.

For all the possible reasons that may be given for this disgraceful trend — "tough on crime" policies, the War on Drugs, all the jobs that building and running prisons provide, or federal employees more focused on enhancing their careers than on seeing justice done — the increasing urge to slap anyone and everyone in prison (with the exception of the political class, which, even when caught redhanded, rarely sees the inside of a cell) is seeping into our national DNA.

This seepage was bought home to me by the untimely death of Michael Jackson. Upon learning of the man's poor physical state, my fellow employees began to sound off on how his personal physician should, you guessed it, be put in jail. If Eugene O'Neill wrote "A Long Day's Journey Into Night" in today's America, he'd have to include a part where heavily armed, Kevlar-encased DEA agents burst into the home, throw everyone to the ground, shoot the dog, and drag the drug addict mother off to prison.

The Clash once sang of their English homeland, "Out came the batons, and the British warned themselves." Every day, with every new law, America's politicians beat us over

the head a little bit harder. One day, however, they'll inadvertently knock some sense into our skulls and we'll bring a stop to their madness. Until then, it can be a small consolation to foreigners experiencing our military's attentions that America's political leaders treat American citizens in the same way.

— C.J. Maloney

Reaping the wind — President Obama has made a fetish of promising gazillions of "green jobs," that is, new jobs that will supposedly flow from his environmentalist program. He claims that wind and solar power, and electric cars — all costing vastly more than existing standard technology — will magically create green jobs for the masses.

Into this green dream a bit of reality has intruded. A recent study by CRA (Charles River Associates) International, called "Impacts of the Climate Provision in the Obama Administration's FY2010 Budget Proposal"(downloadable from the CRA website) estimates the cost to the American economy of Obama's proposed cap-and-trade legislation. The results are sobering.

CRA estimates that if this legislation goes through, it will make natural gas prices go up 39% by 2020 and 56% by 2025. Gasoline and diesel fuel will be forced up 19% by 2020. And electricity will be forced up 27% by 2020 and 44% by 2025.

The rising energy prices will of course cost jobs. CRA estimates that the net jobs lost will be 800,000 by 2015, 1.9 million by 2020, and 3.2 million by 2025. These are net losses, meaning that the new "green" jobs are factored in to the projection. The losses will fall disproportionately on the Sun Belt states.

And the rising energy prices will lower consumers' purchasing power. The greening of America will cost the average household $1,020 annually by 2015, $1,381 by 2020, and $2,127 by 2025. This is again the net cost, factoring in the revenues that supposedly will be given to consumers (revenues that will come from the carbon taxes on businesses).

Finally, the cost to the economy as a whole from cap-and-trade will be significant. CRA estimates that it will cost 0.7% of the GDP by 2025. Considering that our growth rate is in the range of 2% to 3% in a normal year, that is a steep price, indeed.

Does Obama realize that that his green scheme will have massive costs to our national wealth and jobs? Well, I can't pretend to read his mind, and I certainly have learned not to trust his words. But my guess is that he does, but doesn't care, for two reasons. First, he buys entirely the green narrative that the United States is an energy glutton that is the main cause of global warming, and needs to live a more austere lifestyle. In the environmentalist religion, man is viewed as a sinful despoiler of the environment who deserves to be punished and brought low.

Second, Obama recognizes that people don't generally follow Frederic Bastiat's advice to consider the unseen as well as the seen. While the jobs created by his green agenda will be relatively tiny in number, they will be visible. Obama will see to it that every new wind farm is prominently displayed on TV. Meanwhile, as businesses close because of the higher costs, the people out of work will pass unnoticed.

— Gary Jason

Venezuela's got talent — On May 29 Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez declared a marathon edition of his weekly TV talk show, "Alo Presidente" ("Hello President"), to celebrate its 10th anniversary. No doubt he was not only inspired by but was also carrying the torch for his idol, Fidel Castro, who holds the record for longest speech before the UN. Castro's absolute talkathon record is a 12-hour harangue with one intermission. But I digress.

Chavez planned on speaking for four days and started out strong with attacks on "right-wing oligarchs," anecdotes, songs, and light banter. But then he went where no despot dares to go — he opened himself up to competition by challenging several intellectuals, visiting Caracas for an opposition-hosted conference, to a debate.

Mario Vargas Llosa, one-time Peruvian presidential candidate, winner of the Miguel de Cervantes Prize — the Spanish language's most prestigious literary accolade — and champion of liberty, accepted — on the condition that the debate would be one-on-one.

Chavez declined. Well, sort of. Declaring that he, Chavez, was "in the major leagues and you're in the double-A," el Presidente signed off, promising to return the next day. He never reappeared; forcing state TV to fill the time with reruns and old, stale interviews.

Still, he didn't skip a beat and might actually have gotten something right. The Economist reported that "Chavez praised 'Comrade Obama' for nationalising General Motors and expressed worries that he and Cuba's Fidel Castro could end up to the right of the president of the United States."

Tough call.

On June 11, both houses of Congress approved separate bills authorizing the FDA to control the nicotine content of tobacco products, with the ultimate objective of eliminating nicotine from such products. A reconciliated bill is expected to be signed by the president very soon. Commentators on NPR had the mendacity to comment that our freedom to choose would not be impaired: smokers could still pick whatever brand they chose.

On the same day, the Chavez government banned the sale of Coke Zero, ostensibly because of health hazards. No details were provided. Additionally, my extended family in Caracas reports that brand choice in supermarkets has been reduced to one — one soap, one rice, one noodle, one tomato sauce, one diaper . . . you get the picture. Consumer choices have been reduced politically instead of by popularity. Only producers willing to toe Chavez' line are allowed to proffer their products. Is Venezuela the next California — where trends are set?

— Robert H. Miller

Becktionary — What to make of Glenn Beck, Fox phenom? He invites libertarians on his show (I've seen Sheldon Richman once and Randy Barnett three times) and treats them as fellow travelers. He calls himself a libertarian. He's even friends, I understand, with Penn Jillette. But surely I can't be the only one to think he's a major loon.

He has Richman on, for example, as an expert about the meaning of fascism, but never lets him get a clear sentence out, interrupting to raise conspiracy concerns that this country has been going fascistic ever since the government chose in 1916 to put a bundle of sticks with an ax, or fasces, on the back of our dimes (something that predates Mussolini and Hitler).

Recently Beck was talking with the agriculture commissioner of Alabama, who was brought on to rail against an alleged plan of the federal government to detail how much of which crops every farmer is allowed to grow. The commissioner, a political hack, used the forum to complain that we are losing farm jobs in America (something economists call "improved productivity," as it now takes fewer farmers to grow more food), and that nonetheless many American consumers insist on continuing to buy foreign food (something economists call "free trade"). Beck — the libertarian? — not only didn't disagree; he actively agreed.

Soon after, he was talking with a guest about Obama's "pay czar." This is another stupid idea of the administration, and Beck was right to lambaste it. He was also, I thought, on a good tack when he pointed out that many politicians looking into CEO salaries had never worked in the private sector in their adult lives. He mentioned in this regard Sen. Dodd and Rep. Frank. He went on to say (I paraphrase): Congressmen make $174,000 a year. Government records indicate that Barney Frank is worth something between $700,000 and $1.8 million dollars. How is it possible that someone who makes only $174,000 a year can be worth so much? Is Beck truly so limited in his knowledge of investments that he thinks that possessing, by age 69, assets between four and 11 times your annual income is anything out of the ordinary?

Beck's audience continues to grow. To the extent that he is libertarian, this seems to be a good thing. To the extent that he appeals to the most ignorant segment of the American public (also, I fear, a growing segment), it is not such a good thing.

— Ross Levatter

Protean president — Obama is a man of many personae, none of them particularly admirable.

There is MessiahBama, the man who arrogantly presents himself as the embodiment of hope and change — all ye need is faith even as a grain of mustard seed and all good things will come to you. There is BiCzarObama, the super-statist who has the bizarre theory that not only should the government control the economy, but each aspect of it should be run by a czar. Thus we have a climate czar, a pay czar, a regulation czar, and a bunch of others, all controlled by Obama (the czar czar?).

Regarding foreign affairs and national defense, we have dueling personae. There is DoveObama, the man who yearns for peace in our time, in due time. As St. Augustine famously prayed to God for chastity, but not yet, so DoveObama wants to close Gitmo, but not yet, and wants to pull our troops out of Iraq, but not yet. Conversely, there is MachoBama, who has said he would invade Pakistan if necessary to get bin Laden. Where Teddy Roosevelt advised that you should talk softly but carry a big stick, MachoBama thinks that you should shout loudly while holding a limp dick.

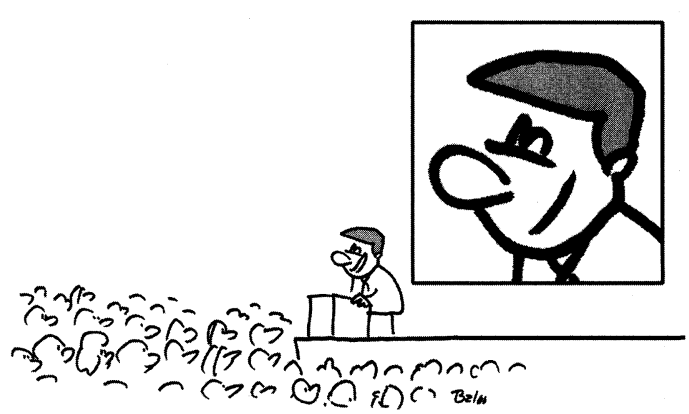
But what appears most frequently is ChicagoBama, a creature of the corrupt Daley political machine that has controlled Chicago for decades. This is the Obama who assembles coalitions by buying off various constituencies, pushes affirmative action, and enables voting chicanery. Obama, who was one of ACORN's lawyers, and benefited from ACORN's dubious voter registration efforts, saw to it that they had access to the massive funds in the "stimulus" bill. And he has repeatedly pushed the Big Labor agenda, after having received massive financial and other support from unions during his campaign. For minorities, he has nominated a staunch proponent of racial-preference affirmative action to the Supreme Court (the self-styled "wise Latina" Sonia Sotomayor).

While ChicagoBama has generally escaped media attention, one particularly egregious action has gotten some notice. It is the firing of Gerald Walpin, Inspector General of AmeriCorps. Mr. Walpin had been unwise enough to investigate tenaciously the misuse of AmeriCorps' (read: taxpayers') money by one of Obama's major supporters, one Kevin Johnson, a "community organizer" like Obama. The facts are striking.

Walpin has been the Inspector General for the Corporation for National and Community Service (which is the federal bureau that oversees AmeriCorps and other "volunteer" organizations) since 2007. Last year, he was asked by the corporation to investigate reports of financial shenanigans at Johnson's pet nonprofit organization St. HOPE. St. HOPE had received $850,000 from AmeriCorps, which was supposed to go for tutoring disadvantaged students, improving certain buildings, and running some arts programs. But Walpin found that Johnson had diverted the money to such purposes as politicking in a school board election, padding the salaries of his staff, and having AmeriCorps members do Johnson's personal chores.

Walprin recommended that Johnson be disallowed from receiving further federal funds, and the corporation agreed. And Walpin's office also referred the matter to the local U.S. attorney's office. Then Johnson was elected mayor of Sacramento, and it appeared that the city would not be able to receive stimulus money. There was an outcry by disappointed moochers, and it led to the U.S. attorney (Lawrence Brown) and others pressuring Walpin to settle the matter by letting Johnson pay some of the money back, and lifting the ban on his receiving federal funds. Walpin refused, pointing out that the whole idea of the process of inspection is to stop wrongdoers from getting more money.

Lawrence Brown then decided to cut Walpin out of the loop and deal with the corporation directly. The corporation was now headed by Obama fundraiser Alan Solomont, and Brown and Solomont worked out a settlement for Johnson that basically let him off with a slight fine and exoneration.



". . . But enough about me. . . ."

Walpin, astonished that he had been treated in this way, put the facts of the matter in a report which he sent to Congress.

His reward was a phone call from Norman Eisen — ironically, the Special Counsel to the President for Ethics and Government Reform — telling him that the president felt it was time for Walpin to "move on." Eisen said it was pure coincidence that he was being let go after refusing to be part of the Johnson whitewash. Right.

An even richer irony is that by an act passed last year by Congress (one co-sponsored by Obama) the president is required to give Congress 30 days notice before terminating an inspector general. Obama violated a law he himself had pushed. At least one congressman, Sen. Grassley (R-IA), is now pushing the corporation to turn over all its communications on this matter, so more details may come to light.

But all of this is looking very Chicagoesque, in an administration that pledged an unprecedented degree of transparency and high ethical standards. — Gary Jason

A license to live — President Obama and Congress want to ensure that everyone has health insurance. At this writing, one of the methods under consideration to bring this about is the "individual mandate." Put simply, the individual mandate would require that people who do not have health insurance paid for by their employer or the government buy it themselves.

To many, this sounds like a modest, humane proposal. What could be wrong with requiring that everyone enjoy the benefit of health insurance?

Lots.

Proponents of the individual mandate often argue that it is akin to the requirement that you buy insurance to drive a car. But all that is required for driving is liability insurance covering injury to others and damage to their cars. You are not required to insure against injury or damage to your car or yourself. The equivalent for health insurance would be to force you to buy coverage only for the harm that you might cause to others accidentally, by giving them chicken pox, for example.

More fundamentally, you don't even have to buy car insurance if you choose not to drive. The equivalent for health would be what, exactly? You wouldn't have to buy health insurance if you chose not to what? Not to live? Would you need insurance to get a license to live? Could it be revoked?

(You stand at the cash register of your shop. A burly man in a fedora and a double-breasted suit walks in and offers to sell you insurance. "Insurance against what?" you ask. "Like if something bad should happen," he says, smiling. "I don't want any insurance," you say. "Sorry pal, you got no choice. It's like a mandate," he chuckles. "What's that mean?" As he leans across the counter his smile is replaced by a cold look. "It means you gotta pay. Everybody pays. We're all in this together." You shudder.)

But let's step back for a minute. Why is the government so keen to force people to buy health insurance in the first place? And why must people be forced to buy something that seems so obviously good for them? Is the government more concerned about their health than they are? The answer to these questions lies in the actuarial tables, community rating, and proposed progressive pricing system.

To illustrate, let us examine the case of a hypothetical citizen: Doug. Doug is 60 years old. He is retired. He is a non-smoker and moderate drinker. He exercises regularly. He is in good shape. After 40 years of hard work and frugal spending, Doug has paid for his home, has no debt, and has a few million dollars spread among various assets. Doug has carefully examined the cost of health insurance available to him and has chosen to self-insure, which is to say, if he gets sick, he'll pay the bills himself.

Doug made this decision because the health insurance policies available to him have lifetime caps smaller than what he could comfortably pay on his own and because the premiums he would have to pay for the coverage are based on the risk of a group of people who are far less healthy than he. In short, Doug decided that the available health insurance was, for him, a bad deal.

And all the actuaries who advise the government about healthcare policy know that Doug is right.

Here is the answer then: the government is keen to force Doug to buy health insurance that he doesn't want in order to subsidize the relatively more expensive healthcare costs of higher-risk people who are less able to pay. Doug, and all other relatively healthy people, must be herded into the same risk pool with the high-risk, unhealthy people. When everyone is in the same risk pool and charged the same premium, community rating will have been achieved. Community rating is considered a moral imperative by its proponents. Their websites are positively thick with imperatives.

(As an aside, if you stake out the position that a person has no choice, that he must buy health insurance, can you still call yourself "pro-choice?" In order to call yourself "pro-choice," shouldn't you at least allow a person to look over the optional health insurance packages, peek at the price tags, and choose "none of the above?" In a way, this involuntary health insurance sounds more like a "pro-life" position, doesn't it?)

Recall that we're talking here about those who aren't already covered by their employers or the government. Would everyone in the grip of the individual mandate really pay the same premium? Well, no. The government, we are assured, would devise a progressive subsidy that would taper off until it reached, say, Doug, who would get none. And because the wealthier tend to be healthier anyway, the formula is this: the lower the risk, the higher the out-of-pocket premium. Imagine car insurance working that way. The worst drivers would pay the lowest rates, or none at all, while the best drivers would have to pay the highest rates. Fairness, always a slippery concept, has just slithered away.

(By the way, if Doug lived in Oregon, would his individually-mandated, government-approved health insurance policy cover assisted suicide, even if it meant that his monthly premiums would stop? Just curious.)

When a government takes a person's money by force, it is a tax, no matter how it has been gussied up. When that money is used primarily for the benefit of a third party, it is a transfer payment. It remains a transfer payment even when the money has been laundered through a dummy insurance corporation, the reins of which have been legislatively snatched away by that government.

The plan is clever, though, because the majority of voters, those already covered by their employers or the government,

will see nothing personally threatening in it, and those being offered someone else's money to help pay their premiums will find it tempting to accept the bribe quietly. (They came for the self-insured, but I didn't speak up, because I wasn't self-insured.) They will overlook the fact that the plan gives no one the freedom to say, "No, thank you." They will overlook the fact that individual mandate would take away a measure of both responsibility and freedom from everyone.

"If Mr. McMurphy doesn't want to take his medication orally, I'm sure we can arrange that he can have it some other way. But I don't think that he would like it." — Nurse Ratched, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" — S.H. Chambers

Too small to fail — Now that President Obama is running Government Motors, he will have free reign to direct the automaker to produce vehicles that will be smaller, less comfortable, less safe, with smaller driving range and less load-carrying capacity. I call them No-Utility Vehicles, or NUVs.

I foresee a much smaller market for these NUVs, which in spite of being less useful will be more expensive to make, especially with Obama in charge of setting excessive wages in order to satisfy his union voting base.

No matter, according to a recent article in the Arizona Republic, "The federal government considers a transit system to be cost-efficient if it recovers a quarter of its operating expenses from fares." So we can probably expect Government Motors to be happy to collect purchase prices of NUVs at a quarter of the cost to manufacture them. At that price they may find sufficient buyers for them, and GM will be deemed cost-efficient. — John Kannarr

Homegrown lessons — I live in a leafy, ravined residential section of Raleigh, North Carolina. Our neighborhood, a couple of miles from downtown and close to a major state university, evokes two policy observations.

First, like other pleasant places I've lived in, the neighborhood's initial construction long preceded zoning, so it has the diversity of income and lifestyle that urban planners drool over. Homes include a near-mansion down the street, a low-rise housing project (originally built privately), manufactured duplexes, 1950s-style brick bungalows (some with Colonial pretensions), a smattering of Bauhaus "contemporaries," and a mix of dignified and humble traditional Southern homes.

To the east is the remnant of a neighborhood built by freed blacks after the Civil War; some of the modest frame houses remain. Thanks to Raleigh's recent growth and the housing bubble, many of our streets have "infill" (new houses built on scattered empty lots or sites of "tear-downs"). Our own 2007 house sits on two former side yards. Down the street is a 1970s-style commune, the Mayview Collective, where six or so youngish people repair bicycles, raise chickens, and hang their laundry in the front yard.

The policy point: urban planners, who know from reading Jane Jacobs that they want such diversity of streetscape, can't achieve anything like this. At best, they force developers into weak echoes of "urban design" mantras by mixing income levels and tweaking layouts and ornamentation. Coercion cannot begin to match our kind of diversity.

Another attribute of the neighborhood is the chirping: birds are everywhere. Our small backyard can sound like a jungle, with only the howling monkeys missing. North Carolina's warm, humid climate nurtures trees and shrubs, which draw birds into noisy theatrical performances. Blue jays swoop across the lawn, cardinals court (or maybe fight), rusty brown thrashers wriggle in the mulch, and industrious robins and wrens build nests and feed offspring. And then there are squirrels, rabbits, and (reportedly) a nearby raccoon.

This policy point? Human beings are compatible with the beauty and fecundity of nature. It's not a message that the environmentalist "humans are a cancer on the Earth" crowd like to hear. To them, nature requires vast stretches of uninhabited wilderness, set aside by the federal government, of course. But the richness of wildlife in small urban habitats — right under our noses — belies the myth that the human footprint precludes nature. I'd say it celebrates nature, instead.
— Jane S. Shaw

Torturous definition — Waterboarding is back in the news. Whether for or against, Cheney, Pelosi, and Obama have all been struggling to find the proper spin for decisions they've made regarding this practice.

It has become popular to debate whether waterboarding is torture or not. I find the entire affair a bit like debating what the atmosphere smells like on Venus. Most of the participants lack a certain experiential credibility.

I think there are several separate questions. There is the classic ethical question, "May we harm one man in order to save 10,000?" This is a tough question that humanity may never resolve, but one that is quite fair and useful to debate. Presuming the answer is yes, another question might be, "How much may we harm one man in order to save 10,000?" I think this question is more difficult, but still perhaps valid to debate.

Another question obviously might be, "Would the harm we intend actually be effective in saving the 10,000?" This question is fair to debate as well, particularly if the practice has occurred in the past and the results can be measured. But unlike the first two ethical questions of right and wrong, this question is, in the broad sense, scientific. The facts and reason exposed in honest, open debate may well tell us whether the practice is actually effective.

The question I object to is this: "Does waterboarding (or your interrogation technique of choice) cause substantial harm to the person who undergoes it?" From the armchair we can speculate whether any harm may happen — physical or psychological, permanent or temporary. We can speculate on pain versus discomfort or a hundred other facets of minutiae. But none of our armchair speculations will bear any weight or get us any closer to an answer.

Unlike our first two, ethical questions, which can be debated only from the armchair, or our third question, which requires accurate scientific research, the fourth question demands experience. There is a very simple, gut-level test that should be required of every interrogation policymaker who claims to have an answer to this question.

An answer of "yes" (there is substantial harm) can be legitimately arrived at by two paths. The first is personal experience. "Yes, I've personally undergone the waterboarding technique and found that it did me substantial harm." The second is not experiential, but still valid. "That technique

scares me so badly that I would never try it." This second, gut reaction is analogous to the death test. Is it good to be dead or bad to be dead? If somebody tells us that death is bad, we may not believe he really knows that from experience, but we instinctively agree that neither of us should push the other to try it out.

An answer of "no" (no substantial harm) can be legitimately arrived at only by the path of personal experience. "Yes, I've personally undergone the waterboarding technique and found that it did me no substantial harm." The gut reaction is not valid in this case, which is once again analogous to the death test. If someone tells us that death is good, we merely laugh and say, "Yeah, right. You know that how?"

We should likewise laugh at any interrogation policymaker who claims to have the answer to this question without having arrived at the answer through one of these paths.

— Doug Gallob

Collect early and often — A recent story in the L.A. Times caught my attention, because it addresses an issue I have written a good deal about and it has an air of bewildered concern that I find amusing, coming as it does from that cesspool of contemporary liberalism.

The article, "Early Retirement Claims Increase Dramatically," was written by Mike Dorning and appeared on May 24. It reports that the Social Security Administration is seeing a major surge in the number of people taking early retirement. The number is up an incredible 25% over last year. This has caused considerable surprise, since the conventional wisdom has been that people would hold off retiring in the face of the precipitous drop in the value of their portfolios.

The article reports speculation that the reason many people are retiring at 62 rather than 66, thereby lowering their Social Security income by up to a quarter, is that they are under financial pressure from being unemployed or underemployed. And the article quotes an AARP expert who worries that these early retirees will be paying a heavy price in security in the decades to come, as they try to survive on the lower benefits.

I think that the Times is incredibly obtuse here. Even before the jump last year, nearly half of all eligible people were taking benefits the minute they turned 62. The reason is obvious, but I will spell it out slowly, so that even the people at the Times can grasp it.

Point 1: Social Security is an intergenerational Ponzi scheme, using present taxes to support past retirees.

Point 2: The most likely way for the government to deal with the impending insolvency of the system will be to "means-test" benefits. That is, anyone the administration deems "rich" will simply be told that he or she is no longer eligible to receive benefits. This will be justified by the usual class warfare insinuations (the rich are evil, they deserve only death, etc.).

Point 3: This means test will include "grandfathering" of current beneficiaries, because it is easier to deny people an entitlement they hope to receive than it is to take away one already given.

Point 4: The point of insolvency will be reached as the Boomer generation retires. This generation, which has just started to receive Social Security benefits, is a much bigger cohort than the ones that follow.

Point 5: It is better to receive reduced benefits than no benefits at all.

Point 6: The Baby Boomers, despite extensive drug usage while young — and in some cases much later! — are not stupid. They can see points 1–5 with transcendent clarity, and are therefore applying for benefits as soon as they legally can.

How hard is it to understand all this? — Gary Jason

Reparations — In a recent exhaustive interview "In Depth" on C-SPAN, Bill Ayres introduced a category, new to me, of "descendants of enslaved peoples" deserving special consideration.

But why didn't anyone ask him whether this included us descendants of Russian serfs and Jews, among many others?

— Richard Kostelanetz

Commitment to opacity — On an operational level, the Obama administration is practically indistinguishable from the immediately previous Bush administration, which was pretty mendacious. To paraphrase The Who's Pete Townsend, "Meet the new statist hacks, same as the old statist hacks." This unpleasant truth — hope-crushing to legions of progressive nitwits — has manifested itself in several significant ways. The clearest may be the continuing (and legally dubious) argument that White House visitor logs should remain secret.

Although Candidate Obama croaked familiar platitudes about fostering "transparency" if elected, President Obama has actually advocated a princely murkiness that would make Dick Cheney proud. And the two men show an equal contempt for court orders.

Media outlets and so-called "good government" advocacy groups claim that it's important to know the names of White House visitors, who may have heavy influence on the president, his various "czars," and other staff. In late 2006, some of these groups sued to make the Bush White House's visitor logs public. At the time, they were interested in tracking visits by evangelical Christian leaders, including James Dobson, Gary Bauer, Tony Perkins, and Donald Wildmon. The Bush administration countered that the logs — created and maintained by the Secret Service — were not government agency records; they were, it claimed, covered by the Presidential Records Act, which trumps the Freedom of Information Act.

U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth (a Reagan appointee who's handled a number of politically charged cases to generally favorable reviews) disagreed with the Bushies. In late 2007, Lamberth concluded that the logs were subject to the FOIA and should be released. The crux of his decision was that a mere list of the people who've visited the White House doesn't betray state secrets or matters of national security. He gave the Bush administration 20 days to make the log public.

The Bushies ignored the court's order. In September 2008, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security tapped his jackboots against the podium and told one media outlet that it wouldn't release the visitor logs, repeating the "presidential privilege" justification that Lamberth had specifically rejected.

Behavior like this was one reason that so many unhinged Bush critics insisted (and still insist) that W. was a criminal who should be prosecuted.

Bush administration lawyers painted a fig leaf over their disregard by making various procedural arguments in court. They successfully ran out the political clock with filings and appeals. In early January of this year, Lamberth repeated his conclusions, but by then, W. was packing for his return to Texas.

On January 14, with less than a week left in Bush's term, the Department of Justice formally appealed Lamberth's decision. A few days later, the "Hope and Change" guy moved into the White House. But the policy with regard to visitor logs remained the same. The Obama Justice Department has continued the appeal.

Recently, the "good government" types have changed their focus from evangelicals to energy executives; they worry particularly that coal companies are exerting a nefarious effect on Obama and his minions. But they're running into the same obstructions.

According to Anne Weismann, a lawyer for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington: "We are deeply disappointed that the Obama administration is following the same anti-transparency policy as the Bush administration when it comes to White House visitor records. Refusing to let the public know who visits the White House is not the action of a pro-transparency, pro-accountability administration."

Welcome to Chinatown, doll. — Jim Walsh

He's out of my life — It's strange but true: whenever there's a Big Murder in America, and there's an investigation and a scandal, most of the participants in the affair turn out to be nuts. And by "participants" I don't just mean the victims and the culprits. I mean the witnesses, the members of the jury, the investigating officers, the eminent jurists, and the friends and relatives of all of the above, together with the throngs of dedicated spectators of the case.

The woman who was on a mule, chasing pig rustlers late at night, and just happened to hear the victim's shrieks; the bosom buddies of the murdered man, who are now convinced that despite all evidence to the contrary, he is actually living abroad under another name; the victim's physician, gardener, priest, and spouse, all of them hopeless embezzlers, drunks, or drug addicts, and all of them possessed of a motive to kill him; even the maids and chauffeurs and the guy who was tying his shoe next to the dumpster where the blood-stained cap was found — the landscape is littered with crazed eccentrics.

This has been true for as many years as Big Murders have been important in American culture. The pattern goes back for generations. It was strikingly visible in the O.J. Simpson case, but it had already appeared in the Hall-Mills case in 1922 and the Lizzie Borden case in 1892. Every episode like this presents a core sample of the American populace, and the results are not encouraging. A big murder case seems intended by God to emphasize the strangeness, the depressing oddity — not the inspiring individualism — of our fellow voters. And so does virtually any celebrity death.

On Thursday, June 25, Michael Jackson, singer and dancer, died in Los Angeles. I don't know why he died, though I can guess, like everyone else. And I don't care. Scores, maybe hundreds, of people die in Los Angeles every day, almost all of them more worthy of attention than Michael Jackson.

Jackson was an excellent dancer, but his dancing was nothing to compare with the performances of the truly great artists — Cagney, Astaire, Kelly, Sublett. There was never anything witty, spontaneous, ironic, self-expressive, or genuinely dramatic about Jackson's act. He danced like a machine. He was even less interesting as a singer. He could always hit the notes that lay in his limited range, but he never recorded anything that wasn't trash. His most popular efforts were preposterous trash: songs in which Jackson, who was manifestly gay, clutched his crotch and pretended to be a bad-ass straight; songs in which Jackson, a Jehovah's Witness, urged cute gangbangers to "beat it" rather than get themselves into a fight; songs in which Jackson, an "environmentalist" and "hunger advocate," cashed in on sentimentality by getting other celebrities to chant a nauseating song called "We Are the World."

No, you weren't. You were just a pitiful little guy who was force-fed on celebrity, relished it, then spent your life trying to recreate the childhood that had been denied you, in payment for the celebrity. I don't know whether Michael Jackson had sex with young boys, as was alleged. I do know that he was as ignorant as a rock, and a sad representation of what it means to be rich and famous — sad, that is, except to the significant proportion of Americans (and Europeans and Asians too) who on every available public occasion reveal that they too are seriously unbalanced.

These are the people who honored Michael, as they honored Princess Di — and, I guess, every other dead celebrity except Richard Nixon — by leaving teddy bears and candles and pictures of themselves and love notes and other trash at any convenient spot associated with the deceased. These are the people who besieged the hospital where he died, blocking its entrances to patients in need of help. These are the people who treated his little brass star on Hollywood Boulevard as if it were a religious shrine, kneeling in tears and leaving in hysterics.

Then there are all those others, people who aren't really eccentrics but just play them on TV, having reached the opinion that everybody else is one, so that's where the bucks are located. I refer to the celebrities and semi-celebrities who rushed to testify that Michael was the "greatest artist of the 20th century," "the best-known person in the world," "a man for whom we should all be thankful," "a gift from God," "a shy, sensitive young man," "a great humanitarian," and so forth and so on.

It seemed to make no difference to African-American talking heads — though it probably made a difference to a lot of African-Americans who didn't have easy access to the media — that Michael was so freaked out by his ethnicity that he spent the second half of his life transforming himself from a sexy black man into a grotesquely repulsive white man. It seemed to make no difference to gays-on-TV that he did everything he possibly could to deny being gay.

And listen: aren't you tired of hearing Fox News categorized as the "right-wing network," a site that broadcasts nothing but conservative and libertarian propaganda? During the Jackson mourning orgy, Fox was indistinguishable from CNN, except that maybe it was worse. It was all Michael Jackson, all the time, and day after weary day. At commercial breaks, Fox filled the TV box with the image of Jackson, his dates, and the kind of solemn music that my set hasn't broadcast since the

funeral of Konstantin Chernenko.

But to return. Before he was done, Michael Jackson had repudiated every aspect of his identity that he could manage to repudiate — his race, his sexuality, his age, his religion, his friends, his health, even the animals on which he was once renowned for doting — yet to hundreds of millions of people around the world, that meant nothing, because there was one aspect that he did not repudiate. He was a fool, and the fools recognized their own. — Stephen Cox

California gold — I have reflected before on how California and states like it appear to be serving as incubators of statist pestilence. Californians (and New Yorkers) vote in large and wasteful government programs, which lead to high taxes, lousy schools, lousy infrastructure, and no jobs. Then the Californians flee their state. But the emigrés are a disease vector; they carry to their new states the same attitudes that led to the ruination of their home state. And I have talked before about the growing crisis in state employee health and pension funds. A recent article brings both these thoughts to my mind anew.

The article is a piece of first-rate investigative journalism in the Orange County Register (May 15) called "The $200,000 Club: State Pensioners Who Collect 10 Times Average." It was written by Tony Saavedra and Ronald Campbell. The article reveals some of the outrageously high pensions that public employees now receive.

The facts are amazing. While the average California Public Employees' Retirement System (CalPERS) retiree receives less than $24,000 a year, about 4,800 of these people receive pensions of more than $100,000 a year, and a couple of dozen receive more than $200,000. For life! This, as CalPERS faces possible insolvency because of a drop in value of about $73 billion from its asset base.

The individual cases that Saavedra and Campbell discuss are remarkable. The pip is one Bruce Malkenhorst, Sr., who held six different city executive positions at once for the city of Vernon, a major metropolis of 110 people. He got $600,000 a year salary, and wound up with a lifetime annual pension of almost a half million dollars a year. (He is currently under criminal indictment for embezzling 60 grand.)

Another indigent civil servant, Anaheim City Manager Jim Ruth, retired in 2001 with a lifetime pension of nearly $220,000, and now works as the city's sanitation chief at a salary of $225,000. So he clears a tidy $445,000 a year.

But the bulk of the people receiving pensions over $100,000 are retired public safety employees — police, firefighters, and prison guards. Their unions have proven very effective at using general public goodwill to get "3 at 50" contracts, which allow an employee to retire at age 50 with a pension equal to 3% of the final salary for each year worked. So after 34 years, the pension is 100% of the final pay.

And as the Sacramento Bee reported on March 2, fully 38% of the 11,454 Highway Patrol officers are paid over $100,000 a year, as are 23% of the 63,287 corrections officers. Add to this the fact that public safety workers can enhance their last year's salary in a number of ways (such as putting in overtime, or getting last minute promotions), and we can expect that the number of public safety retirees receiving over $100,000 a year in pensions will explode in the near future.

The problem here is that the public has allowed feelings of gratitude to undeniably wonderful public safety employees to be exploited by the unions. Rewarding someone who risks his or her life on the job is right, but going beyond reasonable compensation and saying that the sky is the limit is not. Compassion, like any other noble emotion, has to be governed by rationality.

The problem for California is that the voters have been ignorant and emotional. The problem for other states is that many of these voters are moving. — Gary Jason

Neverland — America lost the self-proclaimed "King of Pop" on June 25, and suddenly people rushed out to mourn him. In Los Angeles, fans circled around a star on Hollywood Boulevard with the name Michael Jackson on it, to sing Michael Jackson songs; even though that particular star belonged to a radio personality with the same name (and was no relation).

Just a couple months ago, Michael Jackson was a pariah. He was a likely child predator, with a creepy gingerbread amusement park, where no little girls were allowed. He was a narcissist who grotesquely mutilated himself to indulge his obsession with plastic surgery, leaving a hole in his face where his proud African nose originally stood. Hollywood couldn't have written a better gothic horror script. Yet upon his death, all seems forgiven. iTunes scored record sales for Michael Jackson tracks for the first time since it went into existence. He hadn't sold music in years, and his descent from fame had left him close to half a billion dollars in debt.

I think it's important to remind everyone what he really was. It was the obsession with his star status that led to his problems in the first place. No loving parents would ever drop their kids off with a middle-aged man in a sequined Nazi uniform who carried a monkey around and talked like a 5-year-old girl, but because it was Michael Jackson, parents didn't think twice about leaving their kids overnight.

Enjoy his music if you must, but don't ever forget that the man was a monster, and the world is a better place now that he's gone. — Tim Slagle

High court hypocrisy — Republicans are not only hypocrites; they are predictable hypocrites. Although there may be good reasons for Republicans to have questioned the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to replace David Souter on the Supreme Court, that she is a liberal who was appointed by a Democratic president was not one of them.

Although Souter was part of the liberal wing of the court, he was appointed by Republican president George H.W. Bush. Not a single Republican in the Senate voted against his confirmation.

It was an earlier Republican president, Ronald Reagan, who appointed Sandra Day O'Connor to the court. Once again, not a single Republican in the Senate voted against her confirmation. She likewise turned out to be a tremendous disappointment to conservatives.

Then there is the most liberal member of the court, Clinton appointee Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Surely the Republicans in the Senate tried to block her nomination? The truth is, only three out of 44 Republican senators voted against her.

But even without all of this, the Republicans should have

continued on page 35

Libertarianism: A Force of Nature

by Alex Z. Modzelewski

Generation by generation, society is evolving toward greater liberty. Freedom to innovate increases, knowledge accumulates, and societies that have more freedom gain a large comparative advantage over others.

R.W. Bradford's classic article "The Two Libertarianisms" (reprinted March 2008), clarified some issues for me. Bradford contrasts a libertarianism based mainly on moral principles — what is *right* — with a libertarianism based mainly on "consequentialist" principles — what *works* to produce "a way of life under which human beings thrive." Bradford's discussion of "moralist libertarianism" helped me a great deal. Untrained in the philosophical underpinnings of the libertarian movement, I could not comprehend the apparent naivete of certain ideas I frequently heard.

One was the Libertarian Party's famous "non-aggression" principle: the idea enshrined in the party's declaration, "No man has the right to initiate the use of physical force against another man." Right on! But why would anyone expect members of the most aggressive species on the planet to refrain from aggression? I was reminded of "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" Having the doubtful benefit of learning a bit about Marxism by growing up in a People's Republic, I realized that Marx had no clue as to the workings of the real world. I came to suspect that the proponents of "moralist libertarianism" had no better grip on reality.

Of course, some people argue that it would be difficult to attract fighters to the barricades of libertarianism if the high moral ground were given up. But that sounds spurious to me. I have no desire to mix with moral fanatics. Nothing but destruction and failure is likely to result from such associations. I prefer the unglamorous "bathtub and candy bar merchants" — predictable, hard-working people who are unlikely to take extreme or desperate measures.

In my opinion, the ultimate success of the libertarian movement will come (if ever) not from a victorious revolution but from patient persuasion of our neighbors that, yes, everyone can live a decent life by counting on himself, without Big Brother's suffocating embrace. There is no point in rallying against corrupt politicians if the populace still expects them to deliver handouts. Politics will transform itself only when the people's expectations change. It may take a major social upheaval, initiated by a major failure of government, for popular sentiment to be modified, but until then the best course is to educate ourselves and our friends about how to manage a truly free society. There is a lot to think about. After all, has anybody really tried it before?

But in response to Bradford's challenge to define the basis of libertarianism, I want to present some thoughts coming from a less philosophical perspective.

I believe there are hard, biological reasons to believe that libertarian ideas are favored by evolution (or the Superior Intelligence, whatever your inclination). During the past 40 years, a new discipline, sociobiology, emerged to poke about the roots of social organization, using tools of scientific inquiry instead of speculation in the language of poets and social theorists. While sociobiology has been with us for a while, its implications are not familiar to most libertarians. Without pretending to be an expert in sociobiology or evolutionary biology (I am a surgeon), I'd like to provide an introduction to some ideas that are well worth knowing.

When the first cities were built, the division of labor resulted in a leap in productivity and wealth. But tax collectors, and rule by threat, could not be far behind.

There are two primary reasons for an organism — whether a garden weed or an American homeowner — to take an action: self-preservation and reproduction. Everything else derives its meaning and motivation from these primary, selfish goals. Regardless of the way in which the first strand of DNA came to be, it had to exploit its environment in order to derive energy needed to combat the inexorable gnawing of entropy. Crowded by other forms of life, and pummeled by the hazards of their surroundings, early organisms used occasional errors in the transcription of genetic codes to evolve protective cellular membranes, grow into multicellular beings, and achieve social organization. Nothing too controversial so far, just the textbook teachings of evolution and the second law of thermodynamics.

But the classical theory of evolution could not explain the "altruism" that developed in human and other mammalian species. It might make sense for an animal (including the furless kind) to risk its life to protect a set of genes encoded in the body of its offspring, but being killed or injured in defense of any other being would be counterproductive in terms of evolution. So, was this the defeat of evolutionary science? Was it time to concede to mystical motivations, to celebrate unselfish love and high-minded sacrifice as the explanation for human history?

No, it wasn't time for "Kumbaya." Kin-selection theory offers a much more plausible, if considerably less romantic, explanation. It appears that the roots of our selfishness reach deeper than individual consciousness. The primordial life that powers us, the DNA, cares only about itself, its own preservation and replication. The sophisticated structure that is built around it, a magnificent human body, serves merely as the genes' vehicle and multiplication factory, expandable without regret when the calculus of gene proliferation so dictates. Evolution favored the reproductive success of individuals who were more prone to self-sacrifice, so long as an act of heroism augmented the survival rates of brothers, sisters, and cousins.

An example: a soldier throws himself on a hand grenade to save a few mates from the certain death. We celebrate the act of heroism; it is worthy and laudable; but its origins can be traced all the way to the selfish DNA that inserted an altruistic gene into the brave man's body.

"Ah, not so fast!" an alert critic might say. "The soldiers in the foxhole are unlikely to be closely related; they almost certainly carry different genotypes. How can you claim that the hero's death will help to spread his genes?"

I make no such claim. The self-sacrificing soldier's DNA was duped. For millions of years, small bands of our ancestors consisted of closely related individuals: brothers, sisters, and first cousins. The DNA has no mystic abilities to tell brothers apart from strangers if they happen to dwell in the same closely knit unit. The armies of the world have always taken advantage of this confusion. It has been well documented that it is the survival of close buddies that motivates soldiers in battle; grand words about the beloved country, honor, and God come later, about the time of medal pinning. This explanation isn't likely to get much praise from songwriters, but at least it's real, and deeply grounded in our inheritance as humans.

The logic driving the development of highly complex beehives, anthills, bands of primates, or human societies is directly related to the advantages that such organizations afford. The higher efficiencies of food and shelter provision, of safety, and of increased opportunities to reproduce made these sophisticated associations the preferred way of propagating genes. But the advantage came with a price — loss of independence, even the forfeit of individual identity in some insect communities. Anthills are not friendly places for exuberant individualists or their political movements. Highly specialized communities have to live by stringent rules.

Still, the evolutionary track of *homo sapiens* thrust us toward more individual intelligence and self-conscious identity, augmenting the human potential for independent life. This relative autonomy obviously complicates the challenge of governing our societies. Pity the rulers of human populations! Just recall the trouble that discovery of the word "I" produced in Ayn Rand's "Anthem."

Let's think some more about rules. Methods have evolved to maintain rules of cooperation in groups of *homo sapiens*. These methods can be broadly classified into three categories:

1. The threat system. Rules are enforced by threats of retaliation by leaders and peers. This is the prevalent system in certain specialized institutions such as the police, the judicial system, and the military.

2. The exchange system. Relationships are based on favors and other good deeds performed in expectation of monetary or non-monetary compensation. A market free of outside pressures exemplifies this system.

3. The integrative system. Activities are motivated by such altruistic feelings as love, friendship, and solidarity, without any apparent promise of reward, except for feelings of fulfillment and happiness. A well-functioning biological family can serve as an example.

continued on page 26

Armageddon — Not

by Bruce Ramsey

One-eighth of the way through President Obama's term, there's reason to hope — that change doesn't really mean so much.

In my neighborhood, which votes at least 85% Democratic, I still see the red and blue Obama poster, "HOPE," and another, smaller image saying, "BELIEVE." They remind me of how out of step I am.

But I am also out of step with those who see the end of capitalism in Obama. He can do damage; he is only an eighth of the way through his term, and his "Change" involves things I detest. Yet I think of how difficult it has been in the past century to produce dramatic, government-expanding change in peacetime. Lyndon Johnson did it in the mid-1960s and Franklin Roosevelt in the mid-1930s. That is the magnitude of change Obama's most fervent fans want. But (cross my fingers) I doubt he can do it.

Last December I argued in these pages that Obama's ambitions were going to fall short unless business conditions dramatically worsened. And they haven't. As I write, feeling has improved. Public feeling is a sum of private feelings, and I can experience only my own. They are not too bad. My assets are smaller than they were last year, and my income is smaller, but I will be all right. I no longer feel as I did in the first week of March, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average had plunged to less than half of the October 2007 peak. Then I calculated that in the previous 15 months the Industrials had declined by almost the same percentage as they had in the 15 months following October 1929.

It was scary for a while. The crisis of September, with Lehman Brothers going down, felt like something from the summer of 1931. Last winter I could see the gloom in the emptying out of restaurants when I went to lunch. The traffic on my way to work was visibly shrinking, and gasoline prices were plunging. Everywhere the thought was, "How bad can it get?"

Now we know. In March the downward momentum broke, and the market started up. My lunch places started filling up again. Gasoline started back up. My state's economist looks at the pattern of car sales, house sales, and initial claims for unemployment pay and says, "The economy here is no longer in free fall." It's not strong; new home construction is still dead, and nobody will be starting office buildings for a while. But other businesses struggle, and survive. The Nucor mill in my town is quietly exporting steel billets to India.

I see beggars on the streets, but they are the same ones as before. What I don't see is desperation. I don't read about it. I haven't heard about it. Of course it exists: always there is some private desperation, and in a time like this, more than usual. But it does not set the tone.

Much of what I see is simply the resilience of individual people. Recessions end because individual Americans, on a micro scale, find ways to end them. Also to be considered is more than a trillion dollars worth of bailouts, plus the Federal Reserve System's cheap credit, spent toward preventing an economic collapse. Easy money provides the financial two-by-fours to start building again.

But it's a dangerous policy. Cheap credit, administered to revive business after the dotcom bubble, was the start of the housing bubble. If Ben Bernanke dishes out too much of it — and he may be inclined to do so — there will be another mess to clean up. Yes, cheapening credit does work, temporarily. If you are a bank, and have lost some of your capital, you need to make profitable loans — and that's easier if Ben Bernanke has given you a cheap source of funds. Bailouts are even nicer: if you lose your money and you're broke, the government fills your pockets and you're not broke any more. Yet as a long-run policy it is, of course, insane; it leads to massive money-printing. On my wall at work, I have a reminder of where that can end: a crisp banknote labeled, "TEN TRILLION DOLLARS, Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe."

In the short run, the Treasury can borrow the bailout and stimulus dollars from China or Saudi Arabia and avoid the fate of Zimbabwe. There is still moral hazard, and laxness; a free-marketeer can argue that the country would be healthier, and wealthier, if it bore the pain and got it over with. Sadly, that is not what is going to happen.

Return to the original thought: Obama is a mesmerizing leftist who will use an emergency to fundamentally transform America. It's not a silly proposition. Certainly, he does push left. But with his bailouts and cheap money, he has administered novocaine to the very emergency that gives him an advantage. And this is when he needs that advantage. If he is to be an historic state-expander like Roosevelt and Johnson, he has to push his biggest things through now.

As I write, he is pushing for a federal health-insurance program, and he may get it. But it looks as if it will be an add-on program, not a replacement for the system that exists. An incremental step, not a revolution. And there are signs that America is beginning to revert to its usual conflicted and inattentive self, to the condition in which it is difficult to make big changes in anything.

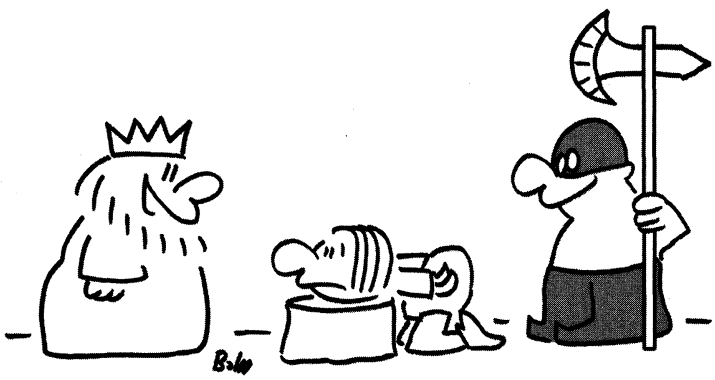
In analyzing this, it is important to separate the lasting things from the temporary ones. For example, Obama ordered the big-bank CEOs into the White House and instructed them to stop paying themselves large bonuses. Set aside the fact that a competent board of directors might have said the same thing; it was an eyebrow-raising thing for the president to do. The Frontline program "Breaking the Bank," run on state television on June 16, called Obama the "chairman of the board" of the "nationalized" banks. It's colorful talk, and will please left-liberals who like to scoff at supporters of the market. And what we have (and have had) is, unfortunately, far from a truly free market. But several of the banks have paid back the money Henry Paulson insisted they take, or said they would pay it back. The others will pay it back if they can. American bankers don't want politicians telling them how big their bonuses can be.

A free-marketeer can argue that the country would be healthier if it bore the pain and got it over with. Sadly, this is not going to happen.

Neither do the Detroit guys want to be bossed by the government. Some Democrats would like to mau-mau General Motors into selling nothing but electric cars, but they want private industry to make the investment. *They* don't want to do it, and have to pay for it when it doesn't work. No Democrat I know wants to turn GM into a giant Amtrak, permanently begging for billions. Their "rescue" of GM is temporary. Also partial: GM still is dumping Pontiac, Saturn, Saab, and Hummer. Eleven assembly plants are closing, shrinking the company by another third. Despite all the protectionism in the Democratic Party, Obama has not suggested protecting GM by keeping out imports — and, given his economic advisers, probably he won't. GM does get a wad of government money, which it shouldn't, but soon enough it will have to compete. Politically, GM is not too big to fail. It is merely too big to fail all at once.

Companies that can't survive are still going to die. Doing it with painkillers will make it take longer and cost more; pumping up the national debt and blowing out a trillion dollars will further weaken the currency and reward bad habits. But how many of Obama's changes are of the long-lasting kind?

A new federal health insurance plan could be, as could controls on carbon emissions. As I write, a push is on for both things. But Obama had to use his first hundred days — the time in which FDR passed the original New Deal — for finger-in-the-dike activities. Megan McArdle of The Atlantic wrote on June 18 that the Democrats "dissipated a hell of a lot of the money and political capital . . . on the stimulus and the GM bailout" and thus disappointed those with "visions of 1932." Now the Congressional Budget Office tells Ted Kennedy



"Hey, sometimes change is a *good* thing!"

his medical plan will cost taxpayers a trillion dollars over ten years. If it looks like a trillion now, you can bet it will be several trillions then; the history of Medicare and Medicaid taught us that. Most Democrats know there isn't the money for the radical versions of their party's idea.

The greens' proposal to set up a "cap-and-trade" system of marketable carbon-emission permits calls for another change that could be permanent. Right now, they're having trouble selling this idea. The program looks like a big new tax. Already Obama has shelved his campaign proposal to increase personal income tax rates, bringing them back to Clinton levels. The trillion and a half blown out the door cannot be spent twice. The "Blue Dog" Democrats begin to fidget. Enthusiasm wanes. As I write, the card-check labor organizing bill, which was expected to have a much easier time this year than last, has been sent to committee — a possible death blow. Obama's commitment during the campaign to leave Iraq by mid-2010 is broken; the question now is whether the soldiers will be mostly gone by 2012, when Obama runs for a second term.

Much of the Right is portraying Barack Obama as a socialist. I don't think he is; I think he is simply a believer in the administrative state and in the rightness of himself as the head of it. In any case, however, the ideological climate does not allow for a wholesale abandonment of capitalism. It did in the 1930s, when the intellectuals believed that capitalism was dead and about to be replaced by something better, something like Mussolini's fascism in Italy, or that bold new system in Russia.

If that were the climate now, you would hear Obama talking like this:

> The moneychangers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.

That was Franklin Roosevelt in his first inaugural address, in 1933. Here he is in his State of the Union, 1936:

> Our resplendent economic autocracy does not want to return to that individualism of which they prate, even though the advantages under that system went to the ruthless and the strong. They realize that in thirty-four months we have built up new instruments of public power. In the hands of a people's government this power is wholesome and proper.

That is what a leftist government sounds like. That was the crisis of capitalism. Then people envisioned an alternative to private property and the market. The crisis of the past year, writes Ross Douthat in his June 15 New York Times column, "hasn't turned into a crisis for democracy and capitalism, because nobody has a plausible alternative." And they don't.

In November, Americans voted for the Democrats, having lost faith in the Republicans. In June, Europeans went to the polls and voted for the parties of the Right, having lost faith in the parties of the Left. The tide of politics goes in and it goes out. In November 2008, Americans voted for a man who offered "change," but for most voters, the change was simply him.

Robert Higgs argued in "Crisis and Leviathan" (1987) that what makes the difference is the ideological framework of politics. In his chapter on the progressive era, he talks about "a profound transformation of the ideological environment" in the early 20th century, which led ultimately to the New Deal. We have seen some change in our own era: the idea that individuals should be held responsible for their own health has eroded. The Green agenda grows. The idea that Wall Street can be trusted has been discarded. These are changes in the ideological environment.

But there remains among Americans a suspicion of government and resistance to making it bigger, and this is also part of the ideological framework. You see it openly in the "Tea Party" protests, but it is much wider than that. In my state this year — an Obama state — Democratic leaders wanted to raise taxes. They had a strong majority, and they could have done it. But they would have had to put a tax increase on the ballot, and they feared how the people would respond. In California, the biggest Obama state, state government did put its appetites on the ballot, and voters responded with a resounding no.

Higgs has a second big idea: the ratchet effect. Every time the government has a crisis, its power grows, and after the crisis its new power is mostly retained. And during the 20th century things seemed to work that way. But nothing is inevitable about it; it was ideology that allowed the power to be retained. And always there were counter-examples. When I was young the draft seemed like a permanent thing, but it wasn't. The restrictions on gold ownership seemed like a permanent thing, but they weren't. The "fairness doctrine" on radio and TV seemed permanent, but it wasn't (and the recent effort by Democratic congressional leaders to reinstate it failed miserably). Internationally, communism seemed like a permanent thing, but it wasn't.

The CBO says Ted Kennedy's medical plan will cost taxpayers a trillion dollars over 10 years. If it looks like a trillion now, it will be several trillions: Medicare taught us that.

The bailouts of corporations will not be permanent. They violate the norms of American culture and are unpopular on both sides of the political spectrum. The huge subsidies to state governments will be harder to stop; already the states think they can't live without them. And yet, if the influence of the Obama administration is mainly in the amount of money it spends rather than the institutions it creates or destroys, it will fall short of being a transformative presidency like Roosevelt's and Johnson's.

And so, I pass the middle of 2009 with a measure of optimism or, at least, non-pessimism. My good feeling does depend on one thing: that the Americans who don't like the proposed changes talk, write, meet, organize, petition, sue, and vote against them. If enough people do such things, the system locks up. "Change" becomes just another word of political marketing, and need not be the name of a chapter in a future American history. ❑

Libertarianism: A Force of Nature, *from page 22*

All societies employ some combinations of these three systems, their character being determined by the predominance of one or another such method of persuasion. Our primitive ancestors were strongly bound by family ties. Precedence was held by the biological urge to protect one's kin. The world was young, with a lot of empty space open to all; in case of strong family disagreement, aggrieved parties could part without bloodshed. The integrative system probably prevailed.

Things changed when humans developed agriculture. Increased production allowed the barter of excess food; trade started in earnest. When the first cities were built, the division of labor resulted in a leap in productivity and wealth. But tax collectors could not be far behind, and the community's *modus operandi* changed dramatically in favor of rule by threat. At the same time, the mobility of the producing class decreased dramatically; farming was the only game in town, and except for a small class of skilled workers, abandoning one's field meant starvation. Ordinary producers were now trapped in a system of coercion. Personal liberty all but disappeared for the majority of the population.

Fast forward now to the industrial revolution, which released untold millions of people from agricultural labor so they could attend to the needs of rapidly growing industries. At first, their material fortunes might be not be much improved, but with freedom of movement and the ability to withdraw their services, they could achieve greater purchasing power and raise their political status. The unrestrained system of rule by threat shifted toward the system of voluntary exchange of services for goods and money.

This shift continues and accelerates, as barriers to mobility keep falling. What once was a major inconvenience and substantial risk for a 19th-century immigrant to America is now a relatively pleasant seven-hour excursion. National borders are porous, and people who have skills that are in high demand can walk in through the main door. Governments fight rearguard battles to retain some control over movement of people and of money, but the threat system falter rapidly when confronted with labor mobility, efficiencies of exchange, and the allure of personal freedom.

A libertarian political system — based not on threat but on a broadly defined self-interest, and with the exchange system prevailing — has become a possibility. Mobile, productive workers are gaining unprecedented power because national and multinational organizations have to compete in order to obtain their services. Oppressive states get stuck with low-quality workers incapable or unwilling to keep pace with frontrunners; these states consequently fall behind in a global competition.

But what about the integrative system of social coordination? What about societies built on love, promises of equal sharing, or solidarity? The grand-scale experiments of communism and fascism have been condemned by their outcomes. In practice, social structures based on patriotism, class, or ethnic brotherhood have rapidly degenerated into totalitarian, terror-based societies. And yet — who knows? — perhaps an integrative way of life will work better when coupled with the exchange system and applied on a smaller, community scale. After all, the kin-selection principle works best within families and small groups. A society based on libertarian (exchange system) principles, but incorporating integrative attitudes in small communities, might succeed where unrealistic socialist states failed. Certainly a system regulated more by threat than by exchange would not promote a truly integrative means of life.

Viewing human history from the perspective of biological and social evolution, we can see that the rapid changes of the past 300 years dwarf the slowly accruing alterations of the previous ten millennia. For millions of years, the unhurried genetic accumulation of new features proceeded in tandem with slow transmission of cultural heritage. All mammalian species use inter-generational instruction (parents to children) to improve chances of survival for their young, but *homo sapiens* acquired a new and revolutionary device: symbolic thought. A few hundred years ago, when abstract thinking was combined with a practical method of retaining and disseminating accumulated wisdom — the printing press — cultural evolution took off on a moon-shot trajectory. A vertical, parents-to-children transmission was supplemented by innumerable modes of information exchange: formal education, media instruction, peer groups, etc. Extended by 21st-century means of information storage and dissemination, invented and disseminated within the framework of the exchange system, the amount of new knowledge is now limited only by the brain's capacity to absorb it.

Accordingly, the ratio of genetic to cultural change (nature vs. nurture) in our evolution has dramatically changed in favor of cultural transformation. This should be the last nail in the coffin of any notions about genetic superiority or purity. Genetics are responsible for only a small portion of disparities among individuals. Genetically, all of us are not that much different from our root-hunting ancestors. Our intellectual prowess relates mostly to individuals' ability to access, and willingness to use, information available to them. For this reason, a prominent physicist can win the world's acclaim despite being imprisoned in a grotesquely deformed body, a condition that would have led to his being exterminated in a society obsessed with genetic purity.

At present, it is the direction of our *cultural* evolution that has immediate and serious consequences for our species. Whether they work for a living or not, individuals have been freed from the threat of starvation. Relieved from the fight for

continued on page 36

"I hunt, she gathers, and my no-good brother-in-law scavenges."

Bastiat on the Bay

by Michael Christian

Where are the libertarians among the high and mighty, the Francisco d'Anconias of the world?

Warren Buffet opposes lower taxes on dividends and supports collectivist politicians. George Soros espouses all kinds of statist nonsense. Alan Greenspan, until retirement touted as the most powerful libertarian in government, now seems to think that insufficient regulation was responsible for the current Great Recession. Hasn't anyone noticed that the industries suffering spectacular collapses because of bad risk management are two of the most heavily regulated industries in the country — banking and insurance? Think that's a coincidence?

Today the rich and powerful take communism with their caviar and liberalism (the modern, debased kind) with their limousines. This is depressing. Shouldn't productive, successful people be natural libertarians, or at least small-government Republicans?

I recently witnessed some encouraging evidence that many of them are. These natural lovers of freedom, personal responsibility, deregulation, and low taxes were to be seen at a regular, though informal and slightly drunken, meeting of a book club in, of all places, San Francisco. All but one of them were strangers to me, and meeting them was a bit of an adventure. By the way, if they aren't already public figures, I expect some of them will be, and since I was dropping in on their private get-together, I will use their initials rather than their names.

We were to rendezvous at the downtown residence of one of the clubmen. Most of us arrived at the lobby of the St. Regis at about the same time. The doorman recognized the regulars and eased our way across the marble floor. I jumped into the elevator with this clutch of likely looking young men, wondering when I would start to feel as if I were wallowing in pretentious middle-brow mud. The first thing I learned was that I am older, déclassé, and unfashionable — in fact, ignorant of fashion.

I learned this by looking down at our feet. Half of those guys were wearing outlandishly long, pointed shoes. Some of them were wingtips and some of them were loafers, but the style was de rigueur. I almost laughed out loud, because, well, to this provincial bumpkin they looked like dressed-up, filed-down clown shoes. But the laugh was on me: fashion is mostly arbitrary, and I was out of it. Everyone except C., the ostentatious original in the group, had a very expensive

looking way of dressing down. When I dress down, which is always, I'm a half step from Goodwill. It isn't reverse snobbery; it's a sad symptom of being lazy and cheap.

To prep for the meeting of the book club, they had to choose a book. This they did by a lively exchange of email that went on for a week or so before the appointed meeting date. I got into the discussion halfway through. They thought about Orwell's "1984" but didn't want to break their no-fiction rule. Someone made the following proposal, which seems to have been ironical: "While I'm sure many of you wanted to read the Communist Manifesto for our next book club, I figured we get enough of that in the typical Obama press conference." They decided that Stephen Pinker's "The Stuff of Thought" was too much work and not enough fun. But when they finally made their choice, it was a work of the year 1850, Frederic Bastiat's "La Loi" ["The Law"], a classic proto-libertarian text.

Hasn't anyone noticed that the spectacular collapses from bad risk management are in two of the most heavily regulated industries in the country — banking and insurance? Think that's a coincidence?

Ever the snob, I read it in the original French; but the guys politely overlooked my Euro-geekery, and from the elevated perspective of the huge suite atop the St. Regis, it was easy enough to overlook it. Lush Persian carpets muffled the pointed feet, and additional comfort was provided by a collectible $200 magnum of Sea Smoke pinot noir, which had been "lying about collecting dust for a few years." They were venture capitalists, merchant bankers, management consultants, entrepreneurs, and mostly Stanford graduates. Late twenties to mid-thirties. All single. Two engaged to be married and one who should be. I put the participants' average income in the small millions, even with me there to drag it down.

They were practical men, not the niggling ideologues who too often exemplify the curious subspecies that we call "libertarians." Still, their words evinced a thirst for freedom that put them way outside the political norm. In the email string, one of them had written this about a conversation with an industry expert:

> With no provocation from me, he digressed from a discussion of the current health-care reform proposals to lamenting what is happening in terms of regulation, taxation, inability to accumulate wealth during his prime earning years, etc. He concluded his digression (mostly in jest) by saying he is contemplating moving his family to Switzerland. I thus find a bit of optimism with the new day. Perhaps Atlas will shrug and there is hope. . . .

J., who wrote that, expressed all of his views with a passion that, I think, spilled over from a large pot of anger (anger that was perhaps not always inspired by the subject at hand, but that's the sort of thing that makes the world go 'round).

As I might have predicted, Bastiat inspired J. to fire off some powerful tirades. C. looked for radical implications, as in "what should we *do*?" Could we move to a tax haven? Start a new country? Go underground? M. drew scorn by hinting at the merest compromises to principles of liberty. But, as S. softly guided the debate back to Bastiat, I thought that these were men who could make *smart* compromises in the interest of liberty, especially economic liberty.

It was my own first reading of "La Loi," and I did my homework before attending the meeting. Bastiat, I knew, was the author of the famous "petition on behalf of candlestick makers," a masterpiece of irony that condemns the sun for unfairly competing with candlestick makers and other purveyors of light, and pleads for government assistance and regulation. "La Loi," I found, was an interesting mix of original and unoriginal ideas.

It starts with a natural rights argument that was well known in America long before 1776. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Sound familiar? It's a fair summary of the first few paragraphs of "La Loi," written about 75 years after the Declaration of Independence.

So Bastiat's first proposition about his subject, the nature of law, is radically different from Rousseau's ideas about a "social contract," because it places individual rights above all other considerations. There is no compromise; the law should only protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It must never "plunder" or "despoil." (Here I'm translating Bastiat's French word "spoliation," a word he uses often throughout this long essay. The law must never take from one person to give to another. And it must never forbid the individual's protection of himself.

I, my 45 Colt, Sig 380, and S&W 357 magnum appreciate Bastiat's complaint against the laws that have turned self-defense into a crime (*"légitime défense en crime"*). But there's ample evidence that Bastiat is wrong when he turns from natural rights to a cost-benefit analysis of crime suppression. He supports basic criminal law with the assertion that the collective must see to it that crime doesn't pay. "When does all this plunder [of man against his neighbor] end? Only when it becomes more painful and dangerous than work." (*"Quand donc s'arrête la spoliation? Quand elle devient plus onéreuse, plus dangereuse que le travail."*) In fact, many people refuse to commit crimes that they could easily get away with, while others go ahead and commit crimes that are very likely to be punished severely. The typical bank robber, for example, can expect infrequent success, small rewards, and harsh punishment. But I guess that Bastiat can't go as far as David Friedman. Bastiat needs criminal law and cops and robbers.

His notion of why crime should not pay resembles Justice Holmes's "bad man" theory of law, also known as the prediction theory of law. Holmes abandoned natural-rights theories on the basis of an idea that bad men didn't give a hoot about natural rights and had to be shown that the law would make being bad a poor gamble. In other words, the law should be a prediction of consequences, and the consequences should discourage bad behavior. This unfortunate theory eventually

continued on page 36

The Tabasco Effect

by Jacques Delacroix

From grumps in Spanish cities to sunnier kids in small towns, food says a lot about culture. And culture is the best foreign policy tool.

My wife and I are good tourists. We don't attempt too much because a vacation should not be like spring cleaning. We go by bus, train, and on foot, and we see what we are pretty sure deserves to be seen. We have no regret about missing the rest. If something desirable, like attending a bullfight, requires foresight and organization, we tell ourselves it's pretty good on television also. Mostly, we follow the natives when they are having fun, and we sit in interesting places to see life flow before our eyes.

That's what we did last year, first in Seville, a beautiful city by any account and then, in Granada, also interesting but a more demanding place.

The world — with the exception of the Native Americans — owes Spain the Americas, North, Central and South, and consequently tomatoes, potatoes, corn, nearly all the variety of chilies that bring tears to your eyes, and chocolate. Spain also invented *tapas* — the gastronomical concept, the variety of dishes, and the social ritual.

Tapas are a modest but unmixed blessing. They are sundry small dishes you consume with wine, in place of dinner. The Spanish have invented a verb, "*tapear*": the custom of walking from open-air bar to open-air bar, usually with friends, drinking a glass of wine or two and eating a dish of *tapas* or two in each establishment. It's an ambulatory activity. You don't sit down to eat *tapas*; you stand or you wedge yourself on high stools, elbow to elbow, congenially, with strangers. The *tapas* scene is a great pickup scene, perhaps the only pickup scene in Spain. Walking round from bar to bar prevents you from getting drunk too quickly, and it staves off worries about DUI.

Much Spanish sit-down food is conventional and on the heavy and bland side. But *tapa* dishes always have character. They can be anything at all. There might be dried salami, or regional cheese, or squid and other seafood prepared in exotic ways, even simply souped-up potatoes. Every bar offers a range of *tapas*, but each has its own specialties. In one, it will be shrimps in garlic; in another, smoked ham from the proprietor's own half-wild pigs.

I am old enough to remember the days when *tapas* were a concrete expression of Spain's forced abstemiousness. Under dictator Francisco Franco, the mean-spirited and pious

victor of the '30s civil war, poverty in the Spanish middle class reached down to Third World levels. There was almost no discretionary income among ordinary people. A cup of coffee in a public establishment was a Sunday luxury for many Spaniards. Bars would bring in customers for their wine, the poor man's luxury, and induce them to forego dinner at home by offering free side dishes, *tapas*. The *tapas* then were often seasonal and an expression of specific regional poverty. A long time ago, in the back country of Catalonia, far from the glistening and charming Costa Brava, I had an unforgettable *tapa* dish of snails cooked in duck fat. The snails were from the vegetable garden outside and the fat probably left over from a roast. It was delicious! *Tapas* are not free any more, but they still constitute a summit of Spanish civilization, an instance of the great virtue of making something attractive out of next to nothing.

There is a natural law: the fewer the worthwhile sites, the more pleasant the inhabitants.

Spain seems prosperous now. Elegant young women in short skirts rush around in the main commercial streets of the largest cities at noon. Yet the impression of ease of living is shallow. And the country has not been prosperous for long. Some effects linger of its interminable grinding poverty. The shadow of the sinister Franco is everywhere if you know the story. Franco was a bitter winner. He kept shooting his former enemies in prisons, many years after they had ceased to be a political threat. I suspect that the fascist regime kept Spain deliberately poor for 40 years in the midst of ever-growing European incomes, because dictator Franco thought poverty made the people virtuous. His was a kind of Catholicism you encounter seldom in Europe outside of Poland. It's illustrated by holy pictures of weeping Madonnas and of savagely realistic Bleeding Hearts of Jesus.

Structural vestiges of former poverty persist in many forms of employment. The Spanish treat as plum positions many jobs that would go to near-starving young artists in New York, and to Third World immigrants in Munich. Often, menial but well-paying jobs are jealously guarded by older men. *Tapa* bartending is an example. It's a job that requires a good memory, to keep tab, and fast action: every order must be satisfied instantaneously because there is a tempo to the *tapear* promenade and there is another *tapa* bar next door, and another across the street.

In the *tapa* bars, the waitstaff are almost entirely men in their late 50s to mid-70s. I am guessing they secured their jobs after long apprenticeships, perhaps busing tables or working in the kitchen. They are in no hurry to relinquish their pinnacle positions because there is *no* chance they might earn as much anywhere, any time. Besides, the mental habits acquired during a harsh Franquist childhood probably never quite leave you. Where there is no economic growth, employment security seems everything. That's what you learned at 12; that's what you believe at 60.

The old *tapa*-men tarry until they can't see so well anymore, while the unceasing demands of the customers seem to get less bearable by the year (although customers are probably, objectively, pretty much the same from season to season). Mostly, it's a standing job, and the men's feet hurt like hell. For all these obvious reasons, *tapa* bar-tenders are almost invariably sullen or surly. They will ignore you on purpose, fail to acknowledge your order (but fill it faultlessly), throw your dish on the counter with contempt, and pointedly refrain from thanking you for the (non-obligatory) tip you hand out.

One especially ugly old guy took a dislike to me because he detected a French accent in my Spanish. That was very annoying on a personal level, since I am inordinately vain about my Spanish. Or perhaps, it was just a lucky guess on his part, because he did not like something else about me, maybe my face, or my wife, or he just needed a scapegoat at the exact moment when I showed up. At any rate, if you are in a tourist-dependent industry, it's not completely rational to show antipathy for citizens of the country that is the main source of tourists visiting you! For Spain, that would be France.

I have a devil in me, so I did not even try to stop myself from torturing the mean old guy for a half hour. I told him how I would alert all my friends in Paris who planned to travel to Spain, send them to his establishment, tutor them on how to place difficult orders in French, and generally encourage them to act haughty and supercilious toward him, as only the French know how to do. And he, of all people, knew for sure how stingy French travelers are, I reminded him!

Obviously, if you are a good tourist, much of your impression of Spaniards is going to come from *tapa* bar attendants and also from museum guards and shop owners. Museum guards everywhere are not a joyous or lively kind. It's their function to be suspicious, including and especially of small children. Most shop owners are okay, but, they are only Europeans after all. Europeans in general are rarely pleasant, except maybe on vacation. Passersby whom you stop for directions are usually kind enough, but they are not as excited about your being in Spain, or in Paris, as you are. You get used to it. You don't go to Europe for the smiles but for the sites. There is a natural law operating there: the fewer the worthwhile sites, the more pleasant the inhabitants. I am thinking that residents of Kansas City and Cleveland are much nicer than San Franciscans and New Yorkers, God forbid!

Incidentally, the crabbiness of Europeans is less often personalized than American travelers like to think. To speak English with a French accent in America, as I do, is to be asked 20 times each year why "the French hate Americans." They don't, honey; they are just not very nice, "Irma la Douce" notwithstanding (that's the old movie). Europeans in general just don't enjoy everyday life as much as Americans do. There are good reasons for this, but that's another story.

Being experienced tourists, my wife and I treat crabbiness like the weather. It makes things less pleasant, but it's part of the package, and there is not much you can do about it. (Except that every so often, we make it a challenge to force someone to smile.) You get used to Euronastiness; you learn to ignore it most of the time.

continued on page 35

Uchronia, or Alternative History

by Leland B. Yeager

The history that didn't happen can be just as interesting as the history that did.

This article is a small example of its own topic. Except by chance, I wouldn't now be writing it. Not finding what I wanted while browsing in our library's magazine aisles, I came across mention of "uchronie" in Le Nouvel Observateur. The philosopher Charles Renouvier chose this word as the title of his novel of 1857 and 1876; he coined it from Greek roots meaning "no-time." He was following the pattern set by St. Thomas More, whose "Utopia" derives from roots meaning "no-place." Utopia is a place that does not exist; uchronia is a time that did not exist. Uchronian works — to introduce the English adjective — are also called "what-if," alternative, conjectural, or counterfactual history. They consider what would have happened if something else had chanced to happen.

Such works fall into two categories. The distinction is fuzzy but useful. Writings of the first kind, unlike actual history or a standard historical novel, are sheer fiction. They are not speculations about real events; they are stories that stand on their own. The "Star Wars" movies and Tolkien's tales are good examples. Another is "Islandia," a novel by Austin Tappan Wright, published posthumously in 1942. Wright describes events and personalities in a country on a fictional continent in the southern hemisphere before World War I. The people of Islandia, while highly civilized and advanced in philosophy and psychology, prefer their old ways, rejecting railroads and most other modern technology and narrowly limiting contact with the outside world. The reader (this one, anyway) drifts with the author into sympathy with the Islandian way of thinking.

Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" (1887) projects an opposite vision, one intended as backward only in an ironic sense; it imagines a prosperous and happy socialist utopia of 2000. This uchronia actually exerted some influence in its time, converting many readers to socialism because they wanted to live in the world of Bellamy's vision. A less satisfying example of the first category of uchronian works is "Hadrian VII" (1904), a rather amateurish fantasy by Frederick Rolfe, the self-appointed Baron Corvo. Its hero is a frustrated would-be priest whom a deadlocked College of Cardinals implausibly elects as pope, the second English pope in history. Pope Hadrian radiates his benevolence right up to World War I or, rather, to its avoidance. His ministrations successfully adjust the world's important political conflicts. This story also had

real-world effects. The oddness of the book and its author inspired a famous work of literary detection, "The Quest for Corvo" (1934), in which A. J. A. Symons discovered how strange the "Baron" actually was.

The second (and my preferred) category of uchronian literature is more strictly what-if history. It concerns actual events or circumstances that might plausibly have been different. "If: Or History Rewritten," edited by J. C. Squire (1931), samples the genre with stories by many writers. Phillip Guedalla supposes that the Christian Reconquista of Spain had somehow not gone far enough to absorb the Moorish Kingdom of Grenada, leaving it a power in international affairs into the 20th century and presumably beyond. Hendrik Willem van Loon supposes that the Dutch had retained Nieuw Amsterdam until, by a treaty with a curiously libertarian provision, it joined the United States in 1841. André Maurois supposes that Louis XVI had been firm enough to keep Turgot, his liberalizing finance minister, until and beyond 1789 (when the French Revolution began, in the real world), instead of dismissing him in 1776. Hillaire Belloc supposes that the cart that blocked Louis' path when he tried to flee from France in 1791 had gotten stuck before reaching the crucial spot at Varennes. Emil Ludwig asks what if German Emperor Frederick III, liberal-minded and married to a daughter of Queen Victoria, instead of dying after only 99 days on the throne in 1888, had survived and exerted his moderating influence until 1914. Winston Churchill, in a double twist, writes as a historian in a world in which Lee had actually won the battle of Gettysburg and who speculates about his *not* having won. Milton Waldman supposes that Booth's shot missed Lincoln. G.K. Chesterton imagines Don John of Austria married to Mary Queen of Scots; Harold Nicholson, Byron enthroned as King of Greece; and H.A.L. Fisher, Napoleon escaped to America and became a prosperous planter. Squire, the editor, postulates discovery of proof that Lord Bacon wrote Shakespeare's works.

Such speculation can deepen our understanding of economics, psychology, military affairs, theology, and even natural science.

Such speculation need not be frivolity. Contrasts with what really happened can deepen our understanding of actual history and of theories of economics, psychology, political science, international relations, military affairs, theology, medicine, and even natural science as applied by decision makers of the past. History for us was the unknown future for them. And each of us has undoubtedly experienced choices in his own life very differently from the way in which a biographer would describe them. He would know the results; we didn't.

One subcategory of conjectural history doesn't much appeal to me. Like Guedalla's Grenada scenario, it speculates about *major* trends or conditions that turned out different from the actual ones. What if the dinosaurs or the Roman Empire hadn't disappeared? What if Europe had never discovered America? So sweeping a conjecture is unsatisfying because it focuses on general frameworks of history instead of particular events, ones that may have seemed unimportant in themselves but had major consequences. (Just what might have enabled Grenada to survive the Reconquista?) Likewise, it seems out of the spirit of the genre to use some event or non-event as a take-off point for sheer fiction, as about Napoleon's imaginary exploits in the New World.

Divergences between what did happen and what might have happened sometimes trigger momentous domino or butterfly effects. Several may particularly interest libertarians. What if the Civil War had been avoided (as supposed below), and with it the federal government's domination of the monetary system? What if the Federal Reserve System had never been created? What if Chancellor of the Exchequer Winston Churchill had heeded warnings against returning Great Britain to the gold standard in 1925 at the no longer viable prewar parity? What if (as Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz have speculated) Benjamin Strong, Governor of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, dominant figure in the Federal Reserve System, and a better intuitive economist than most of his colleagues, had not died prematurely in 1928? What if Harry Gunnison Brown or Irving Fisher had headed the System, or if his advice had prevailed around 1929? Would an ordinary recession have turned into the Great Depression, creating opportunities both for the New Deal and for Hitler? I think not.

But we can carry speculations further. What if Giuseppe Zangara's shot at President-elect Roosevelt in February 1933 hadn't killed Chicago's Mayor Cermak instead? What if the United States hadn't adopted the silver-purchase program of the 1930s, which benefited domestic silver interests but ruined China's monetary system and thus improved the chances of the Communists? What if Von Papen and his associates, early in 1933, had not expected to manage Hitler and make him a safe choice for Chancellor? What if Hitler had decided to finish off England in 1940–1941 before tackling Russia? What if FDR, seriously ill, had died before the Yalta conference of February1945 — or earlier, while Henry Wallace was still vice president? What if Hitler had died in the nearly successful attempt to assassinate him in 1944? What if Lee Harvey Oswald had proved a poor marksman at Dallas in 1963? How would Gerald Ford and the country have fared if he had not pardoned Richard Nixon? Or what would Nixon's refusal of a pardon have meant? What if the tight vote in Florida in 2000 had gone the other way, as it might well have gone, were it not for hanging chads, misaligned ballots, and accidental votes for Pat Buchanan? A Gore administration would have been a disaster, but of a different sort from the disaster Bush brought us. And would today's financial crisis be less or more severe if the rescue of Long-Term Capital Management, orchestrated by the Federal Reserve in 1998, and of other institutions before and later hadn't worsened the dilemma of moral hazard?

Sure, history has its deterministic aspects; Marx stressed technology. But the possibilities inherent in many junctures of history discredit overemphasis on determinism and underline the element of chance. Suppose that Pontius Pilate had saved Jesus Christ, forestalling his crucifixion and the resurrection story. Would Jesus still have become the focus of a religion dominating, for good and ill, most of the Western world? Or would he have remained an itinerant preacher scarcely men-

tioned in the history of religion? Would one of the mystery religions of the Eastern Mediterranean have become dominant instead of Christianity?

Consider an episode of British history. Queen Anne had 18 children, more or less, counting miscarriages and stillbirths as well as live births. If better medical care had managed to save even one of these potential heirs beyond Anne's death in 1714, the Protestants of her family, the Stuarts (the Catholics among them being ineligible by law) would have retained the British crown. But Anne died without leaving a Protestant Stuart heir, so the crown passed to the distantly related House of Hanover. Hanoverians had very different interests and political traditions. It was among them that the British developed what came to be the characteristically modern party-and-prime-minister system. Would it have developed in a similar way under a Stuart succession?

Here we are speculating about the latent potential of people and movements that we can identify. But what about the multitude of what-if cases that never had a chance to come to our attention? Were it not for the accident of dying early, how many men and women would have survived to change the course of cultural and political history? This is a theme of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

> Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
> Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire,
> Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
> Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

Here, perhaps, speculation ceases with our lack of knowledge. But events that are too certain are not fruitful subjects of speculation, either. Historical struggles make poor examples of uchronia when the advantage was decisively on one side. They become more interesting when the details could easily have gone the other way. "My kingdom for a horse!" cries Shakespeare's Richard III at Bosworth Field. To me, even more interesting than battles that might have gone in either way are wars that might have gone in either way — in the sense that they might have been avoided.

If American war hawks had not misrepresented the explosion of the *Maine* in Havana harbor in 1898, Spain might well have remained a substantial power; and the United States might have avoided its deeper colonial and geopolitical burdens. Suppose that hotheads had been less influential in Charleston in April 1861 or that Jefferson Davis had restrained them. The Confederates could have been more patient, not falling for Lincoln's provocative move to resupply Fort Sumter. Without their firing on the fort, Lincoln could not have whipped up war fever in the North. How would a few more months or even years of a Union garrison in Charleston harbor have impaired Confederate independence, thus far succeeding? After all, the garrison had been allowed to *buy* supplies in Charleston even after secession. Neither side expected four years of tragic bloodshed. The issue of slavery might have been resolved at much less cost for either side.

France in 1870 is an example of not taking "yes" (compliance) for an answer. The Spanish provisional government had invited a Hohenzollern prince to become the country's new king. The government of the French Emperor, Napoleon III, objected; and the German prince, a member of the house then ruling Prussia, withdrew. Events could easily have stopped there, but they didn't. Not content with this diplomatic triumph, the French foreign ministry tried to humiliate the Prussians further. It instructed the French ambassador to accost Prussia's King William I at a spa and press for written assurance that no such candidacy would ever be renewed. The king politely refused. Bismarck, the Prussian prime minister, published the king's report of the episode after tendentiously editing it to give the impression to the French that the king had insulted their ambassador and to the Prussians that the ambassador had been impolite to their king. Empress Eugenie of France, a leading war hawk, expected that victory would further consolidate the Napoleonic dynasty. So the French enthusiastically let themselves be tricked into declaring war, even though they were militarily unprepared and lacked even adequate maps of the likely theaters of operations. Napoleon III lost his throne, the Bonapartist Second Empire collapsed, France lost Alsace-Lorraine, revanchisme emerged as a political force in France, and danger of another war developed. What if soberer minds had prevailed in the French government? What if the Spaniards had invited some non-German as their king in the first place?

As the end of the Second Empire hinged on chance, so did its beginning. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, as he was then known, staged a generally unforeseen coup d'etat on December 2, 1851. His term as president of the republic (won by name-recognition) would soon expire, and the constitution barred his reelection. Hence he seized power. But his cruel stroke might well have failed, and with it the train of events that led France and Germany to the wars of 1870 and 1914.

The Great War was a tragic and unnecessary modern turning point. Think of its consequences — economic, political, military, and psychological. In 1914 no power desired or foresaw a war so long and bloody; although a complicated network of alliances did pose danger, events on the scale that later developed were not predicted. They did not stop with the armistice of 1918. World War II followed, largely as a consequence of and sequel to the first war. One of the causal connections was the fact that Germany's defeat and the ensuing

What if the Civil War had been avoided, and with it the federal government's domination of the monetary system? What if the Federal Reserve System had never been created?

Treaty of Versailles gave Hitler material for domestic propaganda. But what if advice not to punish Germany so severely had prevailed at Versailles? Or what if Britain and France had acted decisively when Hitler first violated the treaty in 1934–1936?

The fateful significance of June 28, 1914 — the date when the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo and the curtain began to rise for the world conflict of 1914–1918 and then of 1939–1945 — led me, along with a friend's young son who was accompanying me to a conference in Italy, to make a side trip to Sarajevo. There we saw where Gavrilo Princip stood when firing the shot that killed Franz

Ferdinand — by a building where a laudatory commemorative plaque was subsequently mounted and a museum established. I wondered: what if the Archduke's car had not made a wrong turn? What if Princip's shot had missed, if even only by inches? An assassination attempt had already failed earlier the same day, just barely. This one might also have failed.

Still, the assassination did not make war inevitable. Suspecting Serbian complicity, Austria-Hungary sent Serbia an ultimatum imposing drastic conditions: it must collaborate in an investigation and suppress further terrorist agitation. Serbia came surprisingly close to agreeing completely; but Austria-Hungary, unwilling (like France in1870) to take a near-yes for an answer, started a war, and alliances fed contagion. What if Austria-Hungary had been satisfied with the near-yes, or if Serbia had totally complied?

Beyond the questions it poses, conjectural history can contribute to understanding oneself as well as the roles of other people and of chance in human affairs. When I was in high school I bought "Hugo's Spanish Simplified" and a few of the Haldeman-Julius Company's cheap little books on religion and on the international language Esperanto. Miss Connor, my history teacher, steered me to the economics of Henry George and to a book about Italian history. These little episodes affected my later life in unforeseeable ways. Miss O'Connor was what we would now call an outspoken left-liberal; still, she was a conscientious and inspiring teacher. Without her influence, I might not have majored in economics in college and gone on for a Ph.D. in economics. Meanwhile, the little Haldeman-Julius books aroused my interests in religion and in an international language, both of which I have discussed in these pages (October 2007 and January-February 2008).

Perhaps most accidental, yet significant, was the influence of Hugo's Spanish book. I went on learning Spanish, entirely without any formal classes. At Auburn University I joined the "Friends of Guatemala," a dormant then resurrected weekly Spanish conversation group, the origin of whose name nobody could remember. All but two of our group's members soon dropped out, but Luis Dopico and I carried on, eventually having our Spanish conversations at dinner once a week. I visited him once in his home city in Spain. He now lives in North Carolina and has dual citizenship. I talk with him by phone in Spanish for about an hour almost every Sunday, then for about 15 minutes in English with his wife, Stephanie Crofton. If I hadn't been turned onto Spanish by Hugo's book, I would never have made these two close friendships. This is a prime example of a microstochastic event — an instance of randomness on a very small scale — with major consequences for me.

What if Archduke Ferdinand's car had not made a wrong turn? What if Princip's shot had missed, if even only by inches?

And what if I had failed, like some of my colleagues, in a Japanese language course during the war? What if I had followed my father's (bad) advice, offered because I had lost three years in the Army, to skip returning to college and go directly into the business world? What if I had not happened onto books by Ludwig von Mises in the Oberlin College library and by Wilhelm Röpke in a New York bookstore, works that greatly influenced my understanding of economics and of libertarianism or quasilibertarianism? What if I had chosen the problem of innovation under socialism as my dissertation topic in 1950–1952, instead of the other topic I was considering, "An Evaluation of Freely Fluctuating Interest Rates," which I did choose? (I know I would have had trouble finding much to say about innovation under socialism.) What if I hadn't taught at Texas A&M for one year and at the University of Maryland for five, making a few close friends at the two schools? A year in Maryland's European program came at just the right time of my life. What if an article of mine had not brought me an invitation to move to the University of Virginia in 1957? By happening to take part in an Institute for Humane Studies program in the summer of 1981, I met a valued academic collaborator, Robert Greenfield. In 1984, the idea of buying a big house with a big mortgage as an inflation hedge tipped my agonizingly close decision toward moving from Virginia to Auburn University. (Yes, not only inflation but uncertainty about it can disrupt even personal planning.) Speculation not only about episodes in world history but also about turning points in a single life can make for lively but serious conversation — with others, and with oneself.

I've saved for last an example of uchronia that, for two reasons, is my favorite. Like many of the examples above and as best I can remember, I thought of it myself. More importantly, it is an extreme example of its type; arguably, it even bears on the philosophical issue of free will and determinism. Suppose that in 1818 Queen Victoria had been conceived as a male rather than a female. Her (or his) sex determination was surely a microstochastic event. Except only for this accident of sex, the crowns of Great Britain and Hanover would have remained united after the death of Victoria's uncle, William IV, in 1837. Women could succeed to the throne of Britain, but the medieval Salic Law excluded all females from the throne of Hanover so long as any male heirs were to be found. So another of Victoria's uncles, Ernest Augustus, became king of Hanover, separating the two crowns.

Now, if the new monarch of Britain had been a male, he would also have been king of Hanover. A kingdom in the heart of northern Germany, sharing the same English-speaking, English-educated monarch with Great Britain, would have greatly hampered Bismarck's efforts toward German unification. The Seven Weeks War of 1866 (Prussia against Austria), having in its background the 1864 war of Prussia and Austria against Denmark over the north-German Schleswig-Holstein issue, might never have taken place. As its result, however, Hanover, an ally of defeated Austria, lost its independence in 1866 and was absorbed into Prussia. Without Victoria's conception as a female, then, the wars of 1866 and 1870–1871, the establishment of the German Empire, World War I, and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 might never have occurred, at least not at their actual times and in their actual ways. Would our lives be different? It's difficult to argue otherwise.

Small chance events can indeed sway history. This is how uchronia becomes reality. ❑

The Tabasco Effect, *from page 30*

That summer, we were making our way to Morocco, a country of smilers. In mostly austere Granada, we had bumped into a young Moroccan with intelligent eyes, engaged in some harmless street hustle. He gave us advice in French on crossing the Med to his country. He said to avoid the big port of Algeciras. He told us it was a mess in that season because tens of thousands of Moroccan expatriates from Europe were going home in their semi-viable, overloaded old cars, piled up high with crying children and old grandmothers who were terrified to use "Christian" bathrooms. He advised us to go through Tarifa instead. It's small town, 30 minutes by bus from the Algeciras train station. From Tarifa, there is only one Tangier ferry a day in each direction, and it takes no cars. Sweet and simple.

We got off the train with our reasonable baggage in Algeciras and immediately separated from the dusty Morocco-bound tribe of travelers. We caught the small local coastal bus and got off in Tarifa, at the end of the line, since we had neither specific plans nor a place to land.

It was early afternoon. We had no reservation, as usual. We each picked up our bag and crossed the deserted street into a cafe to have a cup of coffee, possibly a snack, and regroup and inform ourselves. The young people behind the counter, a boy and a girl, greeted us merrily. The girl even inquired whether I wanted more sugar in my coffee. That was unusual in itself. European cafe personnel are more likely to defend their sugar against customer predation.

The young man had bleached hair and a good tan; he looked more edgy than most young Spaniards I had seen, yet he was wholesome. He chatted up my wife in bad but cordial English, asking where we were going. No, he said, he did not have a specific hotel recommendation, but he would go next door where they had the local paper. He described on a napkin map where everything was within the walled city and the advantage of this location over that. We made a preliminary choice. It was hot; we had our bags with us; we did not want to walk. Finding a taxi at siesta time seemed difficult. The bleached guy saw me fumbling with my cell phone. (Yes, I had purchased the European service; no, it did not do me much good. If you give a chimp a piano, you are not necessarily going to get a symphony.) He told me to rest easy; he would call the first hotel of our choice to see whether it had room. Everything went well. He found us a room in a pricey but very pretty place in the old walled town.

The same evening, I was reflecting on the contrast between the mean old guys in the big city *tapa* bars and the friendly, smiling, helpful young people in Tarifa at the cafe near the bus stop. A blurry image was hovering at the edge of my consciousness. After a while, it came into focus: a small bottle of Tabasco. There had been Tabasco on all the tables in the cafe. There is no Tabasco produced in Europe, there is no Tabasco produced in Spain. It's made in New Orleans, by a single family-owned company. It's one of the few American vices that have never spread abroad.

I made inquiries from the merchants around the hotel. What kinds of tourists came to Tarifa, a small and apparently obscure town?

In the summer, mostly travelers to Morocco, smart travelers (like us). In the winter, there are high, steady winds across the straits of Gibraltar. Many foreign windsurfers come then, especially *muchos Americanos, muchos!*

Americans don't care about strange food. Many pretend to, but only at home. That's why we have so many bad Thai restaurants. Abroad, they want three things: pizza, tacos, and cheeseburgers. They are disappointed with the first, with good reason. They expect Tabasco sauce with the second and often with the third. You manage a restaurant in Europe, you want repeat American customers (best tippers in the world), you supply Tabasco sauce.

One thing leads to another. You have a lot of American customers because of the Tabasco. They are friendly, jovial, caring, and mostly kind. It rubs off on you. Pretty soon, you have morphed into a miracle: a nice, pleasantly disposed, helpful worker in the Spanish restaurant industry. Your life is sunnier; the malevolent ghost of Francisco Franco begins to dissipate. You are the light of your grandfather's heart. Life is good, thanks to America.

The Tabasco effect: one of the best ways to export the best of American culture. We could probably have a Tabasco-borne diplomacy if we wanted to. ❑

Reflections, *from page 20*

had no problem with the nomination of Sotomayor. After all, it was a Republican president, George H.W. Bush, who nominated her to the U.S. District Court in New York. She was confirmed on unanimous consent of the Senate. Then, when she was nominated by Democratic president Bill Clinton to be a U.S. Court of Appeals judge, 25 Republican senators voted to confirm her. The Republicans are a little late to be opposing Ms. Sotomayor.

There persists the belief that the Republican Party is the lesser of two evils because a Republican president will at least appoint "good" (usually identified as pro-life) justices to the Supreme Court. But it was Harry Blackmun, appointed by Nixon the Republican, who wrote the *Roe* v. *Wade* decision. Is there any evidence that, had he won the election, McCain's judicial nominees would be better than President Obama's? McCain voted to confirm H.W. Bush's appointment of Souter, as well as Clinton's appointments of Stephen Breyer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. McCain said that W. Bush's appointments John Roberts and Samuel Alito would "serve as the model" for his judicial nominees. Yet both of them recently voted *for* executive power and *against* the right of habeas corpus in the case of *Boumediene* v. *Bush*. Sotomayor, for all her faults, has, according to the Cato Institute's Gene Healy, at least shown some "skepticism toward broad claims of executive power."

The Sotomayor nomination will not be the last occasion for a fight over Obama's Supreme Court nominees. Senior Associate Justice John Paul Stevens, who is 89, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who recently underwent surgery for pancreatic cancer, could both possibly retire during Obama's first term.

— Laurence M. Vance

Bastiat on the Bay, *from page 28*

led to the proudly named Legal Realism movement, which devolved, in time, into such post-modern perversions as Critical Legal Studies. The Critters will "prove" to you that the law is entirely indeterminate. But they won't stop there. Liberated from the notion that law should be based on principles and applied without prejudice, they urge their students and colleagues to remake the world in the interest of an egalitarian goal — an end that can be sought without compunctions about the means. In other words, they would legitimize legal spoliation even when it isn't authorized by specific laws as long as it obtains for someone something that the enlightened Critters thought he deserved.

Bastiat does much better when he is considering the practical benefits of limiting the government. Here, his arguments are charming and true: there will be less strife, less corruption, less of all the civic horrors, if the role of government is minimized, because the spoils to be derived from managing or manipulating the government will be minimal. The procedures of a severely limited government would not be as interesting, in certain ways, as the freak-show cage fight that government now resembles, and people with less than titanic rectitude would no longer be as likely to be fascinated and corrupted by it.

Related to these thoughts is a sort of conundrum I have noticed: as the role of the state gets bigger and the fruits of political victory get juicier, the quality of politicians and statesmen (a big word for these operators) declines. The smartest and most productive people tend to shun government, even though that's increasingly where power is to be found. Bastiat offers some clues to why this is.

As far as I can tell, Bastiat was the first to describe collectivist government as the public tit (*"mamelle"*), an image that has persisted ever since. He extends the conceit nicely, more nicely than anyone else. He makes sure we don't end by thinking, "Hey, what's wrong with a public tit? Sounds yummy." He reminds us that the Great Mammary does not fill itself with milk — we are at both ends of the tit, and for most productive people, a lot goes into the ducts (*"les veines lactifères*) but only a little comes out of the nipple. It's an easy lesson, and the fact that most of us haven't learned it can only indicate that most of us have never read Bastiat.

Well, the book club read him, and although its deliberations ended in frustration, it was not with the author but with his subject — the mammillary state. The discussants were discouraged by reckless government bailouts and exuberant calls for more regulation of commerce and industry. I, on the other hand, felt encouraged to have met such vigorous and well-placed natural libertarians.

There is something in French called *"l'esprit d'escalier,"* which can be crudely translated as "the wit of the staircase." The phrase evokes an image, and a little story. One imagines an intellectual salon, convened in the luxurious second-floor apartments of a Parisian mansion. Eventually the party breaks up and the participants start to descend the stairs. Just then, one of them pauses and discovers, too late, all the things he should have said. That is the wit of the staircase. I found that it was my own unfortunate form of wit when the book club, which was the nearest thing to a salon that I had ever seen, concluded its meeting.

For I had failed to say what I should have said. I should have reminded these likeable, potentially influential people that they could at least do as Bastiat had done. Their choices weren't restricted to being oppressed or hiding from oppression; they could also take it as their task to advocate liberty, clearly and persistently, to other people. More than 150 years after Bastiat wrote, his words are still inspiring and thought-provoking. I'm confident that the members of a certain elite book club in San Francisco will follow his example. There are worse ways to live your life, C. And J., I can't think of a better way to exorcise your angst. ❑

Libertarianism: A Force of Nature, *from page 26*

survival, each of us can use the available time and resources for either personal growth or intellectually deprived amusement. But cultural evolution has not stopped; in fact, it has dramatically accelerated, creating a real possibility of permanently splitting the human species into distinct categories, differing not so much by their genotype and appearance as by their intellectual pursuits and ambitions (if any) and their varying degrees of willingness to live by means of the state. A willingness to live safely and without effort by means of state support may come with the price tag of falling into the "low-speed" class, destined for ever-increasing intellectual backwardness. The equality of people, doubtful even now, could become an empty slogan within a few generations. The libertarian movement could help prevent this fragmentation of humanity by placing everyone's welfare in his or her own hands, thus promoting interest in the productive use of mental power.

But the more important point is this: there is little doubt that the forces of evolution favor organisms and organizations displaying selfish behavior, even if "selfish" is extended to include closely related individuals. We may hide this fact, pretend that it ain't so, but evolutionary processes do not follow ideologies or human aesthetic notions. Things must be seen as they are, not as they should be, regardless of the majority's wish and vote.

I think that the libertarian principle of voluntary cooperation among individuals pursuing enlightened self-interest reflects our identity as a species better than the principles of any other political movement. It reflects the kind of society that evolves so as to maximize the benefits of the division of labor and the free exchange system of rewards. It encourages members of our species to trade and transmit real wealth — intellectual competence — in response to their interests, while promoting everyone's survival and betterment.

Regardless of all debates about ideology and philosophy, the dynamics of social development appear to be headed toward increased freedom and power of productive individuals. The stars are aligning for a libertarian experiment. ❑

Reviews

"Champlain's Dream," by David Hackett Fischer. Simon & Schuster, 2008, 834 pages.

The Old Regime

Jon Harrison

In July 2009 Vermont celebrated the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's "discovery" of the lake that bears his name. Lake Champlain, sometimes referred to as the sixth Great Lake, was created by retreating ice sheets some 9,000 years ago. Its true discoverers were the Amerindians who settled the region long before the first Europeans arrived. It remains a jewel of the Vermont landscape, despite being threatened by pollution and invasive species. (I don't think I'm prejudiced, even though I was married on its shore.) No trip to northern Vermont is complete without glimpsing the sunlight glittering on the lake, with the Adirondacks rising in the west beyond.

Samuel de Champlain, of course, did more than give his name to a lake. More than any other individual, he was responsible for the establishment of New France, the French colonial empire in North America. Although defeat in the Seven Years' War brought Champlain's achievements as an empire-builder to naught, French language and culture still predominate in the Canadian province of Quebec, a Gallic outpost in the midst of a continent long dominated by Anglo-Saxons.

Champlain was in many ways a remarkable man. He was a native of Saintonge, the ancient French province on the Bay of Biscay, north of Gascony. Born probably in the late 1560s, he came of age during the terrible wars of religion that devastated France. While we know that he came from a good (though not noble) family, much else about him remains uncertain. Was he born a Protestant or a Catholic? Was he the natural son of Henry IV, king of France from 1589 to 1610, and one of *la Grande Nation's* greatest monarchs? The sources are ambiguous. It is certain that from an early age Champlain received the patronage of King Henry, under whom he served as an army officer before embarking on his career of exploration. That career, which was to make his name famous, was launched with the encouragement and backing of the king. It is possible, perhaps likely, that Champlain was raised a Protestant but converted to Catholicism in the early 1590s, as did King Henry, who is supposed to have said that "Paris is worth a mass." Just how intimately the two men were connected is likely to remain forever a mystery.

Champlain, like his royal patron, was a man characterized by practicality and tolerance, two attributes in short supply during the late Renaissance. Open-minded, inquisitive, and more concerned with results than dogma, he shines in contrast to many individuals of his (or any other) age. Remarkably, he remained so despite growing more devout as he aged.

Champlain's greatness of spirit is most clearly seen in his treatment of the Indians. Virtually alone among the conqueror-adventurers who appeared in the New World — Spaniards, French, English, and later Americans — he regarded the Indians as fully human beings. He did not, however, idolize them. He deplored what he saw as their backward spiritual life, as well as their cruelty and deceit. He also regarded them as "too free," looking askance at their sexual license and their lack of a European-style system of laws. But he found much to admire as well, and he treated them with a respect that most other white men never deigned to feel. It is no exaggeration to say that from the early 16th to the late 19th centuries, the Europeans and Americans treated

the Indians little differently from the way in which the Nazis treated the Slavic peoples of Poland and the Soviet Union. If only Champlain's example had been followed, a better life for *all* peoples could have been forged in this hemisphere.

Champlain's career peaked in 1608–09, with the founding of Quebec. The murder of Henry IV in 1610 was a major blow to his plans. He spent the remaining 25 years of his life shuttling between the court of Louis XIII and New France, where he served as de facto viceroy (as a non-nobleman he could not officially hold the title). His fortunes fluctuated. He tried unsuccessfully to obtain a monopoly of the fur trade. In 1629 he lost Quebec to the English, but returned in 1633 with the help of the famous Cardinal Richelieu.

His role in the establishment of the French presence in North America is undeniable. Nevertheless, his success proved largely barren. The French cultural heritage here is practically confined to the province of Quebec, while politically and economically France was finished as a North American power by the Peace of Paris in 1763. Wolfe's victory on the Plains of Abraham in 1759 was decisive.

Thus, while Champlain's name and achievements still find a place in the history books, one could be excused for asking whether his importance, his relevance to the current age if you will, justifies the publication of a biography of more than 800 pages. I would say not. David Hackett Fischer, however, thought the opposite.

Fischer, professor of history at Brandeis and the author of such fine books as "Washington's Crossing," as well as such unreadable tomes as "The Great Wave," gives us more than most of us will ever want to know about Champlain and his times. At 834 pages (including 567 of text, 66 of appendices and 110 of notes), the book is just too long. How many people will actually read it? (I should note that a friend of mine, the proprietress of my village's sole bookstore, and a woman possessed of good taste in matters literary, has voluntarily read the entire 567 pages of text. But I would venture to say that she is almost certainly an exception.)

The book is well-written, but spends too much time on tangential matters. We learn far too much about Henry IV, for example (although Fischer tells us that the king was assassinated on May 4, 1610, when in fact it was May 14th). Henry was a fascinating figure to be sure, but many of the details that Fischer mentions have little or nothing to do with Samuel de Champlain. Indeed, Fischer seems compelled to tell us altogether too much about many of Champlain's contemporaries. While reading the book, I thought Fischer might have felt that his subject was not quite substantial enough to warrant a full-length biography, and decided to meet this objection by writing about sundry other matters which, if truth be told, required far less coverage than they are given. The why of this book remains a mystery, beyond the fact that 2008 happened to be the quadricentennial of Quebec's founding.

Fischer is of course an accomplished academic historian, and I daresay the scholarship in the book is sound. I was puzzled by one passage. In describing the Indian practice of torturing enemies, Fischer says:

> [Champlain] recognized that Indian torture was also rational and functioned in a very dark way. In the warrior cultures of North America,

Notes on Contributors

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

Kathy Bradford is an assistant editor of *Liberty*.

S.H. Chambers is a cartoonist living in California.

Michael Christian is in early semi-retirement in a semi-paradisaical corner of California.

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

Jacques Delacroix is a former professor of management and a sociologist by training. He lives in one of the Bellies of the Collectivist Beast, Santa Cruz, with his wife, the artist Krishna Delacroix.

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

Doug Gallob is a composer and music technologist living in Denver.

Erwin Haas lives and writes in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Jon Harrison lives and writes in Vermont.

Gary Jason is a contributing editor of *Liberty.*

John Kannarr is a retired director of information systems and ex-actuarial analyst for an insurance company.

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

Ross Levatter is a physician living in Phoenix.

C.J. Maloney lives and works in New York City.

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

Robert H. Miller is a builder, outdoor adventure guide, and author of *Kayaking the Inside Passage: A Paddler's Guide from Olympia, Washington to Muir Glacier, Alaska.*

Alex Z. Modzelewski is a surgeon who worked his way from Poland all the way to Hawaii, gaining personal experience of a variety of political systems.

William Mostow is a physician who lives in Phoenix.

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

Bruce Ramsey is a journalist in Seattle.

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

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

Tim Slagle is a standup comedian living in Chicago. His website is timslagle.com.

Laurence M. Vance writes from Pensacola, Florida. He is the author of *Christianity and War and Other Essays Against the Warfare State.*

Jim Walsh is an assistant editor of *Liberty.*

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

> the continuing practice of torture was a way of guaranteeing a state of perpetual war. It meant that the work of retribution would always need to be done, and warriors would be needed to do it (273).

This remarkable statement may very well be true, but I found nothing in the book to back it up. Did the tribes in fact desire a "state of perpetual war?" If so, why? Fischer fails to enlighten us, unless I somehow missed his answers.

Champlain rightly condemned the barbaric practice of torturing war captives, and had the courage to do so directly to the Indians, but he also averred that "we [i.e., Europeans] do not commit such cruelties." One wonders how Champlain could have forgotten about the Inquisition or the persecution of the unfortunates suspected to be witches (the witch craze was at its height during his lifetime).

For all his good qualities, Champlain was just another adventurer who contributed to Europe's conquest of most of the rest of the world, and with it the disruption or destruction of countless native cultures. The interest in such men will only continue to wane as Western civilization sinks slowly into the abyss, its successor still uncertain, though we can be sure it will be less white, less Eurocentric, and less likely to spend time reflecting on long-dead seekers after new lands and riches. ❑

"Taking Chance," directed by Ross Katz. HBO Films, 2009, 77 minutes.

Final Trip

Gary Jason

A brilliant little movie produced by HBO Films and shown briefly in theaters is now available for rent or purchase. "Taking Chance" is a fascinating kind of war movie, one well worth viewing.

Actually, let me retract the descriptor "war movie." Of course, "war movie" denotes a movie about a war — typically, a movie that shows a battle or the events that lead up to one. Many classics come to mind — "Midway," "The Longest Day," "The Great Raid," "Tora, Tora, Tora." However, the phrase usually connotes specifically pro-war movies, such as the innumerable John Wayne WWII flicks, which portray war as heroic and good. By contrast, we often use the phrase "antiwar movie" to refer to films that place war in an unfavorable light. I'm thinking of such classics as "All Quiet on the Western Front," "Full Metal Jacket," and "Grand Illusion."

But no, "Taking Chance" is conspicuously neither pro-war not antiwar. It is a pro-person movie, showing respect for the people who serve in the military. The story is, apparently, very simple. Based on real events, it recounts the return of the body of a young Marine, 19-year-old Chance Phelps, to his family for burial. The protagonist is Lt. Col. Mike Strobl (Kevin Bacon), a Marine officer who volunteers for the duty of accompanying the body of Chance, who has died in the Iraq war defending his fellow soldiers.

The story demonstrates the respect with which the Marine Corps handles its fallen warriors, from the people assigned the dolorous duty of cleaning the remains and restoring the uniforms of the fallen, to the soldiers who accompany their dead comrades home. It is also about the respect that the ordinary citizens whom Strobl encounters on his journey show towards Chance.

These ordinary folk include people at the airport, people in the plane carrying the young man home, the baggage handlers loading and unloading the casket, and a volunteer who drives Strobl to the airport, explaining that while he himself opposed the Iraq war, he wanted to help the armed services in some way. Strobl is amazed and heartened by the support his presence spontaneously evokes.

I said earlier that the story is simple, on the surface. A more intricate, underlying story concerns Strobl himself. We come to understand why he volunteered for the duty of taking Chance home and see how he grapples with some complex personal feelings.

The cinematography is excellent, especially the photography of the area around Dubois, Wyoming, Chance's hometown. And the acting is amazingly good, particularly when one considers that the supporting cast does not contain many well-known actors, and indeed contains some who are not professional actors at all. Yet the supporting cast performs flawlessly, with exceptional performances by Tom Aldredge as Charlie Fitts and Tom Wopat as John Phelps.

But I was astounded by Kevin Bacon's performance. I've seen Bacon in numerous films, starting with the great comedy "Animal House," and I've always enjoyed his work. Yet I've never seen him as riveting as he is in this film. He puts in a beautifully restrained but deeply affecting performance, one just perfect for the character of Strobl. My feeling was similar to the one that I had when I watched Tom Selleck play Eisenhower in "Ike: Countdown to D-Day" (A&E, 2004). Again, I saw an actor I had long enjoyed demonstrate a level of mastery of his craft that I was unaware he had.

I found this movie profoundly moving, and while it got little publicity when it first appeared, it is definitely worth searching out and viewing. ❑

"Up," directed by Pete Docter and Bob Peterson. Pixar Studios, 2009, 96 minutes.

Into the Blue

Jo Ann Skousen

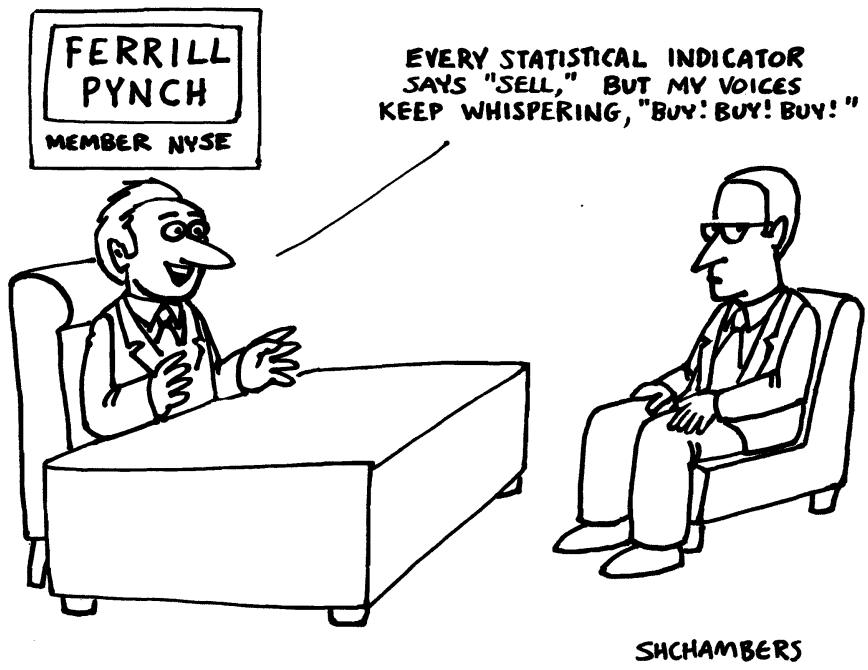
"Up" is an animated feature film from Disney's Pixar studios, but don't let that fool you into thinking it's a children's movie. This film offers storytelling at its best, with a central character whose emotions are as real and as raw as those on the face of any A-list movie star. Children will like it too, with its cute-but-klutzy little boy scout eager to earn his "assisting the elderly" badge and its cheerful, eager-to-please dog Dug. But the real star of the show is Carl (voiced by Ed Asner), a curmudgeonly old man who just wants to be left alone so he can grieve away the rest of his life with his only company, the memories of his beloved wife, Ellie.

Ellie's presence fills the screen, even though she leaves it ten minutes into the film. Carl and Ellie are childhood sweethearts who met through a common love of adventure. Ellie is the leader of the two, a perky tomboy who plans to fill her adventure book with "Stuff I'm Going to Do." Like many newlyweds, Carl and Ellie promise each other that they will dream big, explore the world, and have lifelong adventures. And, like many married couples, they find that life intervenes to cut short their dreams. Savings intended for travel must be used for car repairs, medical bills, and living expenses, and the pages of the adventure book remain blank. The montage in which all of this happens lasts only ten minutes, but it is extremely moving, especially for those on the downhill side of dreaming.

When well-intentioned social workers decide that Carl is no longer capable of caring for himself and condemn him to a retirement home, he decides to escape, lifting his house into the air on the power of thousands of helium filled balloons. This is where the film itself begins to soar. Carl has the adventure of a lifetime as he tries to fulfill Ellie's dream of living in a house at the top of Paradise Falls in South America. The story has enough cute talking animals, menacing bad guys, clever antics, and that sweet klutzy boy scout to please the kids in the audience, but it is meaty enough to satisfy the adults who came with them.

Eventually the balloons start to lose their air, and the house drops precariously close to the ground several miles short of the destination. Carl, determined to settle the house exactly where Ellie wanted it, begins pulling it along the ground toward Paradise Falls. Metaphorically the message is clear: like many of us, Carl has carried his house around on his back for his whole life, and it has kept him from soaring to greater adventures. In "Walden," Thoreau warned that a modern American will "have spent more than half his life . . . before his wigwam will be earned. . . . Houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them." Indeed, as we are discovering in this current economy, many have become overburdened by mortgages, figuratively carrying their houses around on their backs, first to keep up with the Joneses and now to keep ahead of foreclosure.

Ellie's Adventure Book with its "Stuff I'm Going to Do" is also remarkably poignant for an animated film, reminding us that we need to dream, but we also need to modify the dream when newer dreams come along. The film is sad at first, but in the end it is as



buoyant as the balloons that carry Carl forward to the next greatest adventure of his life. He reminds me of my stepfather, who thought his life had ended at the age of 75 when his wife of more than 50 years died. He had one foot in the old folks' home when he met my mother, and the real adventure began. In the 22 years they were married, they traveled to Mexico, Europe, South America, the Caribbean, and Canada. They toured 49 of the 50 United States, pulling a trailer and camping along the way. Once they made a wrong turn on the New Jersey Turnpike, went through the Lincoln Tunnel, and ended up pulling their trailer through Times Square. That must have been quite a sight for the tourists — not unlike Carl's little house being transported by helium-filled balloons.

It wasn't Paradise Falls, but for Mom and Wally it was paradise, and not at all what Wally thought his final quarter-century would be. I think another Wally — Walt Disney — would be very pleased to see the heights to which Pixar has taken his studio with this humorous, intelligent, witty, and thought-provoking film. ❑

"The Latest Illiteracy," by Christopher Ricks, Jim McCue, and Bryan Garner. Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, 2009, 62 pages.

Liberty and Literacy

Stephen Cox

This is a short book, barely long enough to count as a book. But its importance is substantial. It's one of the many books that have been written to alarm readers about the increase of bad writing, or non-writing, in the English-speaking world. It also addresses itself, however, to more fundamental questions: what is good writing? How can you tell? And what is lost when the quality of writing and speaking declines? This reviewer doesn't always agree with what the little book says. But it brings up most of the issues that ought to be considered.

The book consists of three essays, the first by Christopher Ricks (as of June, Sir Christopher Ricks), a British literary critic who teaches in America, the second by Jim McCue, a British journalist, and the third by Bryan Garner, an American editor and legal educator. So this is not a provincial or merely academic book. Its concerns are broad. It argues that an inability to understand grammatical structure and to master traditional standards of diction is damaging to people's capacity to think and communicate on the level necessary to maintain a free and rational society.

Awful portents abound, and are eagerly related by our authors:

The British National Audit Office reports that after 125 years of compulsory public schooling, "almost half the population is not properly literate."

Investigators sent by the Royal Literary Fund into the British universities find themselves "shocked by what they found. Yet [they] themselves [are] not immune, the first page of their muti-authored report saying that not enough attention was being paid by those 'with the real power to affect change.'"

An "intellectual" program on British radio features the reading of a Philip Larkin poem heaping scorn on the government; the program interprets Larkin's sarcasm as praise.

America's own Tom DeLay opines: "Two years of [Nancy] Pelosi gives a good idea of what four years of Hillary [Clinton] will be like." Ignore the singular-plural disjunction (years-gives). Has Republican DeLay thrown in the towel and determined that Mrs. Clinton *will* be president? No, that's not what he meant; but that *is* what he said.

Reporting on recent intellectual labors, "the head of the English Department at a reputable university [writes], without irony, 'John Kerrigan's monumental new study fills a much-needed gap.'" Well, luv, so'd Bill Shakepeare's stuff, din't it?

A high-ranking British official announces that in Northern Ireland, "one in five Catholics is now a serving police officer," thus conjuring images of nuns and altar boys doubling as cops on the beat. What he meant to say was that "one in five police officers now is a Catholic," which isn't quite so big a deal.

Another lofty Brit declared, "We have made improvements" in something or other, "and we'll go on furthermore." Yes, yes — go on! Furthermore! He also declared, "You can't be a leader without getting your nose dirty." Or at least your prose. But Gladstone and Disraeli must have written in vain.

And, back on these shores, Alan Greenspan opines, "I do not question that central banks can defuse any bubble." Not pausing to notice Greenspan's atrocious mixed metaphor (bubbles being defused like bombs), McCue remarks, "Who . . . could be sure what this meant . . . Did he mean [the banks] could, or they couldn't?" And he adds, "Can anyone doubt that misunderstanding at this level could be catastrophic?" I don't doubt it — and I'm sure that Greenspan's mentor, Ayn Rand, would have had his hide for this, even before she had his hide for his economic policies.

As the authors of "The Latest Illiteracy" insist, the ability to think in

any complex way is dependent on the ability to use words, either in communicating with others or in communing with oneself. Are the exalted leaders who came up with some of the statements I've just quoted any more fitted for intellectual tasks than the people who go online to say of themselves,

If your word for "write" is "rite," it may be that you don't understand what a "rite" is, and you probably shouldn't be riting.

"Live in Manceser," "Studyin pyshcology but wanta be a lawyer," and "I like 2 rite songs (b4 u ask there crap) friends are the most important things to me above a thing my friends are like my family, ill do anything for them"?

Most of today's public figures write somewhat better than that, or get other people to write better for them. But how many of them have even a basic conception of the rules of grammar and usage? Not many. Yet these rules, these so-called conventions, are human beings' methods of ensuring that words and thoughts have definite meanings and definite, meaningful relationships with one another. McCue puts it this way:

> Knowing the difference between a noun and a verb means having a way to think, and being able to distinguish an abstract noun or a transitive verb enables those thoughts to be refined. Grammar is a complex rational system which has evolved to order our thoughts and help us to explain ourselves to others, and it is not optional. Without it, we could not process ideas, know what they mean or test their validity.

In short, "grammatical codes . . . correspond to the facts of the world and the relationships between things." The same can be said for codes of diction and spelling, even the weird-looking codes of spelling in English. If your word for "write" is "rite," it may be that you don't understand what a "rite" is, and you probably shouldn't be riting. And if you're fond of saying things like "the implementation of a progressive social/economic platform will assure every person their political/economic needs," what can I say to you? Probably you're a college professor, but certainly you have no experience in connecting words with things. It's obvious that your inability to decide whether your "platform" is social *and* economic or social *or* economic means that you don't know what you're talking about, and that no one should ever listen to your advice. No one, that is, except illiterates like you.

"Illiterates"? Yes. Even college professors should be pronounced illiterate, when evidence indicates that they haven't mastered the written language. And how much credence should we give to an illiterate's pronouncements on our "political/economic" needs?

All right. But here I need to stipulate that this argument about thoughts, words, and politics can be pressed too far. "Our [political] masters," says McCue, "cannot read the manual that we inherited for a free society." And neither, according to him, can their subjects. As a result, or a corollary, "from top to bottom, society has fractured, and instead of the old rules, principles and manners, we are kept in place by ever greater surveillance and ever more dictates as to what we must and must not do, eat, drink, wear, spend, say, think." This is plausible, but overstated. It isn't mainly illiteracy that inflates the size and force of government; it's the power-lust of the "master" class and the narrow self-interest of the "subject" class, which is disgustingly willing to surrender freedom and future prosperity for immediate and particular rewards. Lenin was perfectly literate; so was Hitler, and so were many of their followers. It didn't help.

But the defense of a free society, especially against the attacks of literate (or technically literate) people, does require a fairly high standard of literacy. An illiterate can sometimes organize a mob, yet no one who hasn't read and thought with some precision can convince other people that their long-term interest lies in contract and cooperation, not force and obedience. Every society has some kind of authorities. The question is, will these authorities be respected, or feared? Will their influence be exerted through rational persuasion, or through superstition and organized violence? If our choice is persuasion, then we should guard the means of persuasion carefully — and those means are almost entirely linguistic. While we're doing so, we'll need to look carefully at the nature of language and linguistic change, so as not to throw away our own best arguments about the rational functions of language.

That would be a terrible sin, and Garner commits it — unthinkingly, though with great emphasis — while discussing his own means of judging whether we ought to keep old expressions alive or to welcome new ones. He believes that new expressions should be accepted when their use has become almost universal. Well, fine. I won't struggle to maintain "forsooth," or to keep "auditoria" as the plural of "auditorium." But that's not saying much. In virtually every sentence I write, I still have to choose among an enormous array of current expressions, many of them meaning roughly the same thing. "To be, or not to be — that is the question" could be replaced with "There's a question in my mind about whether it's best to keep myself alive or go ahead and commit suicide right now." That's not ungrammatical; it's just not as good as the original. Well, why? Garner won't say. I will, in a moment. But first I need to quarrel with him over his deepest assumption about language.

Garner tries to explain language as a process of "evolution":

> The forces of natural selection are every bit as much at work in living languages as they are in the rest of the natural world. Over time, words and phrases mutate both in form and in meaning, sometimes through useful innovation and sometimes through unconscious drift and pervasive error. Usually the mutations don't survive, but occasionally a change proves meritorious and ends up becoming a part of the standard language. That happens only if it's fit enough to survive — as a part of the natural selection that takes place in every language.

This is wrong, and seriously wrong. Notice that Garner has not defined "meritorious," or the process by which merit is assessed. Notice also that language is *not* part of "the natural world." It is part of the human, manmade world, and it responds, not to random, Darwinian processes, but to human choices, good

or bad. A society in which people are educated to attend to their choices of words more carefully than Mr. Garner has attended to his choices in the passage I quoted will strongly resist mere "mutations" — almost all of which, as any evolutionary biologist will tell you, are detrimental to the organisms they affect. Conscientious writers identify and reproduce expressions that are more precise, more memorable, more emotionally evocative than competing expressions, particularly those generated apparently at random, in the consciousness of people who don't care about words to begin with. And in the long run, thank God, writers who are conscious of their stylistic choices are much more likely to leave a mark on the language than writers who proceed by random.

Modern English prose style was invented in the late 17th and early 18th centuries by people who were seeking greater clarity and efficiency than prevailed in the current baroque style. Compare the prose of Milton with that of Dryden (who, it has been said, *almost* invented the paragraph), or with the perfected style of Addison, who was chosen as the model of good writing by several generations of influential people in the 18th century (see Franklin's "Autobiography" for a long account of his careful imitation of Addison and his buddy Steele). That's why the new way of writing caught on, and stayed. Darwin has nothing whatever to say about matters like this. If you must use the evolutionary metaphor, call it evolution by intelligent design. *Ours.*

When someone pronounces "a plague on both their houses," or discerns "the mark of Cain" on someone else, or refers to mankind inclusively as both "the quick and the dead," that person is reproducing the most potent literary influences on our language — Shakespeare, the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer. The language of those books was hardly the product of Darwinian evolution or unintended mutations. Nor is there anything accidental about its continued reproduction in a world in which most people do not read the Bible, fewer people have read "Romeo and Juliet," and practically nobody is an old-language Episcopalian. Useful expressions are invented and preserved by people who think about language and care about language.

It's noteworthy that most people who read the Bible today rely on a contemporary translation, because the language of the King James Version has too many *hard words*, and readers have been sold on the idea that "the Bible was originally written in the language of the common man." Well, no, it wasn't. The poet Isaiah doesn't speak the language of the common man, and neither does the theologian St. Paul. It should be interesting to people who believe in the Darwinian evolution of our language that during the past century hundreds of modern-English versions of the Bible have appeared, and some of them have become very popular, but none of them have added a single phrase to the English language.

I won't deny the fact that every morning millions of linguistic mutations are generated from the internet's life-giving slime, and some proportion of the millions survive. It's my sorry duty to act as their zoologist in the monthly installments of Liberty's Word Watch column. But why do they survive? Here's my own metaphor: this is what happens to a disease when there are few qualified physicians to treat it, and when practically nobody believes in the usefulness of vaccination. "The Latest Illiteracy" provides copious evidence — in case you needed it — that the people appointed to be physicians of the language — the writers, teachers, professors, and parents — have mostly abandoned their operating rooms and offices and have retired to Boca Raton.

The authors of "The Latest Illiteracy" are especially severe on the linguists of the past generation, and justly so. These people decided, for some reason, to study language in only its narrowest definition. Aggressively uninterested in judgments of quality, they saw language as a series of "linguistic events," none of which was better than any of the others. They regarded people who wanted to assess the quality of language as "pedants," "reactionaries," and imbecilic "conservatives."

The most influential culprits were the mass communicators — politicians, journalists, television pooh-bahs, and entertainers who couldn't shine the shoes of Irving Berlin. A humbler, more insidious role was played by the professional teachers of English composition. Among them, a wonderful idea appeared, an idea that exempted both them and their students from any critical thinking about language. The idea was this: the only way to get students to *write* is to stimulate them to write *a lot*, making no judgments of quality that might possibly damage their *confidence*. Of course, all that could result from this was the reproduction and reinforcement of any random mutations that crept into the students' prose, but nobody in charge ever thought of that.

But there is another idea, an idea so obvious that you would expect it to occur to everyone. Yet even the estimable authors of "The Latest Illiteracy" find it difficult to state. Here it is: language is not just a method of communicating; it is not just a method of getting elected, telling your customers what you think about the new Model 81 Widget, or letting your daughter know that she shouldn't play in the street. Language is a way of creating pleasure.

To put this in another way: language is an art. It doesn't exist just to help us obtain what we want; it exists to give us joy, the kind of joy that we derive from good music, good painting, a well played baseball game, or a magnificent deduction in theology. That's why it has to be learned and cultivated and criticized, and also defended from people who can't hear the music or see the pigments or be bothered to learn the rules. And that's why "To be, or not to be — that is the question" cannot really be replaced by "There's a question in my mind . . ."

Language is not just a method of communicating. Language is a way of creating pleasure.

That revised version is boring. There's nothing to it, nothing but "information"; but the first version thrills us — if we consent to be thrilled — and why? Because of its unsurpassable concision. The vast field of metaphysical speculation, the emotions we all feel

when confronting an ultimate decision, the urgent choice that the speaker himself is facing — both the small and the large are precisely determined and climactically summarized by those ten words, "To be, or not to be — that is the question."

The same might be said of the brilliant passage beginning, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Here again we have the thrill of seeing the infinite reduced to a few words, small and plain. Jefferson and his friends could have written, "Those of us who are here today, representing the great people of the United States, yet conscious of the necessity to express, in our own words, the political philosophy that has inspired us to announce the beginning of a new nation, have agreed on a number of political principles, which we believe can be accepted by all men who are not blinded by prejudice or misled by custom." Most other 18th-century writers would have said exactly that. The 18th century was, perhaps, the finest era of English writing; but good writing is not the product of history or historical evolution; it's the creation of individuals. The Declaration of Independence isn't a period piece; it's the work of brilliant writers who would stand out in any literary culture. The meaning of version 1 and version 2 is roughly the same. The difference is that version 2 provides no aesthetic pleasure. That's not a problem for you? Then I'm sorry — you're illiterate; you don't know about writing; go away.

I insist that this aesthetic pleasure is also an *educated* pleasure. An uneducated person will read the opening lines of the Declaration without having any idea of why it's good writing. Someone has to *teach* people to notice the distinction between Jefferson and (Jesse) Jackson, Biden and the Bible, Eliot and Eminem, just as someone has to teach people to notice all the astonishing things that Mozart or Andrea del Sarto achieved. To say that appreciation for good language is an educated pleasure doesn't detract from the significance or intensity of the pleasure. Even the teenage bloggers who "like 2 rite songs" are interested in discovering some distinctive pleasures in words; the difficulty is that they're content to realize that their words are "crap," without understanding why.

So, once more: who's responsible for this? The individuals themselves, primarily. Most people are preoccupied with other things than the improvement of their linguistic taste. Nevertheless, we have some right to expect that society, to which we sacrifice so much, should do more than it does to promote a basic understanding of words and how they work.

In "The Latest Illiteracy," the major institutional blame falls on government schools. Every month, Gary Jason provides readers of Liberty with fresh information about the failures of these schools and the means of ending their predominance in our culture. He's right, and I won't poach on his territory. I'll just mention the fact that the authors of "Illiteracy" demonstrate how far government schools are from fulfilling their promise to give life and light to all who live. It shouldn't surprise anyone that students who have spent 13 years eating pabulum should turn to Obama for hamburger and fries.

But suppose you wanted to teach someone how to respect language and use it effectively? What thoughts should guide teachers of writing and reading, whether they work for private or government schools or are "merely" concerned parents? Why should they have any concern for linguistic and aesthetic standards?

Much of this field is covered, one way or another, by a passage that Garner quotes from T.W.H. Holland (1967). "Why not," Holland asks, accept illiterate language as "sound usage," and say it ourselves? "I suppose," he continues, "the only good reply is that people who use the language in a way we think good do not say it."

This is not an auspicious start. It's a fine example of the circular reasoning that too many conservative language advisers employ: the standard of the *good* is the language that *good* writers use. No wonder modern illiterates and their academic defenders regard these conservatives as nattering nabobs of negativity.

But Holland soon takes another tack. "This may be middle-class or upper-class snobbery," he admits, and it certainly sounds like that, "but it is also the defence of those who care about the clear and agreeable use of language, who value the power of making distinctions [that] are necessary or helpful." Finally he's found a good way of putting the matter, a way that takes in both the practical and the aesthetic function of writing and draws attention to the role of human interest in giving our common language the healthiest "evolution" possible. Good language isn't just what certain classes of people happen to say or write; it's what people who care about language, people who value its usefulness and pleasure ("agreeable use"), find reason to emphasize in their speech and writing.

This isn't a middle-class thing, and it certainly isn't an upper-class thing.

The linguistic habits of the British aristocracy have been a joke for 400 years. The linguistic habits of America's current upper class — bankers, stock jobbers, movie people, top-level bureaucrats, and their endowed descendants, wretched creatures that they are — are even funnier. And as an academic, I can testify that it isn't an academic thing, either; college professors write much worse than . . . uh . . . well . . . I can't think of a group that doesn't write better than we do. And good language isn't any more dependent on dialect than it is on class. Every dialect has its own rules, and a good speaker of English should be able to appreciate both the style of Macaulay and the style of "The Big Rock Candy Mountain."

The preservation of sound speech and sound writing is a job for everyone — everyone who is willing to think about language, everyone who is willing to weigh all possible expressions that may be useful in a given instance and to choose, on rational grounds, the expressions that are most "agreeable" and effective. This means it's a job for teachers and parents, merchants and farmers, convicts and judges, nuns and computer geeks; it's a job for whoever (to paraphrase the Bible) teaches with rational authority, and not as the academic scribes.

It's especially a job for libertarians. Libertarianism was largely the creation of writers (good writers, too): Isabel Paterson, Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, and others going back to Jefferson, Macaulay, and Milton themselves. It is inconceivable that a libertarian society could exist in an illiterate culture. And it is inconceivable to me that a libertarian society could exist without joy — yes, the joy of freedom, but also the joy of art. All great writing is great art, and the people who are eligible to create and enjoy it are you and me. ❑

"The Brothers Bloom," directed by Rian Johnson. Endgame Entertainment, 2009, 113 minutes.

The Art of the Con

Jo Ann Skousen

School's out for summer, and teen comedies abound. Most of them are trite, raunchy, potty-mouthed, formulaic — and immensely successful. "The Hangover" is one of them. Its big-budget advertising throughout the spring made it look clever and entertaining, and its 80% approval rating on rottentomatoes.com gave it an air of respectability. Largely a knock-off of the "Dude, Where's my Car?" genre, in which several friends must retrace their steps after a night of drunken debauchery, "The Hangover" follows the shenanigans of several young men who wake up from a drunken stupor after a bachelor party in Las Vegas. One is missing a tooth, another is sporting a wedding band, and somebody's baby is in the closet. Can they retrace their steps and find the groom before the wedding begins? Will they be doing the bride any favors if they do? The film, pushing the well-crumpled envelope of raunch, earned not only that 80% approval rating on rottentomatoes but $45 million in its first week.

At the same time, "The Brothers Bloom," a clever, intelligent, well-crafted crime caper, opened in a few grubby art houses in cities like New York and LA, earning a respectable 62% rottentomatoes rating but a meager $2 million in box office receipts in its first *month*. There's just no accounting for taste these days. If you want to know more about "The Hangover," go see it yourself. Meanwhile, I'm going to review "The Brothers Bloom."

The key to a perfect con job is to give the "mark" something that he or she wants, so that when the con is over, the mark doesn't come back looking for revenge. A good con always relies on persuading the mark to participate in a slightly shady deal that seems to go terribly wrong, so the mark ends up actually thanking the con artist for helping him or her escape publicity or punishment. In a movie about con artists, the audience wants to be conned as well. As much as we pride ourselves in being able to figure it out, we don't really want to know how it's going to end until it's over. Being taken for a ride is the whole point of the film, and we want to enjoy every moment of the ride.

"The Brothers Bloom" is just that kind of film, one that delights the audience in every scene. It begins with two young brothers (Max Records and Zachary Gordon), dressed solemnly in white shirts and black hats, as they are shipped from foster home to foster home after conducting cons in every town. Young Stephen has discovered that people are predictable, and if you plan carefully enough, you can con them into — or out of — just about anything. He's a storywriter at heart, planning complex schemes and then bringing them to life. Stephen's younger brother, who inexplicably goes by their surname, Bloom, obviously worships his brother, and will do anything to please him. But he yearns to stay put and treat people as friends instead of plotlines. The two young actors portray these conflicting characters brilliantly.

The boys grow up, with Mark Rufallo and Adrien Brody stepping into the roles of Stephen and Bloom. Their accomplice, Bang Bang (Rinko Kikuchi from "Babel"), is an exotic Asian beauty who never speaks but can handle anything they ask her to do, from seducing a mark to wiring explosives. Bang Bang provides some of the funniest moments in the film, mostly in the form of bizarre props, deadpan looks, and inexplicable actions performed in the background while the main characters are speaking — as when she methodically peels an apple, drawing our attention to the steely glint of her knife, then tosses the apple over her shoulder and gnaws nonchalantly on the peel.

A con game works because the scam artist can predict what the mark will do under controlled circumstances. In this case the mark is Penelope Stamp (Rachel Weisz), an eccentric billion-heiress who collects skills (such as skateboarding and accordion playing) instead of stamps and crashes her Lamborghini almost daily. She is anything but predictable. An example: if a bicyclist hits the side of your car and goes flying over your windshield, you'll stop and see whether the bicyclist is hurt, right? I knew this film was going to be different when the mark drove away from the injured bicyclist, backed up, drove a few more feet, backed up again, and then crashed over the embankment into the trees. A predictable reaction? Hardly. And without predictability, the brothers' scam is in trouble. That keeps the audience deliciously off-balance too.

The caper takes us on an international romp through several European cities, entertaining us with quirky characters, unexpected twists, comic-book headings, and a jazzy musical score by Nathan Johnson that heightens the offbeat tone. You may or may not figure out the ending, or how many twists will play out before the conclusion. But that doesn't matter, because the journey itself is so much fun.

However, there is nothing comic-book about the relationships between the two brothers, and that's what makes this more than a simple takeoff on "The Sting." One orphaned brother seeks adventure and freedom, the other seeks hearth and home. The story is the classic homeward journey, based (according to director and screenwriter Rian Johnson) on James Joyce's "Ulysses." The brothers' names come from Joyce's characters, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, and "Penelope" is, of course, a reference to Ulysses' longsuffering wife in Homer's "Odyssey" (on which Joyce's "Ulysses" is based). The film also sports a seedy Faganesque character with one cycloptic eye, "Diamond Dog" (Maximilian Schell). These allusions give the film some depth, even as its offbeat direction and ragtime score give it a lighthearted tone. "The Brothers Bloom" may not be able to compete at the box office with today's raunchier comedies, but discerning audiences (such as Liberty's readers) may enjoy it much more. ❑

"Drag Me to Hell," directed by Sam Raimi. Buckaroo Entertainment, 2009, 99 minutes.

Precious Dread

Jo Ann Skousen

I confess to a lifelong love of horror movies — the good old-fashioned kind that make the spine tingle with dread, without resorting to gratuitous gore. A truly great suspense film can terrify audiences without a single drop of blood being shed. I haven't seen many films in this genre lately, however, because most horror films have given way to slasher flicks, full of blood and torture. That's not my style. I want to be terrified, but I don't want to be grossed out. I agree with suspense writer Orson Scott Card, who evaluates the effects of dread, terror and horror in this way:

> Dread is the first and the strongest of the three kinds of fear. It is that tension, that waiting that comes when you know there is something to fear but you have not yet identified what it is. . . . Terror only comes when you see the thing you're afraid of . . . you know the face of the thing you fear. . . . Horror is the weakest of all. After the fearful thing has happened, you see its remainder, its relics . . . the grisly hacked up corpse.

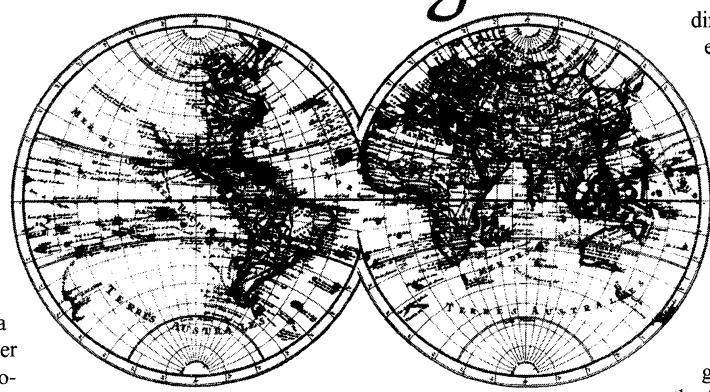
In short, dread is created by the anticipation of an unknown terror, while horror relies on the blood and gore in its aftermath. "Drag Me to Hell" is a little gem about demonic curses and things that go bump in the night. It is successful largely because it relies on the intelligent, creative development of dread rather than overwhelming its audience with horrifying buckets of blood. The result is a tense, smart, and surprisingly funny scream-fest reminiscent of an amusement park ride — scary but safe, and oh, so much fun.

As the story begins, Christine (Alison Lohman), a loan officer at a bank, is competing with another person to become assistant bank manager. In order to show that she can make tough decisions, she turns down a creepy old woman's request for an extension on her mortgage. Big mistake, of course. The woman (Lorna Raver) gets her revenge by casting a curse on Christine. After being terrorized by the woman in the bank's parking garage, Christine learns that she has only three days to reverse the curse or she'll spend eternity in hell. How do you terrorize a victim in a movie rated PG-13? Certainly not with a chainsaw. Instead, the film uses the old-fashioned methods: eerie music, menacing shadows, sudden brief images of hideous faces, and graveyard visits at midnight. Oh, and in this case, getting mauled by an ugly old woman's slobbery teeth.

Movies about demons always have a premise that explains the rules of engagement and provides the possibility of escape. "Drag Me to Hell" offers a plausible set of rules and builds on them throughout, allowing the audience to suspend disbelief and go along with the plot. In short, the story works. There also needs to be a well-meaning skeptic who doesn't believe the believable premise. This role is ably played by Chris' academic boyfriend, Clay (Justin Long), who can't see or hear the demons that are roaring at the doorways and windows, but supports her anyway. Every girl should have such an understanding man in her life.

This kind of movie is best seen in a darkened theater, but it's also a perfect choice for your next Halloween party. Drag out the popcorn and drag your friends over to join you. "Drag Me to Hell" is scary without being gory, funny without being campy, and entertaining as hell. ❑

Terra Incognita



Burlington, Vt.

Curious exercise in rebranding, in the *Burlington Free Press*:

PETA has made a request to the newly revived rock band Phish to change its name to Sea Kitten. In this way, people might come to view fish the way they see cats and dogs, as smart and sensitive animals worthy of care and protection, said Ashley Byrne, a PETA senior campaigner.

"We felt that fish needed an image overhaul," she said of the animals, not the band. "They don't receive the sympathy of the more cuddly animals. We thought that by rebranding fish as sea kittens, they might receive the compassion they deserve."

Since last October, PETA has asked numerous organizations and entities with fish in their name to change it to sea kittens, Byrne said. She does not know how many requests have been made, but no one has made the change to sea kitten, she said.

London

Unreasonable demands made on noblesse oblige, from the *Guardian*:

Tourists enjoying a day of sightseeing at Windsor Castle got more than they bargained for today when a couple were caught having sex on the queen's lawn.

Ignoring signs asking visitors to Please Keep Off The Grass, the man and woman, said to be in their early 30s, selected a spot near the castle's Garter Tower and stripped off in full view of hotels, pubs, and shops. An employee at the Harte and Garter Hotel, which overlooks the castle, said: "It was going on for about 10 or 15 minutes, which is quite a long time, considering the location."

A spokesman from Thames Valley police confirmed that two people had been arrested and cautioned for outraging public decency. It is not known whether the queen was in residence at Windsor Castle at the time.

Bedford, Ohio

Greek tragedy for the new millennium, from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*:

A Bedford father called police after arguing with his son about cleaning his room. The sloppy son is 28 years old and serves on the Bedford School Board.

"I know this looks bad," said School Board member Andrew Mizsak, who lives with his parents and also works as an independent political consultant. Mizsak's dad, also Andrew, called 911 on Thursday after his son threw a plate of food across the kitchen table and balled his fist up at his dad when told to clean his room

The senior Mizsak, 63, wouldn't press charges and told police, "I don't want to ruin his political career." According to the report, he said: "Andrew is 270 pounds and [Mizsak Sr.] cannot fight him, they do everything for Andrew and he doesn't even pay rent."

According the report, "Andrew was sent to his room to clean it. He was crying uncontrollably and stated he would comply."

Mizsak said he was embarrassed to take police away from more important work. "My dad and I love each other very much," he said, promising to keep his basement room clean.

Syracuse, N.Y.

Well-measured response to dangerous artifact, from the *Syracuse Post-Standard*:

Syracuse police evacuated Clinton Square in order to examine a suspicious box left at the base of the park's Civil War monument, standing by the box while waiting for a bomb disposal expert to examine it.

The box was a metal "Sex and the City" trivia game container, set on a step on the fountain side of the monument. The wind blew florescent pink game cards into the square's fountain, where they sank.

Police first tried to track down the men who left it and get them to return to the park to open the box, Lt. Joe Cecile said. That turned out to be unsuccessful.

Tallahassee, Fla.

Get 'em while they're young, from the *Miami Herald*:

A total of 43 children were directly and indirectly shocked by electric stun guns during simultaneous "Take Your Sons and Daughters to Work Day" events gone wrong at three state prisons, according to new information provided by the Florida Department of Corrections. Also, a group of kids was exposed to tear gas during a demonstration at another lockup.

DOC Secretary Walt McNeil repeatedly stressed that the stun-gunning only happened at three of the 55 institutions and that it wasn't part of a widespread practice. Still, he acknowledged that it was "logical" to assume other children had been shocked on other take-your-kids-to-work days.

Paris

Potentially justifiable judicial activism, spotted by the *London Times*:

Reality television faces a bleak future in France after contestants who spent 12 days flirting with the opposite sex on a sun-drenched island won the right to be treated as salaried workers.

In a ground-breaking ruling, the supreme court in France awarded three contestants on the French version of the program Temptation Island compensation of about €11,000 each. The judges ruled that the trio was entitled to full employment contracts — including overtime, holidays, and even damages for wrongful dismissal upon elimination from the show.

Warren, Mich.

The thin blue line separating society from chaos, depicted by WDIV-TV in Detroit:

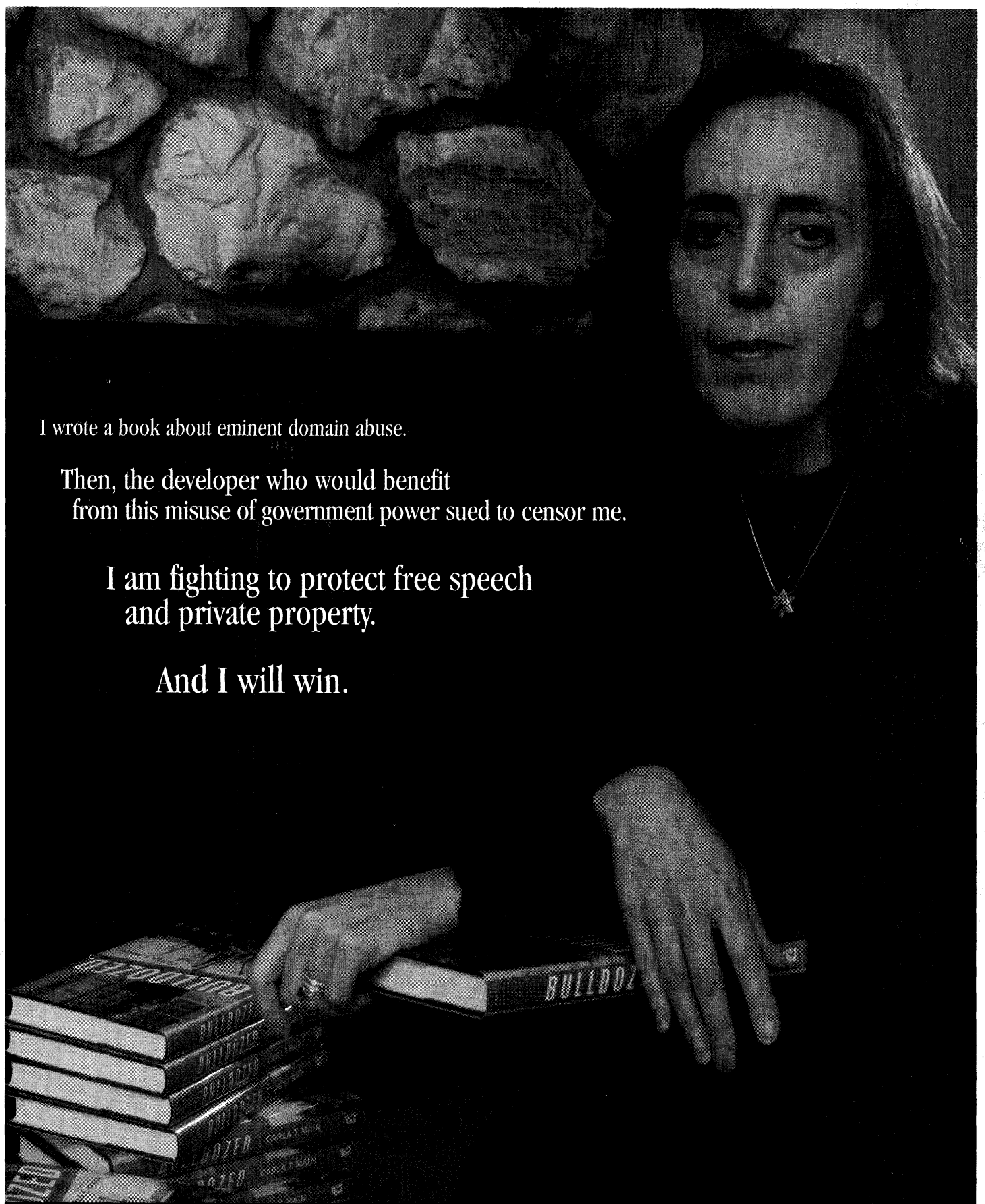
Police responding to a report of a cougar on the loose said they ended up shooting a large toy cat with a Taser stun gun.

A 911 caller said a "huge" animal resembling "a 150-pound cat" was spotted in an old cement drainpipe in Bates Park and 10 officers were sent to the scene, WDIV-TV, Detroit, reported Monday.

The officers saw the outline of the animal in the pipe and shot it with the Taser, only to discover it was a large toy cougar.

Special thanks to Russell Garrard, Laurie Gelb, Tom Isenberg, and Rick Sincere 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.)



Carla Main
Jersey City, NJ

www. .org

Institute for Justice
First Amendment litigation