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The Biker’s Code

Bravo to National Review for Charles C. W. Cooke’s article on bikers (“Right Turn on the Open Road,” April 30). I haven’t been to Daytona or Sturgis, but I have been to several smaller events of a similar nature, and I found most of the people I met to be friendly and fun to hang out with. We truly are victims of misrepresentation by the media because of a few bad apples. My hair might be slightly longer, but otherwise I look like most other sixtysomethings. My bikes are not loud, and I don’t pull stupid stunts on the road, but I have had people look at me like I am some kind of criminal when I pull into a gas station to fill up. Actually, I work in a group home for men with traumatic brain injuries.

I was not surprised by the comments Cooke heard from bikers who wondered what is wrong with people who need to be ordered to help out. I am always amazed by news reports after a tornado or some other natural disaster, when reporters gush over how the townspeople came together to help each other out. I am sorry, but it is not supposed to take a natural disaster or some other tragedy for us to be kind and helpful to each other. This is how we are supposed to act all the time. I always stop when I see a bike on the side of the road to see if the rider needs help, and other riders stopped to offer help the two times I have had flat tires.

I think bikers’ problem with rules goes deeper than just a reaction to being told what to do. We have a government that is trying to take all the fun out of living. When I got my license, seat belts were just beginning to appear in cars. Up until then, we stood up in the back seat, sat on the trunk with our legs in the tires.

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Perhaps the Secret Service picked up some bad habits protecting John Edwards back in 2004.

For months, the Obama campaign and its media militia harped on the story that Mitt Romney once put the family dog Seamus in a carrier atop the station wagon for a vacation road trip. New York Times columnist Gail Collins mentioned Seamus in every Romney-related column, and David Axelrod recently tweeted a photo of Obama and Bo riding together in a presidential limo: “How loving owners transport their dogs.” Then Jim Treacher of the website the Daily Caller posted this paragraph from Dreams from My Father, Obama’s first memoir, recalling his Indonesian childhood: “With Lolo [his stepfather] . . . I was introduced to dog meat (tough), snake meat (tougher), and roasted grasshopper (crunchy).” Dreams was written as a postmodern account of racial displacement and resolution, but by 2008 it had become the gospel of Barack Multiculti: born in Hawaii, raised in Indonesia, schooled at Harvard and the Chicago projects, searching for his Kenyan roots . . . The dog treats were a detail of his multifaceted worldliness. How times have changed. The Romney campaign leapt on it: A senior adviser re-tweeted Axelrod’s unctuous tableau with the tag, “In hindsight, a chilling photo.” The blogosphere sprayed one-liners like shrapnel: How does Obama get Bo to roll over? With a rotisserie. Congrats to Romney and Right/Net jokesters for counterpunching. And condolences to the president, who ran as the savior of the world, but has found, after three years–plus of funk and failure, that all his attitudes and empty rhetoric are coming back to bite him.

Montana’s Democratic governor, Brian Schweitzer, in an interview that touched on the Hispanic vote, said that Mitt Romney could not talk about the Mexican origins of his father George because “then he’d have to talk about his family coming from a polygamy commune.” Women, he added, “are not great fans of polygamy. . . . I am not alleging by any stretch that Romney is a polygamist . . . but [and why give up a good smear?] his father was born into [a] polygamy commune.” Miles Park Romney, Mitt’s great-grandfather, went to Mexico, where he had plural wives. But his son Gaskell and grandson George each had one wife, as does Mitt. So the polygamy, of which women are not fond, ended three generations ago. Would women be less fond of Barack Obama, whose father, Barack Obama Sr., and grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama, were both polygamists? In fact women are smart enough to judge candidates on their own accomplishments, which makes them a lot smarter than Governor Schweitzer.

Secret Service agents doing advance work for the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, were holding an after-hours summit of their own when one of them quarreled with a Colombian prostitute about her fee. She complained to the cops (prostitution is legal in parts of Colombia) and the whole affair went public. Consorting with prostitutes compromises security: If prostitution is the oldest profession, honey traps are the oldest ruse; agent-hookers might also filch codes or itineraries. Being caught compromises the entire agency. President Obama and every successor will be less secure because the Secret Service’s aura of sleek, slightly sinister omnicompetence is dimmed. And whatever happened to revulsion, and to human sympathy? Prostitution is a lousy way to make a living. Does the Secret Service have to support it?

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative group that works on state-level reforms, has become the Left’s latest fascination: Call it New Koch. The group has been under assault by left-wing activists, Democratic politicians, and now possibly the IRS, with the result that many noodle-spined business members—Coke, Kraft, and Procter & Gamble among them—have abandoned the organization. This is part of the manufactured controversy over the Trayvon Martin case, which the Left is using as a cudgel against state laws empowering individuals to act in self-defense. It is not clear that these laws even apply in the Martin case—the authors of Florida’s “stand your ground” law have argued that the law does not protect the shooter—but it is a fact that ALEC has been a force, along with the National Rifle Association, in advocating such legislation, which is beneficial when prudently constructed and applied. In late April, left-
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wring activists filed a complaint with the IRS seeking the revocation of ALEC’s tax-exempt status and the imposition of financial penalties. ALEC is an organization that does good work (it is pressing to relieve the good people of Maine of their state income tax), and while Coke and Kraft are under no special obligation to stick their necks out for good works, conservatives should always keep in mind that, contra the Left’s version, big business can be aickle ally.

Senator Richard Lugar

One need not support formal term limits to recognize the existence of informal ones, and the tightening polls in the Indiana Senate Republican primary suggest that voters there may be starting to think Senator Richard Lugar has been in Washington long enough. Lugar’s challenger, Richard Mourdock, likes to describe himself as “capable, competent, and conservative,” and it is an apt description. Mourdock is a popular two-term treasurer in Indiana, and has impressed the grassroots enough to secure endorsements from a number of tea-party groups. Like so many who have seen the light, Mourdock became a conservative in the age of Reagan; he is a successful oil geologist whose growing interest in thinkers such as Milton Friedman led him to run for office. As treasurer, Mourdock has shown himself to be both fiscally prudent and possessed of a certain fighting spirit, most prominently when he sued (unsuccesfully) to recover $6 million the state’s pension funds had lost in the Obama administration’s auto bailouts. Lugar is a decent man who has in the past been more reliable than not on a number of conservative issues. Arlen Specter he is not. But we can do better. Mourdock strikes us as someone who would not cast votes, as Lugar did, to confirm Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, nor co-sponsor the DREAM Act, support the auto bailouts, or oppose the Vitter amendment to limit taxpayer-funded abortion, as Lugar did and does. For these reasons we support him in the Indiana Republican primary. We think he will make a strong candidate and a fine senator. After Lugar’s long career in Washington, Hoosiers deserve new blood, and Lugar deserves a happy retirement and a gold watch. We’d be happy to spring for one.

John Edwards, the Dorian Gray of the Democratic party, is one of the most loathsome characters in American politics, corrupt himself and a source of corruption in others, a preening, moralizing fraud who went so far as to have a staffer claim paternity of the illegitimate child he fathered with a campaign contractor. If being a louse were a crime, John Edwards would hang for it. But he is instead facing a questionable prosecution on campaign-finance grounds, which is odd: The payments that Edwards’s supporters made to his mistress and to the alleged father of her child were not campaign contributions—no campaign money was involved, and no campaign expenses were met. Keeping one’s mistress is not a campaign expense: Even if he had not been seeking higher office, Edwards and his supporters would have wanted to keep her pacified. Edwards and his friends may be guilty of a number of things—tax evasion and fraud are possibilities—but it is a stretch to prosecute him under campaign-finance laws. Because they empower incumbents to set the rules under which they are challenged, such laws are inherently problematic, and prosecutions under them must be handled with great care. John Edwards is a grotesque, but that is no warrant for a capricious prosecution.

After calling for a third party, Jon Huntsman was disinvited from a Republican fundraiser. He said, “This is what they do in China on Party matters if you talk off-script.” China is a one-party dictatorship with a gulag (laogai). If you “talk off-script,” they do worse things to you than withdraw an invitation to a fundraiser. In fact, the CCP doesn’t need fundraisers. But perhaps Huntsman is auditioning to be a blogger at Salon.

Newark mayor Cory Booker insisted that he was just doing “what most neighbors would do” when he rescued one of his constituents from a burning building next door to his home. On the night of April 12, the 6-foot 4-inch, 250-pound former Stanford tight end overruled his security detail’s attempt to restrain him and rushed into a flame-engulfed apartment, where he pulled a woman from her bed and carried her to safety. The mayor received treatment for smoke inhalation and second-degree burns on his hand, but immediately assured his million-plus Twitter followers that his “injuries were relatively minor” and thanked “Det. Alex Rodriguez who helped get all of the people out of the house.” At a press conference the next day he expressed his gratitude to God, and described feeling “terror” rather than “bravery.” Urban politics being what it is, we expect Booker’s next primary opponent to accuse him of putting a woman out on the street.

The irrepressible Vice President Biden described Senator Al Franken (D.F.L., SNL) as “one of the leading legal scholars.” Soon afterwards, Biden’s overworked handlers explained that what the veep really meant was “. . . in the U.S. Senate,” but that seems unlikely, since 55 senators have law degrees and Franken isn’t one of them. In any case, since Franken thinks “judges are nothing like umpires,” one struggles to devise a parallel example of inadequate qualifications: Chuck Schumer as an expert on farming; Arlen Specter as an etiquette adviser; Ted Kennedy as a driving instructor. Then again, Joe Biden is vice president.

We do not know exactly what transpired between George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla. We do know that the incident began when Zimmerman chased after Martin upon finding the 17-year-old “real suspicious,” that Martin was unarmed, and that after a physical altercation Martin wound up with a bullet in his chest—facts that, taken together, could constitute a good reason to put the case before a jury. But in charging Zimmerman with second-degree murder, as opposed to a lesser charge such as manslaughter, the prosecution has overreached, likely in response to the heated public outcry the case has inspired. In Florida, this charge requires “a depraved mind regardless of human life”; the state’s jury instructions interpret this to mean a person acted “from ill will, hatred, spite, or an evil intent.” The prosecution’s affidavit fails to provide evidence that Zimmerman acted out of such a motivation—and in fact, the wound
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The New Age of Anxiety

AXMAGEDDON is coming. This grim prophecy refers to the scheduled termination of a wide array of tax policies at the end of this year. The list is staggering. It includes the expiration of the Bush-era tax cuts, the end of the payroll-tax holiday, and the start of the new healthcare surtax and the Medicare payroll-tax increase. On top of all of that, Congress will likely hit the debt limit again around the end of the year.

While few observers expect Congress to do nothing, uncertainty about taxes and fiscal policy is likely to skyrocket by the end of the year. This heightened uncertainty is cause for significant pessimism about the second half of 2012.

Economists have long known that uncertainty can have large negative effects on economic activity. If a business does not know what its tax rates will be next year, it will have a hard time getting excited about a big expansion.

While uncertainty in principle is likely harmful, there has been very little hard evidence on the matter, until recently. A recent path-breaking paper, by Stanford economists Scott R. Baker and Nicholas Bloom along with University of Chicago economist Steve Davis, fills that gap. The authors compile a unique index of policy uncertainty, which draws on news coverage of uncertainty in policy decisions, the number of federal-tax-code provisions set to expire, and the disagreement among forecasters about economic variables one year in the future. They use this index to estimate the impact of policy uncertainty on the economy, finding massive negative effects.

The nearby chart shows their index of policy uncertainty from 1985 to 2012.

In general, policy uncertainty has been higher on average since the beginning of the millennium than it was in the previous 15 years. As expected, the major spikes include the 9/11 attack, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the onset of the financial crisis. As even a casual observer would expect, uncertainty has become a much bigger problem under President Obama. The most recent and highest increase occurred in August 2011, reflecting the uncertainty surrounding the debt limit, the work of the supercommittee, and the credit-rating downgrade by S&P.

The authors document the negative effect of uncertainty on the economy in their paper. Their results imply that a 112-point rise in their policy-uncertainty index, which occurred between 2006 and 2011, would reduce real GDP by 3.2 percent and employment by 2.3 million jobs. The uncertainty effects would be especially focused on private investment, as business decision-makers wait for clarity before beginning new projects.

The dramatic spike last summer, the authors argue, is likely a key explanation for the slower economic growth that was posted then. That fact is especially chilling as we look ahead. Taxmageddon will put far more policies on the table. The debt limit will be in play, but so will everything else. Even though the uncertainty index has been steadily dropping in the past couple of months, it is all but inevitable that it will increase sharply as the debate surrounding the tax cuts heats up. When it does, uncertainty will likely break the all-time record set last year, which could easily take a percentage point or two off of top-line GDP growth.

Taxmageddon is the result of the extreme shortsightedness of President Obama and the Democrats, who extended current tax policies for only two years back in 2010. The latest research suggests that the economy will suffer severely this year for that shortsightedness.

—KEVIN A. HASSETT

The Catholic bishops released a statement on religious liberty that suggests they are beginning to understand the seriousness of the Obama administration’s threat to it. Commendably, the bishops explain that they seek no “accommodation” on the administration’s command that nearly all employers, including religious universities and hospitals, offer their employees coverage for contraception, sterilization, and abortion drugs. They want this requirement repealed. With admirable clarity, they say they will not obey an unjust law. They will urge bishops and priests to make the case for religious freedom, particularly during two weeks this summer and on the Solemnity of Christ the King. The on the back of his head indicates that Zimmerman may have been losing the fight, and likely acted out of fear. Simple fear does not justify killing in Florida—one must reasonably fear death or serious bodily harm, and must not have been acting illegally when the attack took place—but it does not justify a charge of second-degree murder, either.

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latter date falls after Election Day, however, at which point the bishops’ influence on this issue will be practically nonexistent if Obama has been reelected. We know that many of them fear being accused of a Republican partisanship they surely do not feel. If they are to win this battle—one that even a left-wing cardinal recently said should draw “all the energies the Catholic community can muster”—they will have to get over it.

As gas prices have soared in recent months, toward and in some cases beyond $4 a gallon, the president has resumed his annual Speculation Springtime. And not only does he insist on blaming Wall Street market-makers, he has also made proposals to rein in commodity speculators by increasing margin requirements and devoting more resources to enforcing trading laws. The president has many dubious policies, but this one is among the least defensible. Whatever his other follies—Obamacare, the stimulus, green-energy loans, cap-and-trade—there were economists or scientists he could find to justify them. He has nothing but sophistry in this fight. Oil markets, like other commodities, have become significantly more financialized over the past decade, but even the most liberal economists agree that there is no evidence to suggest that this has led to higher prices or greater volatility. Supply and demand, and expectations of these, as always, determine prices. But only a reckless speculator would expect the president to act on this insight.

Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner is worried that a threatened increase in corporate taxes may “dampen enthusiasm” among investors. He has further expressed concern that businesses need a more predictable tax environment and need to be made to feel that capital is welcome. Unfortunately, Geithner shared these insights in the process of lecturing India’s finance minister, rather than his own boss.

Speaking at the Summit of the Americas in Colombia, President Obama referred to the Falkland Islands as “the Maldives.” He meant to say “Malvinas,” which would have been a sop to the Argentinians, who so call those islands. Britain’s Telegraph said, “Barack Obama made an uncharacteristic error, more akin to those of his predecessor George W Bush.” Three points: 1) Obama’s error was maybe not so uncharacteristic (the “Austrian” language, 57 states, “corpseman,” etc.); 2) Bush, contrary to myth, did not make many errors of that nature; and 3) a U.S. president should watch the “Malvinas” talk anyway, and stand with our ally Britain, whose claim on the Falklands is perfectly legitimate.

Nancy Pelosi and congressional Democrats, frustrated by the fact that the Bill of Rights interferes with their desire to muzzle their political opponents, have proposed a “People’s Rights Amendment” that would effectively repeal the First Amendment. If this amendment were to be enacted, the cardinal rights protected by the First Amendment—free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to petition the government for redress of grievances—would be redefined and reduced to the point of unrecognizability. The amendment would hold that the rights protected by the Constitution are enjoyed only by individuals acting individually; individuals acting in collaboration with others would be stripped of those rights. All political expression more complex than standing on a soapbox in the public square would come under federal control. As would journalism: Thomas Friedman might be protected by the First Amendment, but the New York Times Company, being a corporation, would not. The First Amendment has served Americans well—something that cannot be said of Nancy Pelosi.

The Los Angeles Times in mid-April published photos taken in Afghanistan in 2010 showing U.S. troops posing with the corpses and severed body parts of Taliban suicide bombers. The Times ran the photos over strong objections from Pentagon officials who feared they would be used to incite violence against American soldiers. The Times editor defended the decision as fulfilling the paper’s “obligation to readers to report vigorously and impartially on all aspects of the American mission in Afghanistan.” He also pointed out that the photos had been submitted by a solider concerned that “dysfunction in discipline and a breakdown in leadership [had] compromised the safety of the troops.” But it’s not at all clear how publication of the photos, two years after the incident, helped to inform the public or restore troop discipline any more than a written account would have done. As Defense Secretary Leon Panetta pointed out, “lives have been lost as the result of the publication of similar photos.” In judging this controversy, keep in mind that the Times could have conveyed the information without the sensational photos; what it is defending here is not the public’s right to know but its own right to publicity.

In early April, 49 former NASA scientists and astronauts signed a strongly worded letter to NASA chief Charles Bolden Jr. that deplored the agency’s tendency to ignore empirical evidence when discussing global warming; warned that its “advocacy of an extreme position, prior to a thorough study of the possible overwhelming impact of natural climate drivers, is inappropriate”; and expressed fear that such actions might lead to “damage to the exemplary reputation of NASA, NASA’s current or former scientists and employees, and even the reputation of science itself.” Given that among the signers was Harrison Schmitt—a Harvard geologist, a one-time U.S. senator, and the last man to see the spherical Earth from the moon—one wonders whether Al Gore now regrets claiming in 2008 that “those people” skeptical of catastrophic global warming “are in such a tiny, tiny minority now with their point of view” that “they’re almost like the ones who still believe that the moon landing was staged in a movie lot in Arizona and those who believe the earth is flat.”

Incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy won only 27.1 percent of the vote in France’s presidential election, second to Socialist François Hollande at 28.5 percent. They will meet in a runoff on May 6. Marine Le Pen of the National Front finished third, with 18.2 percent—the highest her right-wing party has ever polled. Communists, Greens, and Trotskyites will back Hollande in the runoff, and backers of centrist François Bayrou will split evenly. National Front
support might yet save Sarkozy, but he will struggle to get it. Party leaders want him to fail so that they become the dominant right-of-center force, while National Front voters want someone who will address issues long ignored by establishment parties throughout Europe—unhappiness with economic dictatorship from Brussels, and alarm over unchecked immigration. Sarkozy channeled populist energy when he won office in 2007, but governed in the name of the status quo. It is hard to run as a rebel twice in a row, especially when you have to rebel against yourself.

The Obama administration’s desire for diplomatic engagement is more ill-suited to the People’s Republic of North Korea than to any other nation on earth. The hermit kingdom’s recently launched missile reached a height of 93 miles during a one-minute flight, before falling apart and splashing into the Yellow Sea. The president’s North Korea policy has suffered roughly the same fate. The launch evinces the naïveté of an administration that considered Kim Jong Un’s ascension an opening for negotiation, in February promising food aid in exchange for a nuclear freeze. Obama has withdrawn that offer, but should also reinstate the financial sanctions on Pyongyang’s privileged class that began to pay dividends under President Bush (before he himself abandoned them). Only hard-nosed policies, not engagement, will ever alter the Communist nation’s sad trajectory.

The Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik is on trial for killing 77 people in Oslo last July. His are the unsmiling face and dead eyes of the true loner. Sometimes he raises the right arm in a Nazi salute, sometimes he shakes a balled fist like a Communist. He portrays himself as hero and victim, saving the country by destroying it. Most of those he shot were teenagers, and they deserved to die, he plainly believes, because their multiculturalism opens the way to betrayal of their country. Allusions to Serbia, to Liberia, and to a supposed English order of Knights Templar reveal an imagination fictionalizing reality into an inner landscape of figments. Norway makes a religion of social democracy, and people in the court have no idea how to respond to Breivik’s view of the world. As though mutually equal, the lawyers shake his hand. He has demanded to be released or hanged, knowing that neither outcome is possible. His maximum prison term is 21 years, which suggests that he is not the only one who has gone mad.

Leaders of the Chinese Communist Party are doing what they can to suppress the scandal of Bo Xilai and his wife Gu Kailai. This pair had privilege and protection that evidently let them do as they liked. Bo’s father had been one of the eight close companions of Mao on the Long March that brought them to power, and Gu’s father was a general who fought the Japanese. In public, Bo presented himself as an orthodox Maoist, and his reward was to become a star member of the Politburo and the party boss in Chongqing. Privately he sent his son to Oxford and Harvard, which provided an education solely in how to be a playboy and drive fancy cars. Real trouble began when Neil Heywood, an upper-crust but probably none-too-scrupulous British businessman, was found dead in a Chongqing hotel. He was 41 and in good health. No autopsy was carried out; the body was immediately cremated. The police chief of Chongqing informed Bo that he suspected Gu of poisoning Hayward; the chief then fled to the nearby American consulate only to be denied asylum. Whether Gu and Hayward were lovers or caught in money-laundering that went wrong is not yet clear. Bo has been sacked from the Politburo and his position in Chongqing. He and his wife and the police chief are all in custody, invisible and unheard.

For anti-Israeli activists participating in a “fly-in” at Ben Gurion Airport, the government of Israel prepared a remarkable letter. “Dear activist,” it began. “We appreciate your choosing to make Israel the object of your humanitarian concern. We know there were many other worthy choices.” For example, they could have gone to Syria, where the dictatorship is slaughtering thousands of citizens. They could have gone to Iran, whose dictatorship is crushing dissent and spreading terrorism throughout the world. They could have gone to Gaza, “where terror organizations commit a double war crime by firing rockets at civilians and hiding behind civilians.” But no: “You chose to protest against Israel, the Middle East’s sole democracy, where women are equal, the press criticizes the government, human rights organizations can operate freely, religious freedom is protected for all and minorities do not live in fear.” So the activists can now add cutting official sarcasm to their list of injustices to be protested.

Thanks to the Middle East Media Research Institute, which monitors Middle Eastern television stations and preserves notable broadcasts on its website, a video from Iranian state television surfaced in April. It showed three left-wing American professors and three American religious-conspiracy theorists discussing Occupy Wall Street on a panel hosted by authorities in Tehran. The group, which had traveled to Iran to discuss the movement for an obviously delighted Iranian government, compared OWS to the Arab Spring and claimed “that [Occupy] Wall Street is fighting the monster of the day,” namely “global Zionism.” Press TV, the Iranian government’s propaganda station, ended the broadcast by noting the “costly wars, labor standards, housing policy, government corruption, income gap, and the undue influence of corporations” that had led to the protests and hoped gleefully that “in the long run it can lead to the collapse of the government.” We are unsure whether to be more or less worried about Iran now that we see where it gets its intelligence about America.

Britain has had many military foes in its long history and, in April, London’s National Army Museum set out to discover whom the British considered the most outstanding among them. The answer, by some margin, was George Washington, who won almost half of both the 8,000 votes cast in the online poll and the 70 votes cast at the museum’s special event. Washington edged out his fellow contenders because he managed something that runners-up Michael Collins, Napoleon
THE WEEK

Bonaparte, Erwin Rommel, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did not—he comprehensively beat the might of the British Empire, and he did so despite facing a significantly larger and better-trained force. Of these five men, Washington most significantly altered the world map. Indeed, historian Stephen Brumwell describes the American Revolutionary War as “the worst defeat for the British Empire ever.” This is most probably true; but it is not for this alone that Washington deserves his approbation: A reeling George III famously said that if Washington returned to his farm after winning independence, “he will be the greatest man in the world.” Two centuries later, it seems his countrymen agree.

A new set of rules governing European hairdressers will ban them from wearing jewelry (deemed unhygienic for some reason), require “ergonomic furniture” in the workplace, and mandate non-slip soles on footwear and the use of elbow-length gloves when shampooing. Moreover, to “prevent emotional collapses,” care-burdened Figaros (who, judging from the regulations, must give more haircuts than a European sovereign-debt issuer) must be given time during the workday for “social dialogue,” though ordering hairdressers to gossip seems as necessary as ordering ballplayers to scratch themselves. While these rules were initially reported as proposed EU regulations, in fact they are something less sweeping, but perhaps more menacing. The rules were agreed upon by EU Coiffure (an industry group representing salon operators) and UNI Europa Hair & Beauty (a union representing employees), and at present they govern only shops whose owners are EU Coiffure members (which excludes many in Britain, for example). But since both groups are official “social partners” of the EU, it seems inevitable that the regulations will eventually acquire the force of law. It is the EU method at work: A few representatives from remote, undemocratic bodies get together and micromanage everyone’s life; lather, rinse, and repeat.

The European Union is not renowned for a commitment to the truth, but its apparatchiks hit a new low in April when they took a break from ignoring various impending catastrophes to announce the creation of a $65 million “European identity” museum. Among the museum’s exhibits will be a memorial to World War II—or rather, as it will be described, the “European Civil War.” Such rechristening is part of the ongoing attempt to foist a single European “identity” and, in turn, a single federal government on a continent that isn’t interested and is wholly unsuited to union. But this—and the small matter of the Pacific theater—aside, “civil war” is an odd characterization of the most global conflict in history. And Europe was hardly unified before its alleged “civil war.” But European elites wish the people to pretend that they are all as one and, what’s more, always have been except for some unfortunate episodes.

A Yankee fan we know calls Boston’s Fenway Park the Joe Biden of stadiums: a cranky eccentric that came to be venerated simply by sticking around long enough. A less biased comparison would be to Milton Friedman, a lonely prophet for many years, whose ideas have since become mainstream. After a 1920s–30s vogue for Brobdingnagian ballpark[s, and a 1960s–70s plague of symmetrical multipurpose stadiums with the personality of Velveeta, the trend today is strongly toward smaller baseball-only fields full of idiosyncrasies and odd angles and hand-operated scoreboards—just like Fenway. Even the faux-pastoral descriptor “Park” has come back into fashion. Through all these ups and downs, Fenway has endured with remarkably little change, and it has just celebrated its 100th birthday with a game against the Yankees (who else?) that ended in a loss (what else?). Fenway Park’s endurance shows that if you stand athwart history long enough, sometimes history comes around to your side.

Critics say contemporary art is becoming a commodity, but can art be a commode? In Martinsburg, W. Va., a planned statue of the city’s founder was canceled for lack of funds, so a local artist responded by topping the vacant pedestal with a toilet (“with the lid up,” an assiduous reporter noted). The purpose, he explained, was to show “how the arts can make Martinsburg a greater place to live, work and visit,” though exactly how a toilet on a platform might contribute to achieving this goal remains unclear. (Admittedly, the location, at the intersection of King and Queen Streets, was the perfect place for a throne.) To be sure, Marcel Duchamp once transformed a urinal into art, but to make that work, you have to be Duchamp—or else live in New York City, whose shock-cringing bourgeoisie has long considered restroom fixtures to be aesthetic objects: A few years ago, art and architecture critics enthused over the new pay toilets in Madison Square Park. In down-to-earth Martinsburg, by contrast, the toilet was swiftly removed, and unimpressed authorities gave the artist a citation for illegal “deposit of garbage, rubbish, junk, etc.” We can think of a few contemporary artists who would risk falling afoul of this ordinance if they ever found themselves in Martinsburg.

Ernest Hemingway, Mad Men, the Nixon White House: A style of post-war macho bluster found its final form in the Watergate tapes. One of the main blusterers was Charles Colson, counsel to the president from 1969 to 1973. “When I complained to Colson,” wrote Nixon in his memoirs, “I felt confident that something would be done. I was rarely disappointed.” After Colson was charged with approving the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg’s office, a friend gave him a copy of Mere Christianity, by C. S. Lewis, and read aloud a passage saying that pride “is the complete anti-God state of mind.” From standing at the right hand of a president, he fell before the King of Kings—who took him, just as He said He would. Colson’s time in jail opened his eyes to the suffering of other convicted criminals, and he devoted himself to Prison Fellowship Ministries, which now has programs in 1,300 prisons nationwide. In Christian theology, election refers to God’s saving grace: “I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit.” Colson won the election of his life. Dead at 80. R.I.P.
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THE WEEK

Rock music and television, even after the swift rise of other genres and media in recent years, remain a massive presence in American culture. Indeed, they sometimes seem joined at the hip, the one serving as the soundtrack of the other. So it’s useful to be reminded, by the passing of broadcasting legend Dick Clark, that there was a time when the two existed but kept a certain distance from each other. With his American Bandstand show, which premiered in 1957, Clark brought rock into the TV-household mainstream. And “mainstream” is the motto: The music genre that prided itself on rebellion was made part of the clean-cut culture of the Fifties. When a lot of material is poured into a mainstream, the character not just of the material, but of the mainstream itself, changes. With his modest mien of boyish innocence, Dick Clark probably never imagined himself a culturally transformational figure, but he does indeed have a serious claim on that title. He joins the recently deceased Don Cornelius—the Soul Train host who did a similar cultural service in mainstreaming soul music—in the choir invisible: an ensemble that performs in, and celebrates, all musical genres. Dead at 82, R.I.P.

Gabriel Tepelea was one of the select intellectuals who saved the honor of his native Romania by setting an example of moral consistency. Between the wars he joined the center-right Peasant party, whose platform was the defense of private property. Freethinking members of such a party could not survive the rule after 1945 of local Communists and the Red Army of occupation. Tepelea was one of hundreds of thousands arrested. He survived six years in the gulag. An academic in the Ceauşescu era, he published a score of books that kept alive Romanian culture. After the fall of Communism, the wheel came full circle when he became deputy leader of the revived Peasant party and a parliamentarian for ten years. At the age of 95, he has died. R.I.P.

POLITICS

Rise Above

HILARY ROSEN, a Democratic lobbyist and talking head, complained about Mitt Romney’s comment that his wife tells him the top election issue for the women who talk to her is the economy. Ann Romney, Rosen said, “has actually never worked a day in her life.” This attack on the candidate’s spouse and on housewives generally earned rebukes from Obama associates and, finally, a half-hearted apology from Rosen herself. The administration’s storyline of a Republican “war on women” had to be dropped, at least temporarily. Mrs. Romney aptly called Rosen’s comment a “gift” to her husband’s campaign.

But some gifts are valuable only if they are correctly used. To win a series of tactical victories in controversies like this one could still amount to a strategic loss. The Obama campaign cannot run on the president’s record, since his major legislative achievements are unpopular. It cannot run on the state of the country, which the public considers deeply unsatisfactory. It cannot win a choice-of-visions campaign because most people prefer a smaller government to a bigger one. We can therefore expect repeated attempts to distract the electorate from the fundamental questions before it: The war on women. How Romney transported his dog in 1983. His tax returns.

Romney would be doing a triple disservice to the country if he allowed the campaign to proceed on these lines. First, because the country deserves a more serious discussion of the stakes of the election. Second, because this sort of campaign would make it more likely that the worse alternative prevailed. Third, because an electoral victory achieved on these terms would reduce President Romney’s ability to make accomplishments on the scale the country requires.

The alternative campaign strategy is to stick to the basics: Obama’s policies are not working; they will not work, because Obama misunderstands the limits of government and the genius of our country; and there is a better way. On that last point, Romney can be more specific than Obama was about his agenda in 2008 without getting bogged down in details. To some extent, Romney already has offered such specifics and begun to draw the appropriate contrast.

Obama’s economic agenda consists of raising taxes, particularly on investment, while allowing spending on entitlements to grow so much faster that debt levels rise with no end in sight. The Romney alternative is to rein in the growth of entitlements to keep taxes at their historical levels, and to reform the tax code so that revenues can be raised at the lowest possible cost to the economy. Obama would direct subsidies to companies and industries he considers promising. Romney should reject that policy as a certain path to corruption and failure, and instead allow the market to identify tomorrow’s rising economic sectors within the context of an impartial rule of law that only government can provide. Obama would dramatically expand the federal government’s management of health care in the illusory hope of finding efficiencies. The Romney alternative should be to remove obstacles in the way of small businesses and individuals who seek health insurance.

Reporters recently overheard Romney telling some donors about some policies he was considering, including shutting down the Department of Housing and Urban Development and eliminating the tax breaks for state and local taxes and for mortgages on second homes. Important steps both, but footnotes to what a presidential campaign should be about. Romney needs to take the campaign to a higher level, so that the public may start to see him as more presidential than our current president.
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Ask Me about Your Volt

Our man takes a test drive

BY DANIEL FOSTER

It’s a boxy, snub-nosed little bastard, with roughly the rear visibility of a Mercury space capsule. But Chevrolet’s Volt is plenty slick, in its way.

The one I’ve just strapped to my back in New York City is Silver Ice Metallic with four leather-appointed bucket seats and a pair of seven-inch LCD displays on a dash arrayed with twoscore buttons and dials by which one can access the onboard DVD player, the satellite radio, the built-in nav, and the “Driver Information Center.” This last gives you a real-time graphic representation of the distribution of operating power among the Volt’s 288 lithium-ion battery cells, its electrohydraulic regenerative brakes, and the geologic pesto of processed Paleozoic carrion that folks in the flyover states call “gasoline.”

Those regenerative brakes, which are augmented with good old-fashioned “Oh, %&!@!” anti-lock discs, are spongy and take some getting used to. The blind spots are more like blind blotches. And the driver’s seat accommodates a 6’2″ buffet enthusiast like me, actually.


At this point the question naturally arises: How did I, a lowly scrivener for a right-wing rag, possessed of neither the world-saving messianic impulse nor the liquidity to meet the Volt’s $41,000 MSRP, come to be in possession of this space-age automobile? The short answer is that I did what everybody in this country does when he needs to get something done: I called a lobbyist. This after I had despaired of renting or otherwise temporarily acquiring a Volt through the usual channels, having gone so far as to join a large New York car-sharing service that boasted of its “green fleet,” only to find out after a series of tedious phone calls that the sole Volt in said fleet had been decommissioned after GM’s January 2012 recall of all 8,000 of its production vehicles. (The recall concerned a small number of battery fires. For the record, my Volt never did combust.)

I had better luck with the D.C. rep for a national auto-dealers’ association, who in turn put me in touch with a PR flack from General Motors whose job it is to arrange multi-day test drives for people like me. Well, not people exactly like me, actually. Friendly fellows both (all lobbyists are), the dealer and GM rep were forthright enough to share their concerns with the name over my byline, and each gently interrogated me on the nature of the piece I proposed to write. I aimed for an even-handed review, I told them. Based on what I’d read, the Volt sounded like an impressive piece of technology and a fun drive. But I was no fan of the government subsidies, direct (a $7,500 tax credit to every buyer) or indirect (by one broad estimate, some $250,000 per vehicle in public money spent getting the Volt to market). And I was dubious that the Volt constituted a practical option for the American car buyer.

They bought it. And so I was delivered a low-mileage, immaculately clean Volt for a long weekend trip from New York to D.C., where I’d kill two birds by doing some work at NR’s Capitol Hill offices. And as I headed south by southwest, out of the city and onto I-95, I figured that my first guess was more or less accurate. The Volt is an impressive piece of technology and a lot of fun to drive—from the small pleasure of being in stop-and-go traffic and seeing your miles-to-empty creeping upward as the generators in the brakes trap marginal quantities of kinetic energy, to the considerably larger pleasure of being stopped next to a smoothie-drinking academic in an older, less-efficient Prius hybrid and giving him an ever so slight shake of your head from the towering heights of your environmental superiority, as if to ask, “How do you sleep at night?”

But in other ways the Volt was a bit of a disappointment. Start with the name. Rather than a hybrid, the Volt is marketed as an “extended-range electric car.” That’s because, unlike the Priuses of the world, which use electricity as an auxiliary in low-demand driving conditions and to ease the burden on the internal-combustion engine, which, in fact, does virtually all of the work of powering the drivetrain, the Volt has a 1.4-liter gas engine that acts as a generator for the large electric motor that actually turns the wheels. This engineering quirk might matter during the 42 miles, on average, of pure electric driving you get on a full plug-in charge (which can take anywhere from 4 to 10 hours, depending on whether you use the 120-volt adapter, which is included, or a 240-volt upgrade, which is available). But since I ended up using the 9.3-gallon gas tank for roughly 90 percent of my trip, it makes the Volt the first semantically distinct I’ve ever driven.

See, I had initially planned to go electric for the entire endeavor. That was, as it were, a non-starter. As Americans, we’re spoiled in our ability to crisscross the country at will, thanks not only to the arteries and veins and capillaries of the interstate highway system but also to the ubiquity of filling stations. By contrast, planning a 300-mile trip in an electric car is a logistic feat, and like Rommel...
pushing east across Libya into British-held Egypt, you have to take care not to outrun your supply lines. This means finding a series of commercial charging stations roughly 30 miles apart for as many as ten charges. Before I ever hit the road I realized that not only would this operation be onerous and time-consuming, it would be nigh impossible, owing to desert stretches of the New Jersey and Delaware turnpikes unenlightened about the requirements of green locomotion. The alternative—using the onboard 120-volt plug and siphoning power from whatever regular-old-three-prong outlets I could find—would have required even greater chunks of time, along with a sleeping bag, an extension cord, and a cultivated taste for rest-stop food.

Fine then. The hydrocarbon ride on 95 was smooth enough, and the nearly 40 mpg I got on the highway was nothing to sneeze at. Save the electric cruising for the city, right? Indeed, Google lists addresses for a dozen-odd charging stations inside the District. A brief recounting of the four I visited:

First there was one alleged, in an enthusiastic press release, to reside in a parking garage on the campus of my alma mater, George Washington University. I arrived to find the garage freshly razed.

Then there was the one whose listed address placed it somewhere near the dumpster of a wine shop along a stretch of Massachusetts Avenue near the Capitol. I crisscrossed that block so many times I’m fairly sure I now have a DHS dossier.

Then there was the garage at Union Station, whose multiple levels of steep grades and capricious speed bumps the Volt’s skid plate heartily braved (old joke—Q: What can a rental car drive over? A: Anything). After a circumnavigation turned up nothing, I found an attendant and asked him if I had the right place. He scratched his head and made two phone calls, and another attendant appeared who led me to a darkened lower level where cones were moved, gates were manually opened, and I was directed to a lonely charge point near the elevator. Out of order, I jest you not.

At last, on the corner of 14th and U Streets, in the heart of gentrifying Northwest, where all of heap D.C. goes on Saturday nights when Democrats are in the White House, I found a fully functional charge point, between a bus stop and a surveillance camera, on a curb outside a D.C. municipal building whose architecture and denizens had seen better days. I eased the car up and noticed that the pair of traffic signs bracketing the space denoted that 24 hours a day, seven days a week, this space was for people like me—people juicing their status symbols—and that all others were subject to tow. But I barely had a moment to bask once more in my specialness before I realized that this particular transformer accepted only “contactless” credit cards—the kind read by tapping them lightly against a sensor, the kind replacing the cumbersome and barbaric swipe technology that still prevails in the Third World. Crestfallen, I looked down at the retrograde array of plastic in my wallet and one by one feebly massaged my cards across the sensor, hoping it would be able to detect some faint heartbeat of Progress in these artifacts of 2005.

At that moment I stood with the full faith and credit of a duly credentialed representative of NATIONAL REVIEW magazine and was completely helpless. I could have been holding 30 million dollar-denominated bearer bonds, a brick of highly enriched uranium, or a Honus Wagner rookie card and I would not have been able to pay or barter my way to a lousy kilowatt-hour.

Eventually I located an 800 number for the company that operates the machines, and a lovely South Asian woman took my credit-card information and unlocked the station remotely. I plugged in, met a friend for dinner, and returned about three hours later to a $6 bill and 22 miles’ worth of premium electrons (commercial chargers cost more; home charging is purported to cost about $1.50 a day).

But, in a world where free markets have made us, to our collective benefit, gluttons of convenience, there is something egregious about having to plan an entire evening around securing your means of conveyance. It recalls all the annoyances that have come in the form of inferior “green” substitutes for products that worked just fine—it’s the compact fluorescent light bulb, the low-flow toilet bowl of the Great American Commute.

This green disgruntlement crystallized for me during the ride home, at a Maryland gas station where I had stopped to use the facilities and stood rubbing my wet hands under the lukewarm sigh of the electric dryer. Above the machine I noticed the following sign:

We encourage the use of our high efficiency electric hand dryers as alternatives to disposable paper towels. By doing so, we reduce our carbon footprint and our

This book is an analysis of a specific section in the book, The Naked Communist by W. Cleon Skousen, published in 1958. The section to be evaluated is entitled, “Current Communist Goals.” From his FBI background, Skousen lists what he considered to be the top 45 Goals of the Communists, as of 1958. The progress and status of each of these Goals as of 2012 is documented.

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THE NAKED COMMUNIST – REVISITED

James G. Bowers, Sc.D.

FOREWORD by Dr. David A. Noebel

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Let Detroit Fail
The case against bailing out our worst city

BY KEVIN D. WILLIAMSON

A n industrial juggernaut in the days of Packard and Hudson, Detroit today is home to a new and uniquely 21st-century industry: the art of urban ruin. Detroit has become a mecca for photographers drawn to its blight. Grand theaters molder and collapse in increments, brick by brick. Vast interiors abandoned by humans collect debris and are repopulated by wildlife, with packs of feral dogs so large and so vicious that the U.S. Postal Service has considered ceasing delivery in some parts of Detroit. Trees take root in the most unlikely of places, sprouting from the roofs of abandoned buildings. It is a rich vein for visiting visual artists. Among the most successful of them are the duo of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, who were commissioned by Time magazine to document the city’s decline in a series of haunting and sometimes beautiful photographs. Their work was admired at the Cinéma du Panthéon in Paris and the Kühlhaus in Berlin, reviewed by all the right critics, and collected into a bestselling book, The Ruins of Detroit. Writing in the Guardian, Brian Dillon complained that the art of post-apocalyptic Detroit, while appealing, “seems oddly detached from analyses of the political forces that brought the city to its present sorry pass.”

On Mr. Dillon’s point, the sobering fact is that Detroit has been utterly destroyed by utterly conventional politics common to most U.S. cities but by no means limited to urban government: The politics of Detroit consist of cultivating and exploiting public dependency in order to justify massive wealth transfers from taxpayers to the political class, its dependents, and its favorites in the private sector. In Detroit, the aggrandizement of the public sector is fortified by a very nasty strain of racial resentment. Which is to say, the politics of Detroit are a lot like the politics of the Obama administration with a good head start and no Ivy League compunction about putting identity politics front and center. With apologies to Lord Keynes: In the long run, we are all Detroit.

Detroit has just gone through one of its periodic episodes of promising to save itself. Michigan’s Republican governor, Rick Snyder, has announced a “financial-stability agreement” by which a nine-member advisory board will be entrusted with seeing to it that the City of Detroit amends its wicked ways. If you have ever known a junkie, you know how this story ends: Promises are made, and sometimes even kept for a while, but sooner or later the needle goes back into the arm, because the seldom-spoken truth is that a junkie wants to be a junkie. And Detroit wants to be Detroit.

Governor Snyder’s toothless agreement is not going to save Detroit from itself, and the governor himself doesn’t even sound particularly convinced of its efficacy. Challenged by a critic about what would happen if the city should fail to live up to its obligations under the agreement, the strongest stuff Governor Snyder could muster was: “The goal is to have things work.” It always is.

Other Michigan cities have been through similar fiscal traumas, and the state has had some success in turning their fortunes around with the appointment of emergency managers, who function in much the same way that special masters function in complex corporate-bankruptcy proceedings: They can hire and fire, make budgetary decisions by decree, and behave in a generally masterful fashion until the crisis subsides—i.e., they are empowered to act like the Roman officials from whose office we get the word “dictator.”

Detroit is not getting a dictator. Instead, Detroit will get three new highly paid city executives—a chief financial officer, a chief operating officer, and a program-management director—all of whom will report to the mayor, Dave Bing, a seven-time NBA all-star and the latest in a long line of Detroit mayors plainly unequal to the task of governing the city. Detroit will get a state bailout as well, an injection of $137 million to tide the city over until the end of the fiscal year, at which point the dance will be begun again from the bow. But Detroit’s ability to borrow on its own account is more or less maxed out; it is getting that $137 million in financing only because the State of Michigan is selling the bonds in its own name, backed by its own credit. But the ability of the State of Michigan to borrow on Detroit’s behalf is not unlimited: The state’s credit rating

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And all of a sudden I wanted to buy a ’65 Impala with monster-truck wheels that runs on CFCs and American exceptionalism.

It’s moments like this that make you forget that the Volt is a neato car. You remember that it is also a talking point, a floundering mascot of a political world-view according to which markets can be bribed and cajoled into making premature and uneconomic decisions, innovation can be centrally planned, and the future runs on the good intentions of the present’s policy-making class. Maybe that’s why GM had to suspend Volt production in March, and temporarily lay off 1,300 workers, to “align . . . production with demand.” Or why the president of the United States stooped to telling the United Auto Workers that he’ll temporarily lay off 1,300 workers, to “align production with demand.” Or why the president of the United States stooped to telling the United Auto Workers that he’ll temporarily lay off 1,300 workers, to “align production with demand.”

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already is subprime, and one of Governor Snyder’s top priorities is to get the state back to AAA status. That isn’t going to happen if Detroit continues to be a fiscal millstone around the state’s neck. The cost of letting Detroit fail would be high, but the cost of trying to save it may prove higher, largely because Detroit will resist being saved.

At some point, Governor Snyder and the people of Michigan will have to deal with reality: Detroit’s political leadership is a parasite that has outgrown its host. People are leaving Detroit as quickly as they can: Well more than 200,000 have left the city since 2000, and more than 1.5 million since 1960. Which is to say, Detroit’s refugees since 2000 could form a city bigger than Providence, Salt Lake City, or Des Moines. Those who have fled since the city’s peak could form a municipality bigger than any U.S. city except New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, or Philadelphia. But government spending in absolute terms long continued to rise; in per capita terms, it rises still, and the city spends far more per capita than the U.S. average. Detroit’s public sector has responded to every fiscal crisis by raising tax rates and by instituting new taxes, as often as not enabled by Republicans in Lansing. But new taxes and higher rates cannot offset the effects of the city’s rapid and steady depopulation—in fact, surveys suggest that they have hastened it—with the result that revenues declined by more than $100 million between 2007 and 2011. Income-tax revenue dropped by 18 percent, utility-tax revenue by 17 percent, property-tax revenue by 2.3 percent. Seeking a quick fix to its revenue problems, Detroit chartered several casino-gambling operations, only to see taxes from them begin to decline (by 1.5 percent last year) after a period of early growth.

Detroit, once the wealthiest city in the United States by per capita income, is today the second-poorest major U.S. city. Like many cities, Detroit has promised very generous pensions to its public-sector workers but set aside very little money to fund them, meaning that in 2011 the city had to put more than $70 million into the pension fund to keep making payments. Government is Detroit’s largest single employer, and spending on government remains very high. What Detroit is getting for all that spending is unclear: It has some of the worst schools, roads, sidewalks, and local services of any city in the country. Last year, its murder rate was up 10 percent. Very few people with options are going to stick around to endure both the highest tax rate in the state and one of the highest murder rates in the country—let alone highly skilled, highly productive workers, investors, and entrepreneurs. Detroit is driving away the people it needs to survive. Who is left?

Who is left includes a fair number of disciples of the late mayor Coleman Young, a pioneer in racist politics who, when he wasn’t impersonating Newt Gingrich (“We need to dream big dreams, propose grandiose means!”), prefiguring the Fox News investment strategy (“I don’t know nothing about no goddamned Kruggers!”), or meeting the press in Hawaii (“Aloha, motherf**kers!”), helped create the myth of Detroit as a black-power success story. That he managed to create that myth while presiding over one of the roughest and steepest runs in Detroit’s slide into the abyss says either something impressive about his political insights or something poor about those of Detroit’s residents, but in any case Detroit is now a polity in which a paramount political concern is keeping power in black hands, even at the expense of enduring everything that has happened to Detroit already and everything that is going to happen to Detroit in the coming years. That attitude makes itself felt in the strangest places:Reacting to a good-news story that some young professionals were returning to the city, Detroit went into a racial conniption about “gentrification.” Writing in Time, progressive Darrell Dawes approvingly quoted Mayor Young’s dictum that “white people find it extremely hard to live in an environment they don’t control,” and considered the possibility that the trend would mean that “hard-fought black political power in Detroit is in jeopardy.” Citizens at a public meeting on the subject complained that a panel of “people of color” was moderated by “a beady white guy” and spoke bitterly of “white entitlement.” But Detroit is in fact undergoing degentrification: In spite of a few trendy lofts downtown, the city is getting poorer as the black middle class and the Hispanic middle class follow the white middle class out—185,000 blacks have left Detroit since 2000.

But Detroit’s race-poisoned politics are not going to change. When Governor Snyder considered imposing an emergency manager on Detroit, the ensuing outrage focused relatively little on economics and a great deal on race. There was talk of a “takeover” by the “white establishment.” One Detroiter demanded: “Can some black people have some courage to face the white man off?” An influential community organizer, Minister Malik Shabazz, characterized the proposal as “white-on-black crime” and “white supremacy.” His solution? “Before you can take over our city, we will burn it down.” It bears noting that this declaration was made, to cheers, at a city-council meeting. Pace Minister Shabazz, Detroit already is burning, from the inside out. Any exterior fire would merely provide confirmation of the interior rot. The inescapable problem is that you cannot save a city that does not want to be saved. A city whose people regard economic development as a plague because it brings in young white people and Starbucks is a city that cannot be developed economically. Detroit has no money. Governor Snyder has a little, but his credit is not infinite. The real choice is between imposing an emergency manager or stepping back and letting Detroit descend into formal insolvency. Minister Shabazz and his acolytes are as likely to burn down Detroit under either scenario, so the remaining calculation is only economic, which argues against bailing out America’s worst city.
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Aren’t They Cute?

America and some special criminals

BY JAY NORDLINGER

According to news reports, George Wright is entertaining book and movie deals. He’s a star, practically—yet another glam criminal out of reach of the law. Safe abroad, smirking at justice, holding forth on the inequalities of America. Wright and his comrades often spelled this word with a “k.” Sometimes three of them.

He has an exciting story to tell, it’s true. It has been all too exciting for those on the wrong end of his guns. In 1962, the day after Thanksgiving, he and some buddies went on a crime spree. This was at home in New Jersey. One of the people they robbed was Walter Patterson, a gas-station owner. With panty hose shoved over their faces, they shot him dead. Off they went with $70.

Patterson, 42 years old, was a member of what someone would call the Greatest Generation. He came home from the war with a Bronze Star, earned when he drove his truck into a hail of German bullets, in order to save some men. Patterson survived the Nazis, but not the two-bit thugs who came to his gas station.

George Wright, apprehended, was sentenced to 15 to 30 years. He served seven of them. In 1970, he escaped from his minimum-security prison, which was nothing but a dairy farm, really. He and a buddy hot-wired the warden’s car. They got to Detroit, where they joined the “Black Liberation Army.”

In 1972, they and three others hijacked a plane. Wright, dressed as a priest, pulled a gun from a hollowed-out Bible and held it to a stewardess’s throat. The hijackers demanded a million-dollar ransom. Wright said, “If that money’s not here by 2 o’clock, I’m going to start throwing a dead body out the door every minute.” The U.S. government paid.

The gang forced the plane to Algeria, which was a haven for self-styled revolutionaries (in reality, robbers, rapists, and murderers who had learned a little black-power talk). When they landed, something funny happened: The Algerians confiscated the money. The gang was ticked. In a statement, they said, “We are shocked and bewildered to be branded as criminals for our revolutionary activities.”

After a sojourn in their new “homeland,” as they called it, they moved to another homeland: France. Eventually, they were arrested by French authorities—all but Wright, who escaped down into Portugal. From there, he went to Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony in West Africa. It was run by people much like Wright, and they were happy to give him a new identity: José Luis Jorge dos Santos. After acquiring a wife and two children, he went back to Portugal, to live a pleasant life by the sea.

U.S. law did not quite forget him. They tracked him down last September—49 years after the murder of Patterson, 41 years after Wright’s prison escape, and 39 years after the hijacking. Wright commented, “Knowing the Americans, I always feared that they had their antennas up.” He need not have feared too much: The Portuguese refused to extradite him. The case is now regarded as closed. Wright, who is 69, said, “I want to relax now, and spend time with my family and friends.”

Yes, don’t we all?

Walter Patterson, too, had a family: a wife and two daughters. His wife died a year and three months after his murder, of a heart condition. When Wright was finally tracked down, Patterson’s daughter Ann said, “He needs to come back here and pay his debt to society.” She was 14 when her father was murdered. Wright “has had a good life for the past 40 years,” she said, “but he took away about half of my father’s life.”

Wright and his fellow hijackers have been celebrated in at least two documentary films. These films portray them as struggling against oppression, racism, and imperialism. They were virtually civil-rights heroes, you see—maybe a little overzealous. Maybe too impatient. Wright recently said that he hijacked the plane “to support the hopes of black people.” One of the films borrows a title from James Baldwin: “Nobody Knows My Name.”

The Black Liberation Army was part of a “family” of groups—that’s what the criminal radicals called themselves, “The Family.” (Rather bourgeois, when you think about it.) The groups included the Weather Underground, the Red Guerrilla Resistance, the Republic of New Afrika, and the May 19th Communist Organization. Why May 19th? The birthday of Malcolm X and, as a bonus, Ho Chi Minh. Now and then, Family members indulged in what they called “non-political murder”—the offing of a prostitute, for example. But mainly they liked to kill policemen (“pigs”), which, for them, was “political murder,” or “revolution.”

Several of the cops they killed were black, including two men named Waverly: Waverly Jones and Waverly Brown. The first belonged to the NYPD, the second to the force in Nyack, N.Y. Brown was an actual civil-rights pioneer: the first black man to join that force.

Like George Wright, many of the killers fled abroad, and mainly they fled to Cuba—Castro was happy to receive them and show them off. Something like 70 American fugitives are in Cuba. One of them is Charlie Hill, who, after killing a cop in New Mexico, hijacked a plane. But probably the most famous of them is Joanne Chesimard, a.k.a. Assata Shakur. She killed her cop in 1973. (His name was Werner Foerster; Hill’s was Robert Rosenbloom.) In 1979, she escaped from prison, whereupon she found her way to Castro.

Oh, the press she enjoys! In 1997, Essence magazine published an interview with her: “Prisoner in Paradise.” (“Paradise” would be totalitarian Cuba.) She said things like “I represent someone who has dedicated her life to the liberation of my people.” Two years later, the New York Times published an article by a Princeton theologian, defending her. He called her an “activist”—which is one way of putting it. He also said she was “vibrant” and “articulate,” which no doubt she is. More vibrant and articulate than a dead cop.

She has been the subject of many songs, poems, and other tributes. One of them is by a rapper called Common: “A Song for Assata.” One line goes, “All this sh** so we could be free, so dig it, y’all.” A year ago, Common was invited to perform in an “Evening of Poetry” at the White House. Law-enforcement associations and other squares objected, but they were easily brushed off. In the White House, President Obama made sure to give Common a big hug.

Undeniably, the radical fugitives make good copy. It’s hard for journalists to resist. How it works is this: You go to Tanzania, let’s say, and interview Pete O’Neal. You paint a picture of him in the old days: “He glazed with purpose: End racism and class inequality, fast.” You describe his flight and wanderings: “Sweden…Algeria…”
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Tanzania, whose socialist government welcomed left-wing militants.” You note that he’s gray and paunchy now, and gentler. But then you quote him defiant: “They will never convince me in my life that what I was doing wasn’t right.”

Undeniable, too, is that we Americans have always romanticized criminals. We sing of Bonnie & Clyde, Jesse James, Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid. Speaking of “Kids”: André Previn composed a song cycle about Billy the Kid, in 1994. The George Wrights and Assata Shakurs are particularly ripe for romanticization, given our fraught relationship with race. But, as William Rosenau writes, “Historical amnesia about groups like the BLA [Black Liberation Army] is unfortunate.” Rosenau is a scholar, and writes with fine scholarly understatement.

Few Americans knew or cared about President Clinton’s granting of clemency to Susan Rosenberg and Linda Sue Evans, in the very last hours of his presidency. But his actions shocked and sickened people in law enforcement, and people who remember the Weather Underground, accurately: the bombings, the murders—the plan to wipe out NCOs as they danced with their dates at Fort Dix.

Why is it that so many liberals are so tender toward Rosenberg, Evans, et al.? Why do these terrorists, who are generally unrepentant, receive such sympathetic treatment from the Times, The New Yorker, 60 Minutes, etc.? Is it because liberals, some of them, “hold their manhoods cheap” for not being part of the “struggle” themselves? Do they feel guilt over “preserving their viability within the system” (to paraphrase Clinton)? Do they regard The Family as “liberals in a hurry”? Rosa Parkses with itchy fingers?

Discussion of Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn was essentially out of bounds during the 2008 presidential campaign. Question Obama’s friendship with them, and you were slammed as uncouth, at best. Ayers and Dohrn are considered almost quaint figures now—living mementos of a colorful past, of “crazy times.” Lincoln Diaz-Balart, the Cuban-American politician, has said he doesn’t know how Castro can seem cute after decades of torturing people. To many, Ayers and Dohrn seem cute, too.

Ayers once summed up his situation to David Horowitz in a memorable way: “Guilty as hell, free as a bird—America is a great country.”

It is, yes. But not because of the Weather Underground or the Black Liberation Army. More because of people such as their victims. Who are those victims, by the way, those dead? Talk about Nobody Knows My Name! Plenty of people know the names of their murderers. Often, those murderers get two names: George Wright and José Luis Jorge dos Santos; Joanne Chesimard and Assata Shakur; Wesley Cook and Mumia Abu-Jamal; H. Rap Brown and Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin; Don ald Weems and Kawasi Balagoon. Their victims aren’t celebrated in films and songs. Their names aren’t known at all, except to those who loved them.

Here is a partial list of those names: Waverly Brown, Patrick Curran, Daniel Faulkner, Werner Foerster, Gregory Foster, Robert Fromhold, James Green, Waverly Jones, Joseph V. Kelly, Ricky Kinchen, Rocco Laurie, Edward O’Grady, Peter Paige, Walter Patterson, Joseph Piagentini, Robert Rosenbloom, Sidney Thompson, Frank Von Collin, John Victor Young . . .

I magine that a U.S. president is considering his options vis-à-vis a rapidly developing Iranian nuclear-weapons program. First, a science adviser comes into the room and predicts that if the Iranians take the following quantity of fissile material and compress it into a sphere of the following size under the following conditions, then it will cause an explosion large enough to destroy a major city. Next, a historian comes into the room and predicts that if external attempts are made to thwart Iranian nuclear ambitions, then a popular uprising will sooner or later ensue and force changes in government until Iran has achieved nuclear capability.

The president would be unwise to begin debating the findings of nuclear physics with his science adviser. Conversely, the president would be unwise not to begin a debate with the historian. This would likely include having several historians present different perspectives, querying them on their logic and evidence, consulting with non-historians who might have useful perspectives, engaging in introspection about human motivations, considering prior life experience, and so on.

Next, an economist walks into the room. She predicts that if the CIA were to successfully execute an Iranian currency-counterfeiting scheme designed to create additional inflation in Iran for the next five years, then the change in Iranian employment would be approximately X. Is this more like the historian’s prediction or the physicist’s prediction?

Superficially, she might sound more like the physicist. She would use lots of empirical data, equations, and technical language. But many issues would remain outside the grasp of this analysis. How would consumer psychology in Iran be altered by the scheme, and how would this

Mr. Manzi’s Uncontrolled: The Surprising Payoff of Trial-and-Error for Business, Politics, and Society goes on sale May 1.
In previous *hasbarah* (educating and clarifying) messages, we made clear what a tremendous asset for our country Israel is. We gave many examples of its contribution to American safety in that important area of the world. But there is much more.

**What are the facts?**

**Turbmoil in the Middle East.** There is upheaval in the Middle East. Governments shift, and the future of this vital area is up in the air. In those dire circumstances, it is a tremendous comfort to our country that Israel, a beacon of Western values, is its stalwart and unshakable ally.

**Unreliable “allies.”** Egypt, a long-term “ally” of our country, is the beneficiary of billions of dollars of American aid. Its dictator, Hosni Mubarak has been dethroned. As of now, it is unclear who and what will be Egypt’s new government. It is widely assumed, however, that it may be the Muslim Brotherhood. Far from being a religious organization, as its name would imply, it is dominated by fanatical radicals, ardent antagonists of the West, obsessed anti-Semites, and sworn enemies of the State of Israel. If the Muslim Brotherhood would indeed come to power, a bloody war, more violent than anything that has come before, is likely to ensue.

Saudi Arabia, a tyrannical kingdom, is another important “ally” of the U.S. It is the most important source of petroleum, the lifeblood of the industrial world. It is, however, totally unreliable and hostile to all the values for which the United States stands. The precedent of Iran cannot fail to be on the minds of our government. The Shah of Iran was a staunch ally of the U.S. We lavished billions of dollars and huge quantities of our most advanced weapons on him. But, virtually from one day to the next, the mullahs and the ayatollahs – fanatical enemies of our country, of Israel, and of anything Western – came to power. Instead of friends and allies, Iran’s theocratic government became the most virulent enemy of the United States. Could something like that happen in Saudi Arabia? It is not at all unlikely!

Other U.S. allies in the region – Jordan, the “new” Iraq, and the Gulf emirates – are even weaker and less reliable reeds to lean on. Libya, which once, under King Idris, hosted the Wheeler Air Base, became an enemy of the U.S. under the late, loathsome Khaddafi – and probably still is. Turkey, once a strong ally, has cast its lot with Iran.

**A stalwart partner.** Israel, in contrast, presents a totally different picture. Israel’s reliability, capability, credibility and stability, are enormous and irreplaceable assets for our country. Many prominent military people and elected representatives have recognized this. Gen. John Keegan, a former chief of U.S. Air Force Intelligence, determined that Israel’s contribution to U.S. Intelligence was “equal to five CIA’s.” Senator Daniel Inouye, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said that “The intelligence received from Israel exceeds the intelligence received from all NATO countries combined. The huge quantities of Soviet military hardware that were transferred by Israel to the USA tilted the global balance of power in favor of our country.”

In 1981, Israel bombed Iraq’s nuclear reactor. While at first condemned by virtually the whole world – sad to say, including the United States – it saved our country a nuclear confrontation with Iraq. At the present time, US soldiers in Iraq and in Afghanistan benefit from Israel’s experience in combating Improvised Explosive Devices, car bombs and suicide bombers. Israel is the most advanced battle-tested laboratory for U.S. military systems. The F-16 jet fighter, for instance, includes over 600 Israeli-designed modifications, which saved billions of dollars and years of research and development.

But there is more: Israel effectively secures NATO’s southeastern flank. Its superb harbors, its outstanding military installations, the air- and sea-lift capabilities, and the trained manpower to maintain sophisticated equipment are readily at hand in Israel.

Israel does receive substantial benefits from the United States – a yearly contribution of $3 billion – all of it in military assistance, no economic assistance at all. The majority of this contribution must be spent in the US, generating thousands of jobs in our defense industries.

Israel is indeed America’s unsinkable aircraft carrier. If it were not for Israel, thousands of American troops would have to be stationed in the Middle East, at a cost of billions of dollars a year. In contrast to the unreliable friendship of Muslim countries, the friendship and support of Israel are unshakable because they are based on shared values, love of peace and democracy. What a comfort for our country to have stalwart and completely reliable Israel in its corner, especially at a time when in this strategic area turmoil, upheaval and revolution are the order of the day. Yes, Israel is indeed America’s most steadfast friend, a most important strategic asset and most reliable ally.

**“What a comfort for our country to have stalwart and completely reliable Israel in its corner...”**

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translate into overall demand changes? Would the economy respond to this problem over time by shifting resources to new sectors, and if so, what innovations would this create? How would inflation in Iran affect its foreign policy and in turn the policies of other nations, and how would these changes affect the Iranian economy? And so on, ad infinitum.

How would the economist respond if challenged like this? As far as I can see, she would respond with three kinds of evidence: (i) a priori beliefs about human nature, and conclusions that are believed to be derivable from them, (ii) analysis of historical data, and (iii) a review of the track record of prior predictions made using the predictive rule in question.

The physicist’s answer to challenges to the reliability of his prediction is simple: try to test a nuclear bomb at Trinity Site, N.M. The only thing an observer of these macro events “natural experiments” is that these are accepted as the random experiments conducted to test a nuclear bomb at Trinity Site, N.M. and some had been arguing that there was no moon. The only thing an observer called for. The Obama administration proposed a large stimulus program, which led to an intense public debate in January and February of 2009. Setting aside for a moment ideological predispositions and value judgments, this presented a specific technical issue: What would be the effects of any given stimulus proposal on economic output and employment? This was a practical question worth trillions of dollars.

On the questions about which we seek predictive guidance from economics, it is possible to find highly credentialed economists who answer one way with great certainty, but it is just as easy to find equally credentialed economists who answer the opposite way with equal certainty.

“Please view the following film footage of various huge explosions that resulted when independent evaluators combined the materials I described in the manner I described.” The reason the physicist needs only concentrate on controlled experiments is that these are accepted as the gold-standard method for testing theories. Note that the first president faced with this kind of a briefing actually had an enormously expensive experiment conducted to test a nuclear bomb at Trinity Site, N.M.

The problem with the economist’s (iii) is that, in practice, so many things change in a macroeconomic event that it is not realistic to isolate the causal impact of any one factor. The economist’s findings are really observational data, and to call some of these macro events “natural experiments” is almost always to dress up rhetoric in analytical language.

Economists can use controlled experiments for certain narrow and important purposes, but they are not possible in macroeconomics, unless we order some randomly selected countries to, for example, print more currency, and others not. Therefore, while the economist might refer to prior periods in which some countries experienced inflationary episodes, she can’t test and validate a predictive rule in the way that the physicist can.

The role of government and deficits in a major economic downturn has been the subject of extensive academic study for decades, and many leading economists were active participants in the public discussion in early 2009. Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, both Nobel laureates, argued that the Obama administration’s proposed stimulus would be successful in improving economic performance. In fact, they both argued that it should be bigger. On the other hand, Nobel laureates James Buchanan, Edward Prescott, Vernon Smith, and Gary Becker all argued that it would fail to improve economic performance enough to justify the investment. This was not an argument about technical minutiae, but a disagreement about the basic effects of the policy.

While fierce debates can be found in frontier areas of all sciences, they are not all as if, on the night before the Apollo moon launch, numerous Nobel laureates in physics had been asserting that rockets couldn’t get as far as the moon, almost as many had been saying they could get there in theory but needed much more fuel — and some had been arguing that there was no moon. The only thing an observer
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could say with high confidence prior to the launch of the stimulus program was that at least several Nobel laureates in economics would be incorrect about its effects.

Debates also broke out in 2009 about the other two supposed examples of consensus that I have borrowed from Mankiw. James Buchanan argued that largeprojected federal deficits would have an adverse effect on the economy, while Joseph Stiglitz argued that “what really matters is not the size of the deficit but how we’re spending our money.” And Gary Becker argued that cutting the minimum wage would increase employment, while Paul Krugman asserted that cutting the minimum wage would do no such thing.

When it comes to deciding what policy actions to take, we should listen carefully to what economists and other social scientists say, but we should treat their assertions differently than we do predictions arrived at via experiments. We should subject them to useful cross-examination by specialists in other fields, reflect on how to weigh technical and non-technical opinions, ponder human motivation, and all the rest. Beyond this, we should always keep in mind the unreliability of social-science predictions, and treat the fog of uncertainty about the potential effects of our actions as fundamental when considering what to do. This is far from saying that social science is valueless, or that policymakers should not consult social scientists—indeed they should. But we should nonetheless be extremely humble about anyone’s ability to make reliable, non-obvious predictions about the results of potential policies.

I believe that recognition of this deep uncertainty should influence how we organize our political and economic institutions. In the most direct terms, it should lead us to value the freedom to experiment and discover workable arrangements through an open-ended process of trial and error. This is not a new insight, but the central theme of an Anglo-American tradition of liberty that runs from Locke and Milton through Adam Smith and on to 20th-century libertarian thinkers, preeminently Karl Popper and F. A. Hayek. In this tradition, markets, democracy, and other related institutions are seen as instruments for the discovery of practical methods for improving our material position in an uncertain environment. Ironically, we need freedom because we are ignorant.

Differently The Same

A transsexual beauty queen and the evolution of ‘tolerance’

BY ANTHONY DANIELS

JUST before the Moscow Olympics in 1980, the now-defunct British humor magazine Punch ran a number of cartoons about them. One showed the sex test that would be run there for allegedly female athletes suspected to be male (the Soviets had a record of fielding ambiguously sexed athletes, most notably the Press sisters, Tamara and Irina, sometimes known as the Press brothers, who disappeared from the sporting scene once chromosomal sex tests were introduced).

The cartoon showed a man, the Soviet tester, and a woman, the athlete, standing next to a tractor. “If you were a woman,” says the tester, “you could change that tractor tire in thirty seconds.”

But where chromosome sex tests are concerned, what Sganarelle says to Géronte, when the latter accuses him (in Le médecin malgré lui) of placing the liver and the heart on the wrong sides of the body, is apposite: “Nous avons changé tout cela,” we have changed all that. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are in the process of changing all that, since the change is, and ever will be, a work in progress: for in the absence of a sense of eternity, change under our direction is the only meaning we can attach to life.

A couple of weeks ago, Beauties of Canada, the company that runs the Miss Universe Canada beauty contest, announced that a transsexual person, Jenna Talackova, will now be allowed to compete in the contest after all, having first been rejected on the grounds of transsexuality, which was against the previously existing rules. A “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender” group, GLAAD, welcomed the decision, saying that Miss Universe had taken an important first step. To what, exactly?

Mr. Daniels, a physician, is a contributing editor of City Journal and the Dietrich Weismann Fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

One learns with some alarm that Jenna Talackova was started on sex-hormone therapy at the age of 14, and had reassignment surgery at the age of 19. Since the school-leaving age in British Columbia is 16, and one of the International Labour Organization’s criteria for child labor is work that forces a child to leave school prematurely, one is forced to the conclusion that, in Canada, the decision to change one’s outward sex is considered to be of less moment, requiring less maturity, than the decision to leave school, and a lesser potential danger to the welfare of the child than that of being exploited by employers.

Thereafter, Jenna Talackova’s trajectory as a beauty queen seems to have been somewhat contradictory. Shortly before entering for Miss Universe Canada (surely one of the few last places on earth where the demeaning, derogatory, and abusive mode of address “Miss” is still in use), Jenna Talackova took part in the Miss International Queen event in Thailand, open only to transsexuals—no chromosomal XX women need have applied, the rules forbade them. This smacks of wanting to have one’s cake and eat it, or of wanting two bites of the cherry, or (to change the metaphor yet again) of being a rose among thorns and a thorn among roses—in effect, a mediocrity’s charter. But if transsexuals claim the right to compete against normal women, because they consider that they are to all intents and purposes women and not merely playing at being women as Marie Antoinette played at being a shepherdess, by what argument are normal women to be excluded from competing against transsexuals? Evidently all women are equal, but some are more equal than others.

The story of Jenna Talackova is that of a person who demands the right to be different according to his or her own desires (I leave it to the reader to choose the appropriate pronoun in this case), and to be accorded the privileges of conventional society at the same time. Such persons are very frequently encountered these days: I demand the right to tattoo the words “F*** off” on my forehead, and that you take no notice of it (except, of course, when I want you to do so).

Jenna Talackova’s story is also that of the change in meaning that we now attach to the word (and concept of) “tolerance.” Where once tolerance was the discipline
so much for the chance to obtain that return.

your face, and for you to say nothing in a crude expression) to be constantly in be. The freedom they claim is that (to use however much in the majority they might certified minority, but members of that identity. Furthermore, the right so to parade went along with the duty on the part of other citizens not to object; indeed, they were almost duty-bound to applaud. If anyone were to object, however mildly, to the indecorousness or tastelessness of it all, at its sheer unabashed vulgarity, at the absurdity of such cavortings’ being a manifestation of “pride,” he would be reproved not only as a prude, but as a bigot, a bad person, one step removed from Anders Breivik.

This notion of tolerance is a one-way train, of course. Everyone has a moral (and increasingly a legal) duty to spare the feelings of members of an officially certified minority, but members of that minority have no duty, legal or otherwise, to spare the feelings of everyone else, however much in the majority they might be. The freedom they claim is that (to use a crude expression) to be constantly in your face, and for you to say nothing in return.

So Jenna Talackova probably insists on competing in Miss Universe Canada not so much for the chance to obtain that worthless crown (it is unlikely that her insistence will find much favor with feminists, who would not want the test of entry into true femaleness to be participation in a beauty contest), but to make a point: her or his right to obtrude her- or himself on a public most of which would still regard her or him as a freak, and to compel its silence. It is the demand that the public should simultaneously know that she or he is different from the other competitors, but nevertheless act as if, and pretend to think that, she or he is the same—in other words, that the public should perform the kind of mental maneuver daily required in totalitarian states, which did such violence to the human personality. If Jenna Talackova merely wanted the crown for its own tinselly sake, she or he would have taken elaborate steps to ensure that the organizers did not find out about her or his transsexuality, and would have retired quietly from the fray once it was discovered.

Jenna Talackova said something revealing when, at first, she was disqualified from the competition. She was, she said, “disqualified for being born.” This, of course, is a Prometheus revolt against the existential limits of human life—any such limits whatsoever. But people who hanker for limitless choice over everything are destined for a state of permanent egotistical resentment and querulousness. To them, there is no wisdom, only defeat and cowardice, in the Gospel’s words: “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?”

That the Prometheus bargain has to be interpreted with judgment and subtlety is a thought completely, indeed repellently, alien to them.

By chance, I happened recently to be reading a short essay by the late Malcolm Muggeridge on the subject of humor (for a time, he had been editor of Punch, published in 1966 and titled “Tread Softly for You Tread on My Jokes.” Muggeridge lamented the lack of subject matter for the humorist because the world itself had become so absurd that humorous commentary on it was supererogatory, indeed impossible. This is what he said: “The sad fact is that there are very few jokes—not more than six or seven at most, and all by now decidedly well-worn. Every now and then something happens in the world—as, for instance, a man changing his sex and becoming a woman—which opens the faint hope that a new joke may be born; but this hope is soon disappointed, and it is seen that the seemingly new situation falls into the pattern of an old joke.”

Nous avons changé tout cela. But in a certain respect, Muggeridge was mistaken: Old jokes do not remain jokes, that is to say old friends, as he thought they did, to be sniggered at when we knew they were coming. Instead, what was formerly a joke becomes deadly serious, perhaps the most serious thing left to many of us. The ridiculous become sublime, the sublime ridiculous.
In “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell says that a writer can avoid the heavy lifting of making an original or insightful argument by simply turning his pen on autopilot and fueling it with “ready made” clichés. “They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself,” writes Orwell. “It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.” More than a half century later, liberalism (and too much of conservatism) has switched to autopilot. For reasons I will discuss below, liberalism imposes itself not through sustained argument, but through a shabby tyranny of clichés, which hides its ideological underpinnings behind a façade of trite phrases and homespun truisms.

Let us start with the example of “social justice.”

In the Oscar-robbed movie Caddyshack, Danny—the protagonist—desperately wants to win the annual Bushwood Country Club scholarship, which is set aside for impressive young caddies. He meets with Judge Smails, who is in charge of awarding the scholarship. For reasons I will discuss below, liberalism imposes itself not through sustained argument, but through a shabby tyranny of clichés, which hides its ideological underpinnings behind a façade of trite phrases and homespun truisms.

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In the Oscar-robbed movie Caddyshack, Danny—the protagonist—desperately wants to win the annual Bushwood Country Club scholarship, which is set aside for impressive young caddies. He meets with Judge Smails, who is in charge of awarding the scholarship. The encounter is awkward, because Danny was recently caught in flagrante delicto with the judge’s niece.

Eager to show how fair he is, Smails explains his thinking:

You know, despite what happened, I’m still convinced that you have many fine qualities. I think you can still become a gentleman someday if you understand and abide by the rules of decent society. There’s a lot of . . . well, badness in the world today. I see it in court every day. I’ve sentenced boys younger than you to the gas chamber. I didn’t want to do it—I felt I owed it to them. The most important decision you can make right now is what you stand for—goodness . . . or badness.

I hate to spoil the plot for you, but Danny, eager to please, chooses goodness.

Danny’s vague but earnest answer captures the essence of what most people mean when they invoke social justice. A cry for social justice is usually little more than a call for goodness; “progressive” has become a substitute for “all good things.” But sometimes the word is too vague. So if you press a self-declared progressive to say what it means, he’ll respond, eventually, with something like, “It means fighting for social justice.” If you ask, “What does ‘social justice’ mean?” you are likely to get an exasperated eye roll, because you just don’t get it.

Social justice is goodness, and if you can’t see that, man, you’re either unintentionally “part of the problem” or you’re for badness.

“Social justice” is one of those phrases that no mission statement—at least no mission statement of a certain type—can do without. You simply cannot be in the do-goodery business without proclaiming that you’re fighting for social justice. Here’s the AFL-CIO: “The mission of the AFL-CIO is to improve the lives of working families—to bring economic justice to the work-place and social justice to our nation.” The 2 million–strong Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—which serves as the political shock troops for President Obama (former SEIU president}
Andrew Stern was the most frequent visitor to the White House during the first six months of the Obama presidency, which no doubt is why his presidency got off to such a great start)—asserts: “We believe we have a special mission to bring economic and social justice to those most exploited in our community—especially to women and workers of color.”

A recent editorial in the Harvard Crimson explains that readers should give the college money because it largely succeeds as a mechanism for social justice. “Well, okay then, where’s my checkbook? The Ford Foundation gave the Newseum a grant “for a Web site incorporating videos, interactive games and primary resources in a curriculum-based structure for classroom use and to organize a forum on journalism and social justice.” In 2010 the Smithsonian held a conference on “A Deeper Diversity, the Nation’s Health: Renewing Social Justice and Human Well-Being in Our Time.” The Muslim American Society, an organization founded by the Muslim Brotherhood, and through which the Brotherhood has operated in the United States, declares on its website that it “hopes to contribute to the promotion of peace and social justice.” Even the American Nazi Party, not wanting to be left out of the fun, identifies “social justice for White Working Class people throughout our land” as one of its two main tenets (the other being “Aryan Racial survival”).

One of the great things about social justice is that once you become a poster child for it, you also become, ipso facto, an expert on it. Invoking the “longstanding commitment to all forms of social justice of the LGBT community,” the presidents of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce sent a letter (subsequently retracted) to the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission in May 2011 urging it to support “President Obama’s vision of an America in which everyone has high-speed access” by allowing the merger between AT&T and T-Mobile. I remain a bit hazy on how, exactly, high-speed Internet access is a requirement of social justice, or for that matter why it is of specific concern to gays.

Till, though, what is social justice? That’s harder to figure out. Indeed, one of the fascinating aspects of “social justice” is that it sounds so pleasing and innocuous, a term any politician can use in a speech or signing statement. But each time someone tries to define it, the idea becomes more radical. The Green party is one of the few organizations that get into specifics, and its platform goes on for pages and pages delineating what “social justice” means—everything from “a commitment to ending poverty” through “welfare” to “open dialogue among all residents of Hawai’i on the sovereignty option of full independence.”

Meanwhile, a major report from the United Nations insists that “social justice is not possible without strong and coherent redistributive policies conceived and implemented by public agencies.” Typical U.N. statist? Perhaps, but it’s downright Jeffersonian compared with the more concentrated and pernicious asinity to follow. The U.N. warns: “Present-day believers in an absolute truth identified with virtue and justice are neither willing nor desirable companions for the defenders of social justice.”

Translation: If you actually believe in the antiquated notion that rights exist outside the schemes of governments and social planners, then you are not part of the global effort to promote goodness.

I don’t have space here to detail the intellectual history of the term, but the sad irony of its birth is worth noting. In 1840, the theologian Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio came up with the concept as a way to defend civil society from the ever-increasing intrusions of the state. Social justice, according to Taparelli, was the legitimate realm of justice beyond formal legal justice. Since then, the term has become completely inverted: “Social justice” has become an abracadabra phrase granting the state access to every nook and cranny of life.

The reason Hayek refers to the “mirage of social justice” is quite simple: There’s no such thing. “Only situations that have been created by human will can be called just or unjust. . . . Social justice,” Hayek concludes, “does not belong to the category of effort but that of nonsense, like the term ‘a moral stone.’” The assertion that high unemployment is “unjust” is dangerously misleading nonsense. Justice creates a claim on others. Who is being unjust? The employers who cannot afford more workers? The consumers who refuse to create enough demand to justify more workers? The government, for not raising taxes to pay for labor that isn’t needed? Social justice is based on rights—social rights, economic rights, etc.—that cannot be enforced in a free society. It’s like saying “Let the market decide” in North Korea.

The only way for social justice to make sense is if you operate from the assumption that the invisible hand of the market should be amputated and replaced with the very visible hand of the state. In other words, each explicit demand for social justice carries with it the implicit but necessary requirement that the state do the fixing.

And a society dedicated to the pursuit of perfect social justice must gradually move more and more decisions under the command of the state, until it is the sole moral agent.

There is, of course, a rejoinder. Hayek is working from the assumption that we do and, more important, should live in a free society, in the classical sense. That is the ideological prior conclusion, as it were, from which he launches his attack on the stupidity of social justice. I will stipulate that it is my ideological foundation as well (a shocking revelation, I know). So if you’re a progressive activist for social change and social justice, or for just plain goodness in the Smailsonian sense, you are free to respond that the concept of social justice is worthwhile, but in order to do so, you must first concede that you are coming from a specific ideological perspective as well. To say “Social justice requires X” is to say the state is justified in compelling or coercing X.

And that’s the point. Social justice is not a non-ideological concept that simply draws on ethics or morality. No, it is a deeply ideological set of assumptions that most practitioners of social justice refuse to openly and sincerely acknowledge, preferring instead to roll their eyes and proclaim that they are on the side of goodness.

And this is where Hayek (praise be upon him) had it slightly wrong. Social justice isn’t so much a “mirage” as it is a Trojan horse, concealing a much more radical agenda. “Social justice” is a profoundly ideological term, masquerading as a generic term for goodness. In short, it is a tyrannical cliché, a seemingly benign truism that, like a pill with a pleasant protective coating, conceals a mind-altering substance within.

Such clichés are numerous. Some take the form of familiar phrases—“One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” “Better ten guilty men go free,” “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism,” “Causes larger than ourselves,” etc. Others are seemingly wholesome or admirable concepts and categories—“com-
Conservatives, meanwhile, are ideologues who don’t live in the plain sight. Progressive ideas about the world are every bit as ideological as conservative ideas, and often far more so. But progressives won’t admit it, not even to themselves. Instead, they insist they are non-ideological, concerned only with “what works.”

“My interest is finding something that works,” Barack Obama told CBS’s 60 Minutes at the dawn of his administration. “And whether it’s coming from FDR or it’s coming from Ronald Reagan, if the idea is right for the times then we’re gonna apply it. And things that don’t work, we’re gonna get rid of.”

Obama was alluding to FDR’s famous promise (at Oglesby University in 1932) to pursue “bold, persistent experimentation” to end the Great Depression. Roosevelt’s vow was itself a homage to the reigning philosophical pose of American liberalism at the time: pragmatism. Self-anointed champions of the “pragmatic method,” the progressives believed they were anti-ideologues, experts and technicians using the most scientifically advanced methods to replace the failed liberal-democratic capitalism of the 19th century. Words like “philosophy,” “dogma,” “principle,” and “ideology” were out, and terms like “progress,” “method,” “action,” “technique,” and “disinterestedness” were in. When Herbert Croly, founder of The New Republic and author of the progressive bible The Promise of American Life, was accused of violating liberal principles when he supported Italy’s great modernizer, Benito Mussolini, Croly replied that the flagship journal of American liberalism was in fact “not an exponent of liberal principles.” Indeed, “if there are any abstract liberal principles, we do not know how to formulate them. Nor if they are formulated by others do we recognize their authority. Liberalism, as we understand it, is an activity.”

This has been the primary disguise of liberalism ever since: “We’re not ideologues, we’re pragmatists! And if only you crazy ideologues”—“market fundamentalists,” “right-wingers,” “zealots,” “dogmatists,” etc.—“would just get out of the way and let us do what smart people agree is the smart thing to do, we could fix all the problems facing us today.” It’s a variant of the old “scientific socialism” that exonerated the Left from the charge of ideological bias. “We’re not seizing the means of production and cherishing its ideas. As a result, they don’t know when, or how, to subordinate their ideology to larger concerns (and when you cease to be aware that you have an ideology, it doesn’t make you a pragmatist; it makes you a dogmatist).”

Driven by feelings more than fact, they seek rationalizations. Or as William Voegeli puts it in his book Never Enough, liberalism has lost its ability to articulate a “limiting principle” to the size, cost, and ambition of government. Indeed, as we saw during the oral arguments before the Supreme Court over Obamacare, this administration is incapable of articulating any principled limit to the apparently infinite powers of the Commerce Clause and the living Constitution.

While I’m sure the notion that Obama has focused like a laser on “what works” is the subject of a fantastic new rap video coming out from the GSA later this summer, for most of us, the idea that he has been a pragmatist is the sort of statement that summons coffee through the nose. The enduring strength of both conservatism and libertarianism as intellectual movements is that they acknowledge that they are, in fact, intellectual movements. We not only know what we believe, we know why we believe it. But while liberals know what they believe, they have a hard time explaining why they believe it. That’s because, as E. J. Dionne, Martin Peretz, and other liberals have written, they’ve turned their backs on their own intellectual history. Liberals, in Peretz’s memorable phrase, are “bookless,” so they follow an ideology without knowing why it upholds and cherishes its ideas. As a result, they don’t know when, or how, to subordinate their ideology to larger concerns (and when you cease to be aware that you have an ideology, it doesn’t make you a pragmatist; it makes you a dogmatist).

There’s perhaps no better proof that liberals are terrified of admitting their own ideological aspirations than the effort to mint fresh clichés to preserve the integrity of old ones. That’s the apparent goal of the group No Labels, whose official motto is “Put the Labels Aside. Do What’s Best for America.” (Or at least that’s one of them; for a group that doesn’t like labels, they sure have a lot of mottoes.)

Their mission statement goes on: “We are Democrats, Republicans, and Independents who are united in the belief that we do not have to give up our labels, merely put them aside to do what’s best for America.” Elsewhere on its website the organization likens itself to the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which it describes as an area designed by North and South Koreans alike for “cool heads” to craft “elegant solutions.”

Just for the record, the Korean DMZ is one of the most heavily mined and dangerous places in the world, with soldiers on each side waiting for the slightest provocation to launch a devastating war. It’s a place where nothing fruitful has happened for half a century. Moreover, the DMZ is the demarcation point between the fundamentally decent, prosperous, and democratic nation of South Korea and the fundamentally evil, impoverished, and totalitarian criminal regime of the Kims—hardly an apt metaphor for No Labels’ professed we’re-all-in-this-together spirit. But those kinds of distinctions matter only if you’re the shallow kind of person who’s into labels.

More to the point, the notion that we should give up our labels is an ancient grift, a venerable con, a time-honored ruse used by ideologues to clear the field of opposition (as I chronicle at some length in my new book, the tactic was pioneered by none other than Napoleon Bonaparte, who invented the practice of using “ideologue” as an epithet). This Jedi mind trick has two parts. First, the liberal says: “In the spirit of civic cooperation and problem-solving, we must all abandon our ideological priorities!” Then
comes the implicit Step 2: “So we must accept my ideological pri-
orities as fact and wisdom.” It’s like saying “Nice doggie” until you
can find a rock.

You never hear people say, “We’ve got to get beyond labels for
the good of the country. So that’s why I am abandoning all of my
principles and agreeing with you.”

In past decades, the serious Left was at least a bit more honest
about this game. That’s why John Dewey begged the American
Socialist party to abandon the label “socialist” but keep the poli-
cies. Earl Browder pushed the Communist party to brand itself
as “20th-century Americanism.” And, as historian Ronald Radosh
has chronicled, this has also been the tactic of Browder’s heirs,
down to Obama’s erstwhile “green-jobs czar” Van Jones, who gave
up honestly proselytizing Marxism in order to sell his wares with
more attractive packaging. “I’m willing to forgo the cheap satis-
faction of the radical pose for the deep satisfaction of radical ends,”
his explained in a 2005 interview.

Today the grift is played by liberals who don’t even seem to
understand what they’re up to. For instance, whenever Arianna
Huffington is accused of spewing boilerplate leftist, she responds
with a long, canned answer about how the left-right paradigm
has outlived its usefulness. Here she is on CNN: “This whole fram-
ing as a right-versus-left debate—a liberal-versus-conservative
debate—is completely flawed. It’s obsolete. It’s making it much
harder for us to solve our problems as a country.” And here she is
raving in one of the books with her name on it: “Someone please
alert the media: not every issue fits into your cherished right/left
paradigm. Indeed, that way of looking at the world is becoming
less and less relevant—and more and more obsolete.”

This argument might have been a teeny-weeny bit more com-
pelling if it hadn’t appeared in a left-wing screed of a book titled
“Right Is Wrong: How the Lunatic Fringe Hijacked America,
Shredded the Constitution, and Made Us All Less Safe (And What
You Need to Know to End the Madness).” For Huffington the anti-
ideologue, only one ideological perspective is too ideological.

The most basic problem with “I don’t believe in labels” talk is
that it is incandescently stupid. “Label” is another word for “word.”
Everything we associate with civilization, decency, and progress
depends on labels. If we cannot label something poisonous, people
will die. Similarly, labeling policies, or politicians or commen-
tators, with ideological or party identifiers helps make clear their
underlying assumptions and values. If you cannot understand why
having a rule against labels is such a terrible idea, I urge you to
march into your kitchen and peel the wrappers off all of your clean-
ing supplies, prescription drugs, and canned goods. Natural selec-
tion will take care of the rest in due time. (Though in many cases,
refusing to label politicians is like refusing to label men and
women by gender; the difference is usually easy to see regardless.)

The coming election will be a terrible test for liberalism. On one
hand, Obama speaks almost entirely in the progressive language
of clichés. He describes the world through the ideologically
loaded tropes of the campus worldview, all while insisting he’s
nothing more than a pragmatist stymied in his reasonable,
American quest for social justice. But you can see in Obama, par-
ticularly the Obama of Osawatomie, a burning desire to shed the
pretense and admit what he truly he is: a thoroughgoing, progres-
sive man of the Left. The problem with that is obvious: If you
let the troops out of the Trojan horse and into broad daylight,
you are inviting a fair fight in the war of ideas. And a fair fight
is the last thing progressives want.

BY WILLIAM VOEGELI

VEN Critics of Safety Net Increasingly Depend on It,”
read the front-page headline in the February 12 issue
of the New York Times. Reporting from Chisago
County, north of Minneapolis, the paper’s Binyamin
Appelbaum and Robert Gebeloff found several residents who,
although they describe themselves as “self-sufficient members
of the American middle class” and “opponents of government
largesse,” are “drawing more deeply on that government with
each passing year.” One says, “I don’t feel like I need the government,”
even though he supplements his $39,000 income with Earned
Income Tax Credit refunds, his three younger children receive
federal subsidies for their school breakfasts and lunches, and
Medicare recently paid for his mother’s hip surgeries.

Appelbaum and Gebeloff interviewed several other people who
“continue to take as much help from the government as they can
get,” despite being skeptical about government programs. “When
pressed to choose between paying more and taking less, many
people interviewed here hemmed and hawed and said they could
not decide. Some were reduced to tears.”

The Times did not randomly select Chisago County for exami-
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margin of victory in November 2010 when he became the first
Republican congressman since 1947 from Minnesota’s Eighth
district. Cravaack, a former airline pilot who had never run for
public office before successfully challenging an 18-term Dem-
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tion to the Obama domestic agenda. “We have to break away from
relying on government to provide all the answers,” the Times
quotes Cravaack telling his supporters. Many people in Chisago
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angry because the government is wasting money and giving
money to people who do not deserve it. But more than that, they
say they want to reduce the role of government in their own lives.”

The real subject of the story, then, is the sincerity, feasibility, and
even coherence of conservatism’s renewed commitment to limited
government. On balance, the article refrained from overtly dis-
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politicians who “deliberately encourage” voters to believe that
slashing government spending means “cutting programs for the
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Mr. Vogeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books, the author
of Never Enough: America’s Limitless Welfare State, and a visiting
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ACCOUNTING

Our entitlement programs are at war
with themselves

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ous act of mercy by a sovereign, to the presumption that such a payment, under social insurance, was the honest fulfillment of a contract between the citizen and the state.” Through “his individual contribution to our economy,” according to Brown, the citizen establishes his contractual rights, which define “the level of his protection.” Complex formulas determine social-insurance benefits on the basis of each individual’s unique wage history, since “we still believe in America that a man should be rewarded for his own efforts.”

President Johnson invoked this principle of individually earned benefits in 1965 when he signed Medicare into law. (The new legislation amended the Social Security Act.) Through Medicare, he said, “every citizen will be able, in his productive years when he is earning, to insure himself against the ravages of illness in his old age.” He was to do so the same way workers were already paying for their old-age, survivor, and disability benefits—by contributing “through the Social Security program a small amount each payday for hospital-insurance protection.”

An American who warns an elected official to keep the government’s hands off a social-insurance program doesn’t misunderstand our welfare state but has grasped its central argument exactly as it has been presented. Social insurance, we have been told (and told and told), is a mechanism through which we insure ourselves against financial vulnerabilities. The benefits are ours because we paid for them in advance. They vary because the amount we paid for them varies. Having “contributed” our taxes, we insist on receiving our benefits, since we were assured that the former are just like insurance premiums, and the latter just like insurance settlements.

The “infantile denial” expressed by the woman who wrote to President Obama is nothing more than the demand for “the honest fulfillment of a contract between the citizen and the state.” Having discharged her contractual duties as the people who wrote the contract explained them, she resents the possibility that the government might, to her detriment, unilaterally revise its contractual obligations. Appelbaum and Gebeloff summarize the attitude of the Medicare recipients they interviewed: “They paid what they were told; they want to collect what they were promised.”

But the fulfillment of our social-insurance contracts has become a grave problem because the myth of social insurance cannot be reconciled with the reality, political and fiscal, of social welfare. The Times cites an Urban Institute study showing that the value of social-insurance benefits is typically a multiple of the value of social-insurance taxes. In one example, a woman born in 1965 earns a midrange salary during her working years and deposits her (and her employers’) Medicare withholding taxes into an account that compounds annually at the inflation rate plus 2 percent interest. That account would be worth $87,000 by the time she retired in 2030 at age 65. “But on average,” Appelbaum and Gebeloff report, “the government will then spend $275,000 on her medical care.”

Our welfare state is a system at war with itself. It offers us, in our capacity as beneficiaries of its programs, a terrific deal. Not only do we receive the material benefit of enormous windfalls on our “investments,” ones that entail no participation in any kind of capital formation and, therefore, never expose us to any risk of capital destruction. We also receive the moral benefit of strenuous reassurances, delivered over many decades, that our windfalls are not really windfalls because we’re merely getting back what we’ve paid for. And so we have no reason to think of ourselves as recipients of charity or dependents on welfare. We’re entitled to every last dollar of our benefits. They come to us as a matter of right.
What the welfare state offers us in our capacity as taxpayers supporting its programs, however, is a terrible deal. We are the ones who’ll have to cover the difference—$188,000 in the Urban Institute’s example—between what each American actually did pay in social-insurance taxes and the much larger amount he’s been told again and again he’s entitled to get “back.”

In the eight decades since the dawn of the New Deal, liberal politicians and intellectuals have tirelessly urged their countrymen to disregard all the evidence and common sense telling them to worry about this fiscal disparity. The most notorious example was the prediction of the economist Paul Samuelson in 1967 that our social-insurance programs could go on and on, paying each beneficiary far more than he had ever contributed, because of our “growing population” with “more youths than old folks,” and because “the national product is growing at a compound interest rate and can be expected to do so for as far ahead as the eye cannot see.”

Twenty-nine years later, altered economic and demographic prospects found even Paul Krugman conceding that Social Security was built to look “an ordinary retirement plan,” where “what you get out depends on what you put in.” It has, in reality, “turned out to be strongly redistributionist, but only because of its Ponzi game aspect, in which each generation takes more out than it put in.” The trends Samuelson thought eternal having proven transient, “the Ponzi game will soon be over.”

More recently, liberals have encouraged the belief that the high costs of Obamacare, the most dramatic expansion of the welfare state since the Great Society, will be offset by that law’s mechanisms for incorporating remarkable new efficiencies into our health-care system. Newly constituted groups of experts, in bodies including the Independent Payment Advisory Board and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation, will, we are assured, discover ways to significantly reduce the long-term growth rate of health-care spending and preserve or enhance the quality of health care while never even considering any recommendation to “ration health care, increase Medicare premiums or cost-sharing, cut Medicare benefits, or restrict eligibility.”

One might reasonably suppose that if our federal health programs, the most important of which are nearly 50 years old, do indeed offer billions of dollars in potential savings that won’t have the slightest adverse impact on the quality of the health care we receive, this low-hanging fruit would have been harvested by now. Not only has it not been picked, however—it can’t even be named. Obamacare’s defenders exhort us to place the highest hopes in the discovery, just over the horizon, of marvelous new health-care efficiencies, but decline to provide examples of these painless improvements.

Moreover, Obamacare’s savings are more likely to be spent twice than realized even once. As Steven Rattner, a former adviser to the Obama Treasury Department, was honest enough to admit in a New York Times op-ed, the government is counting expected savings on Medicare against both the new benefits established by Obamacare and the old revenue shortfalls that were already baked into the Medicare cake.

The thread connecting all such efforts to banish fears about paying the bills we’re running up is the belief that we should be unapologetically militant about defending and enlarging our claims for benefits from the welfare state but serenely complacent about meeting our financial obligations to it. Something—economic growth, a permanently ample supply of young people, experts’ brilliant discoveries about getting more social-welfare bang from taxes that only rich people and big corporations will have to worry about—something will cover the gap between the welfare state’s debts to us and our debts to it. It is indisputable at this late date that liberals have been much more attentive to the political foundation of the welfare state than to its financial one. When hard choices or hard truths about the financial requirements of the welfare state would have compromised their efforts to gain and keep support for its programs, liberals have reliably done and said what is necessary to make social-welfare programs popular rather than what is necessary to make them solvent. These efforts have made the politics of curtailing the welfare state extremely challenging—just like the politics of adequately funding it.

The most direct way to ensure that the welfare state grows more popular as it grows more financially precarious is to extend its benefits to more and more people. Paul Starr, a Princeton sociologist and a co-founder of The American Prospect, explained the rationale in 1991. Liberalism’s domestic-policy objective “should be, above all, to eliminate poverty and maintain a minimum floor of decency to enable individuals to carry out their own life plans.”

Though conservatives would interpret and apply the principle differently, it is consonant with Ronald Reagan’s insistence in 1980 that it is “essential” to maintain the “strength of the safety net beneath those in society who need help.” For Starr, however, it is urgent to broaden that agenda in order to fulfill it. Garnering and keeping the political support required to maintain a minimum floor of decency is part of liberalism’s “overall task of constructing democratic majorities. And that imperative will often mean support for programs that provide universal benefits to all groups, including the middle class as well as the poor.” This idea had occurred to the architects and supporters of the welfare state before 1991, of course. It is not by happenstance that, according to the Times’ summary of a recent study by the Congressional Budget Office, the percentage of federal safety-net outlays directed to Americans in the bottom quintile of income distribution “declined from 54 percent in 1979 to 36 percent in 2007.”

The political calculation to make more and more people eligible for more and more government benefits reinforces the administrative logic that constantly works to expand social programs. It will always be the case that households with an income one dollar too large for them to apply for a particular program will be barely distinguishable from the slightly less affluent families who do qualify. The logical response of the gatekeeping bureaucracy is to move the cutoff point to include those who just missed the last iteration. The families one dollar above the new cutoff point will, inevitably, be included after subsequent revisions.

The Times notes, for example, that the maximum income a family can report and still be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit was, after adjusting for inflation, 82.7 percent higher in 2010 than when the program was established in 1975. (The 2010 maximum, $49,317, was only $128 less than the median household income that year.) Little surprise, then, that almost half of all American households received benefits from at least one federal program in 2010. Even before the recession, the proportion had grown from 37.7 percent in 1998 to 44.5 percent in 2006.

The facts on the ground, as they have been arranged there and then interpreted by liberals, would place the welfare state in a politically unassailable position. First, make sure that every American stands to receive benefits from at least one and preferably several
survivalists living off the grid. Second, stipulate that the only people with the moral standing to criticize the welfare state are those in line for no benefits whatsoever from it. These premises combine to reduce the ranks of opponents liberals deign to recognize to survivalists living off the grid.

This effort to rig the political contest over the welfare state wouldn’t be quite so objectionable if liberalism had a history of candor regarding the welfare state’s costs. The two most recent Democratic presidential nominees, however, upheld a long tradition of disingenuousness about the price tag of their party’s agenda. Both promised, repeatedly and categorically, that the federal government could meet all the obligations it had assumed over the 20th century, and then add many new ones to further the cause of social justice, while exempting more than 95 percent of the population from any kind of federal tax increase.

Having been assured their entire lives that moderate taxes would somehow sustain generous welfare-state benefits, the Times subjects in Chisago County come by their cognitive dissonance honestly. Unlike the Obama administration, they regard with alarm the prospect of rising federal indebtedness as far ahead as the eye cannot see. They are looking for a way out of a burning building that was designed without exits.

Ever since the late Irving Kristol introduced the concept of the “conservative welfare state” into our political discussions, people have argued about what it means. To some critics, left and right, it’s a contradiction in terms. A useful way to understand the idea, however, is to say that conservatives who want to cut the welfare state down to size want to cut it down to a particular size, one where the programs’ expenditures equal but never exceed the revenues generated by the taxes that liberals have told us the welfare state will require. Right-sizing the welfare state until it balances with that revenue stream means, as in the budget proposals Representative Paul Ryan has advanced, big cuts and big changes, such as turning Medicaid into block grants to the states, and Medicare into a means-tested voucher program for buying private health insurance.

It’s fair to say that Democrats have not received Ryan’s framework warmly. Speechwriters and editorialists have ransacked thesauruses for the censorious mot juste, with “cruel,” “cold-blooded,” and “savage” leading the field.

What’s more interesting is the response we haven’t heard. After 80 years of clearing their throats, liberal politicians still can’t summon the language or the courage to make a simple, candid argument:

Every nation in the world with the kind of welfare state we want for America pays for it by taxing a large majority of its citizens far more heavily than we do. To pretend we can do otherwise is to invite our countrymen to indulge a fantasy rather than call on them to make a serious commitment. Building the welfare state we need means most Americans are going to have to pay significantly higher taxes. No one likes such taxes, of course, but the reality is that they’ll fund an array of government programs that leave all of us better off than we will be with the rudimentary welfare state we’re forced to live with if we insist on a much lower tax burden.

There. Was that so hard? The Ryan framework challenges Democrats to show some confidence in their agenda, their own powers of persuasion, and Americans’ ability to listen to reason. If, instead, they remain committed to magic realism as a method of public finance, they’ll betray an infantile denial far worse than anything in Chisago County.

A Lethargic Dragon

China is no model for the U.S. economy

BY REIHAN SALAM

A MERICANS have always looked abroad for inspiration. Alexander Hamilton drew on the experience of Britain and France to shape the economic institutions of the early republic. In the early 19th century, Henry Clay championed tariffs, a national bank, and internal improvements in an effort to match Britain’s economic might. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, Germany emerged as an industrial colossus, and American intellectuals had a new model. During the 1950s, at least some Americans, mainly but not exclusively on the political left, saw the breakneck modernization of the Soviet Union as a clear indication that the old-fashioned market economy was on its last legs.

There have been a variety of fads and fashions in the years since. Once it became clear that the Soviet model was not quite as impressive as it had once seemed, liberals and progressives started looking to northern Europe, and in particular to Sweden, for lessons on how to run an economy. Conservatives have swooned at various times over Switzerland and Chile and Singapore, among other capitalist success stories. And then, of course, there was the 1980s-era obsession with Japan, which in the view of some observers was destined to surpass a declining America.

Some of these enthusiasms proved less harmful than others, and some were even constructive. Hamilton was right: The United States really did have much to learn from Britain. Germany’s scientific breakthroughs were indeed enviable. Sweden, Switzerland, Chile, and Singapore all have their virtues, and not just of the culinary variety. Even Japan, for all its economic pathologies, taught U.S. manufacturers a great deal about how to thrive in a more competitive world.

But the belief that we had much to learn from the Soviets was both dangerous and stupid. And much the same can be said for the current enthusiasm over China’s economic model.

Y ou’ve no doubt heard President Obama cite China’s investments in wind and solar energy, and its gleaming infrastructure and high-speed trains, as a slam-dunk case for devoting taxpayer dollars to similar efforts here. Perhaps you’ve read books such as China, Inc., What the U.S. Can Learn from China, or the colorfully titled Becoming China’s Bitch. You may have encountered the work of New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who has suggested that America’s political class could learn a thing or two from the Chinese Communist Party.

What you most likely haven’t heard is that across a wide range of economic, technological, and military indicators, the United States is actually, in the words of political scientist Michael
Chinese economic model. They flow from the very nature of the economy somewhat larger than that of the United States this will happen. While we can expect China at some point to have growth rates indefinitely, Beckley’s thesis regarding its relative stagnation that accompanied the Second World War, China experienced a bloody civil war and collective traumas such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which led to tens of millions of deaths by disease and starvation in the years that followed. Even after those dark days, autarkic policies limited China’s growth prospects until Deng Xiaoping decided to loosen the Party’s economic grip. Those envy-inducing double-digit growth rates are at least partly the product of the catastrophes that came before, rather than of policies the U.S. could emulate.

China might be worth emulating if its growth trajectory were sustainable. Indeed, if China could keep growing at its current rates indefinitely, Beckley’s thesis regarding its relative stagnation would soon seem ridiculous. But there is no reason to believe that this will happen. While we can expect China at some point to have an economy somewhat larger than that of the United States—after all, China has four times our population—the country is plagued by pervasive corruption and bad debts that are already undermining its growth prospects.

And these maladies aren’t just a blemish on an otherwise sterling economic record. They flow from the very nature of the Chinese economic model.

Late last year, Andy Stern, former president of the Service Employees International Union and one of the leading lights of the American labor movement, published a short essay in the Wall Street Journal extolling China’s virtues. He contrasted China’s extraordinary economic success since the late 1970s with the failure of “the conservative-preferred, free-market fundamentalist, shareholder-only model,” which, in his view, “is being thrown onto the trash heap of history in the 21st century.” As Exhibit A, Stern cited a visit to a mushrooming metropolis in China’s southwest: “Our delegation witnessed China’s people-oriented development in Chongqing, a city of 32 million in Western China, which is led by an aggressive and popular Communist Party leader—Bo Xilai. A skyline of cranes is building roughly 1.5 million square feet of usable floor space daily—including, our delegation was told, 700,000 units of public housing annually.”

This aggressive and popular leader has, alas, run into some trouble. Bo, the son of Long March veteran and Chinese vice premier Bo Yibo, has been removed from office on grounds of corruption, and there are extensive reports that he used torture and intimidation tactics to eliminate or discredit his political rivals. His wife is currently under investigation for her alleged role in the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood. To be sure, this doesn’t in itself undermine the notion that Chongqing’s people-oriented development has been an economic success. But a closer examination suggests that the glittering Chongqing that so impressed Andy Stern is a kind of overgrown Potemkin village.

As an inland city, Chongqing has far lower labor costs than do cities in coastal regions such as Guangdong, the affluent southern province that borders Hong Kong. So while Guangdong has been working to improve its economic prospects by upgrading the skills of its work force, giving non-governmental organizations greater freedom to do their work, and embracing private entrepreneurship, Chongqing has been generating growth by shifting workers from agriculture to industry. In other words, Chongqing is a throwback to an older economic era.

Bo Xilai made his mark by using substantial state subsidies to build large public-housing projects and to encourage elite firms such as Apple to locate production facilities in the city. But these subsidies weren’t drawn from Chongqing’s local economy. Rather, they came at the expense of other regions. China’s political authorities essentially decided to turn Chongqing into a showpiece to demonstrate that China’s government is committed to developing the country’s poor interior. And the reason China’s government has to press this message is that, for decades, Beijing has been extracting resources from the poor rural interior to subsidize rich coastal regions.

In Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics, MIT professor Yasheng Huang offers a new take on China’s experience since 1979. Whereas most scholars have seen it as a period of uninterrupted growth and prosperity, Huang divides it into two distinct eras. During the first, which lasted roughly from 1979 until 1988, Chinese economic policy was remarkably friendly to homegrown private entrepreneurship. China’s GDP per capita grew at an annual rate of 8.5 percent during these years, and both rural and urban regions made substantial gains in personal income and consumption. During the second period, from 1989 to 2002, the government embraced a more statist economic approach. GDP per capita grew at an impressive 8.1 percent, yet household-income growth fell from 11.1 percent in the previous period to 5.4 percent. Moreover, the rural areas that had thrived in the 1980s experienced a sharp slowdown in the 1990s. The years since have been a muddle; the
central government has been unwilling to surrender control over the economy, but there have been fitful efforts, such as the Chongqing experiment, to spread growth to the interior.

One of Huang’s central insights is that the so-called township and village enterprises that fueled Chinese growth during the 1980s were largely private. Scholars have often mistaken them for state-owned enterprises, thus masking the extent to which China’s 1980s-era growth was a bottom-up rather than a top-down phenomenon. This boom in private entrepreneurship had a particularly big impact in the poorest provinces, partly because local Communist elites were less risk-averse. Rural financial institutions were granted wide autonomy, and they proved a crucial source of start-up capital for new firms. At the same time, the CCP allowed a number of political reforms to increase the accountability of local officials and to guard against corruption.

After 1989, however, the Chinese government embraced a different approach. Rather than tolerate the rise of homegrown private entrepreneurs, Beijing decided to channel investment toward coastal regions and large state-owned enterprises. The financial reforms of the 1980s were largely reversed, as were the political reforms. The result has been a form of investment-led growth that has enriched China’s exporters and its political elites at the expense of Chinese workers.

So why is investment-led growth a problem? It’s not—or at least not intrinsically. Much depends on how efficiently investments are used to increase economic output. Economic expansion flows from two sources: increases in inputs, such as growth in employment levels, rising skill levels of workers, and a greater stock of physical capital; and increases in productivity. Increases in inputs alone can go a long way, particularly in a country that starts out very poor.

China has seen an extraordinary increase in inputs. High domestic savings rates allowed for massive investments in the stock of physical capital. A growing share of the population has been of working age, increasing the size of the labor force. And the shift of workers from low-productivity agriculture to high-productivity manufacturing has been a huge boon.

But these drivers have all but run their course. Higher domestic savings rates have come at the expense of lower consumption levels, and a resentful Chinese population increasingly wants to spend what it earns. Even more important, capital has been misallocated on an extraordinary scale, owing to tight political control of the financial system. China’s population is aging rapidly, and soon the country will have to carry the weight of tens and eventually hundreds of millions of retirees. Despite the Chongqing experiment, the scope for shifting more agricultural workers into manufacturing is limited, not least because China’s cost advantage is eroding and a weak global economy can absorb only so many of the country’s wares. China’s growth is already slowing as a result. Since 2001, China has grown at an annual rate of 10.1 percent. This year, however, Chinese GDP is expected to grow at 7.5 percent. Further, the official statistics almost certainly conceal the extent of the decline. Scholars such as Huang have found inconsistencies between local and national data, and curious patterns such as rapid GDP growth during periods in which electricity usage, a good hard indicator of economic activity, experienced a sharp slowdown.

What China needs now is not to ramp up inputs even further, but rather to ensure that capital is allocated efficiently. Growth in the advanced market democracies has been driven primarily by productivity-enhancing technological innovation, which refers not just to the invention of new machines but also to the embrace of new ways of combining technology and labor. The advent of new communications technologies is one thing. Walmart’s ingenuous use of these technologies to make its employees more productive is quite another.

But this kind of productivity-enhancing technological innovation is far less likely to occur if capital is allocated according to political criteria rather than by investors and entrepreneurs in an open market. For years, Michael Pettis, a professor at Peking University’s Guanghua School of Management, has been arguing that the Chinese economy has been badly undermined by this kind of politicized capital misallocation. As he put it in his newsletter last year, “investment in high-prestige areas such as electric cars, solar panels, and so on for technologically backward countries with low worker productivity may be a little like investment in the space program or in the Olympics.” While these efforts might give a boost to national pride, “they reduce overall wealth and exacerbate domestic imbalances.” Pettis’s predictions are looking sound as the Chinese growth engine sputters.

Last year, the economists Barry Eichengreen, Donghyun Park, and Kwanho Shin published a fascinating survey of growth slowdowns. They found that fast-growing emerging economies tend to see a downshift in average annual growth rates around the time they reach a GDP per capita of $17,000, which China is expected to reach by 2015, and when 23 percent of the work force is in the manufacturing sector, a level China should reach around the same time. Other factors that are correlated with growth slowdowns are higher ratios of retirees to those of working age (a ratio that in China is expected to go from 11.6 percent in 2010 to 38.8 percent in 2050—higher than the 37 percent the U.S. is expected to reach that same year), undervalued currencies (check), and volatile inflation rates (another problem looming on the horizon). Though Eichengreen, Park, and Shin are careful to note that there is nothing inevitable about growth slowdowns, experience strongly suggests that China is due for one in the very near future. Given that the Chinese Communist Party depends on high growth rates for its legitimacy, this is a profound challenge.

Even in the unlikely event that China does the right thing—if it addresses capital misallocation by placing more of the economy in private hands, if it allows Chinese households to retain more of the wealth they create—the country will still struggle with the bad debts it has accumulated over the last 20 years. Pettis anticipates that China will grow at an average annual rate of 3.5 percent, yet he argues that if China does not address the systematic misallocation of capital, growth could come to a halt. The real threat from China is not that it will grow so economically strong that it will budge the world like a colossus. Rather, it is that it will become so weak and vulnerable as to collapse, or to lash out at its neighbors.

Consider what those who want America to mimic China are asking us to do. They want to place decisions in the hands of an enlightened elite that will invest heavily in electric cars, solar panels, and fast trains, and in infrastructure in politically favored regions. They want us to follow a course that is leading a great nation down a path of ruin and misery.

No thanks.
Incontinent

BY JAMES LILEKS

You’re forgiven if you don’t want to hear anything about the Titanic for another century, but heed this: The death of the great ship is intimately connected to the matter of the giant incontinent French toddler robot.

Oh, what isn’t, these days? you ask. Well. The robot—an immense cable-steered puppet, operated by a French company that specializes in such things—was part of the Liverpool Titanic commemoration. It symbolized a girl who’d written a letter to her father. He drowned, thanks to some kinetic iceberg activity. As the enormous robot was dragged around town during festivities, it paused and squatted, and a great gout fountained from its haunches. As a Liverpool newspaper put it: “Many people were really surprised when the Little Girl Giant urinated but a lot of them were delighted and they shouted as if it was a Beatles show.”

Which Beatles tune? “Love, Love Me Loo”? That one about a particularly hued submarine?

One of the robot operators told clickliverpool.com: “It’s what little girls do—even giant little girls—and all of the giants have many other surprises in store for the people of Liverpool.” Uh-huh. A Nightsoil to Remember, that’s next for Titanic celebrations, perhaps.

Internet commenters loved it, banging out unpunctuated outrage about . . . other people’s outrage. A selection, from a puppet defender: “Brilliant and entertaining for all age groups what makes me mad is the people that moan about a simple act of urinating. Get a life.”

It makes her mad. Get a life if you think an advanced civilization with deep-rooted standards of decorum doesn’t need a blundering puppet dumping its bladder on a public street.

Auto-befouling is hardly unusual, according to another: “After all, it’s only what drunks do, and we don’t complain about them.”

There’s your problem right there, innit? You don’t complain about them. It’s part of the rich, tangy, fascinating fabric of urban life: some passed-out harridan with a bloom in her britches because she’s too hammered from Ladies’ Lager Liter Nite to grope her way to the powder room.

From another comment, a slap at people who complain about silly things like “money” when there’s fun to be had: “Why are there so many sad, miserable negative, whining penny pinching people out there! Best thing that’s happened in Liverpool for years.”

Really? Really? Careful parents who wanted to install manners and propriety would have just let little Beryl let loose where she stood? In the shop? In church? In the school? The Queen Mum as a little girl was noted for exercising regal prerogative whenever she wished, and everyone cooed at the precious sight of glinting royal tinkle? Really?

Of course, there was a snoot who don’t understand wot the people enjoy, and she had to get all, like, knicker-twisted: “Disgusting waste of money when we have libraries closing and other cuts by the council.”

Libraries! A right larf, that; ever try to get a lottery ticket at a library?

Over at HuffPo, a guy who calls himself “proud godless commie” echoed the sentiments of the cultured Continentals: “Royal Deluxe has been exhibiting their giant puppets all over the world for many years, and the young girl has been peeing in the street since the second year she was created. I would have expected this reaction from us puritanical Americans, but I thought the English were more civilized.”

The inversion is complete: It is a mark of civilization to applaud an ambulatory automaton programmed to void its bladder on the public streets. Civilization, as we define it today, isn’t just the absence of restraint, but martial opposition to the idea of restraint, or even the suggestion that restraint has its virtues. The only virtue is to deny virtue exists, apparently.

This is why it’s very, very important to reelect Barack Obama. Put a Mormon in the White House and you can expect travel visas to be denied to peregrinating robots with lax bladders. Put conservatives in charge of anything and the first thing they do is look through the arts grants, their long blue noses sniffing for anything honest and real. On one end of the spectrum, civilization; on the other, Puritanism. We’re clear?

No? Big robots of Priapus stomping around town, poking out windows and knocking over streetlights, that’d be cool? Of course: It offends the people who need offending, because they’re offended by the wrong things. If the robot had relieved herself on a Bible, even better. On a Koran? Hate speech. On a newspaper that printed the offensive Mohammed cartoons? Brilliant, as long as everyone understood the cartoons weren’t actually present at the time.

From a distance, across the pond, it seems as if there are two Britains—a small quiet slice that tends the old virtues behind locked doors, collecting stamps from the days of empire and buffing a bust of Churchill, and a variegated army yowling beyond the hedgerows: loud rude dote-suckled slags and yobs, bloodless academics and Eurocrats bent on extirpating national pride in the name of Western shame, sharia enthusiasts, and a blithe entitled troupe of Pippa-ninny royals.

Ah, what do I know. It was never jolly-good-tally-ho from crown to heel, but you can’t help but think of Captain Smith’s instruction to the crew of the Titanic: Be British. Needed no explanation. Stiffen your spine. Not loosen your zipper. NR
From the Twitter stream of Kim Jong Un, @youthcaptain . . .

That awkward moment when you realize that the uncle you think you’re talking to is the uncle that executed the uncle you think you’re talking to.

Tweeps, need advice. Be honest now: Does this area of my body need man-scaping? twit.pic17/r50

Hey! @barackobama! We’ve got more in common than you think! I’m a fan of dog meat, too! #buildingbridges

Hey Tweeps! We still don’t have #gameofthrones here in the DPRK. So do me a solid and LAY OFF THE SPOILERS kaybye.

Huge HUGE missile launch coming up! V. v. v. excited! Please RT!

How is it possible to lay off the carbs in a rice-based culture?? Wonder how everybody else in this country stays so slim. Sigh. #priceofleadership

Wondering why exactly people think @mittromney has a weird religion. My grandfather was born on a mountain by a ray of sunshine. My dad had x-ray vision. Nobody thinks that’s weird, right?

Loving that @lindsaylohan is in talks to play Elizabeth Taylor. Hey, Hollywood! Forgive her already! She’s majorly talented! #wouldlovetoplayMikeToddmyself

Ordered a brand-new jumpsuit for the big missile launch. Lots more pockets. Really fashion-forward orange color. More room in the waist area. #sigh #losingsweightisabummer

Hey, @nbc! Don’t cancel @communit... #sigh #losingweightisabummer

RT Right-wing attack machine will backfire in November @ericboehlert

Stand tall, @annromney. My mom worked hard raising us kids. Not easy to do, especially when she was at that prison farm. And I gotta say: You are one HOT grandmother. #respectforwomen

Uncle Yoon sees me in my new orange jumpsuit, says, “How are things in Sing Sing?” Which I didn’t get until I Googled it. #they’llallpayeventually

I don’t get it. @harrypotter’s dad is Snape? For reals? Not sure I like this direction. Prefer to think of his dad as a version of my dad, but with fewer magical powers.

Hey, @annromney. Just to add to my last Tweet. Really think you’re something special. Wondering if there’s anything happening between us? I feel your energy coming at me through my TV. Is that a weird thing to say? #feelingmywayhere

From Korean Heritage Cookbook: Older dogs are braising dogs. FYI, @barackobama

Tomorrow’s the big missile launch. So stoked. I get to push the button and everything. Lots of dirty looks when I told them that. #haterscankissmy-youknowwhat

We’re about 5 minutes from the missile launch. Generals keep treating me like I’m an idiot. I KNOW what button to push, okay? Green for go, Red for abort. What’s so complicated about that?? #stupidgenerals

@annromney Haven’t heard from you. Not sure why you’re being this way. Please follow me so I can DM you! @mittromney doesn’t have to know.

Hey Tweeps! That flare you’re gonna see in the sky is a DPRK missile launched by yours truly! #countdown

Wait. Was it Green for go and Red for abort? Or the other way around? I’m confused but I’ll be damned if I’ll ask one of my know-it-all uncles. Maybe I’ll just press them both.

That big fiery streak you see in the sky is for you, @heidiklum. My love for you is like a burning missile aiming straight for your heart.

Turns out it was BLUE for go. Green and Red both tell the missile to explode in the air. Which doesn’t make any sense? Why put a button on there if it does that? #notmyfault

People very upset at me. Not sure how I’m to blame. Yes I pushed the wrong button. Well, buttons. Not sure why that’s now a crime against humanity. #theynevermademistakes?

If a person has food issues and eats when he is upset and being YELLED AT by a bunch of CREEPY uncles for something that ISN’T REALLY HIS FAULT, why is it okay to yell at him for eating all of the ICE CREAM in the country? #natalotoficecreaminthedPRKbutstil

Question for U.N. and international-law Tweeps: Can an autocratic ruler get grounded? Asking for a friend.

@barackobama The trick is to remember to remove the collar and the tags before putting into the microwave. #learnedthehardway

Would like to hear from any of my Tweeps who have been in the situation of being a supreme leader who is admittedly a little green but who just needs some understanding from a lot of very very inflexible Korean uncles.

@annromney Thanks for following me back. I’m DMing you some pics. Please DO NOT RT any of them. Just trying to show you how much and how deep my feelings are.
Books, Arts & Manners

It’s Not Our World

MARK STEYN

The World America Made, by Robert Kagan (Knopf, 160 pp., $21)

THERE is a great deal of ruin in a nation, and even more of it in the nation’s publishing catalogue. Robert Kagan has noticed the resurgence of declinism; he doesn’t care for it; and The World America Made is his response to it. For the record, I am not a declinist: I’m way beyond that, and am more of a collapsist, as may be adjudged from the title of my own contribution to the genre, After America, and even more from its subtitle, “Get Ready for Armageddon.” As I’m always at pains to point out, an author doesn’t get into the apocalyptic doom-mongering biz because he wants it to happen. As anyone who’s tried enforcing his copyright in China or the old Soviet Union or your average nickel-n’-dime Third World basket case well knows, in a world without Western civilization the royalty checks are going to be a lot smaller. So you write the head-for-the-hills stuff in hopes of preventing the need to.

Similarly, Kagan’s entry into the field is designed to help ensure that it doesn’t happen. He is an eminent thinker, consulted by Romney, quoted favorably by Obama, but don’t hold either against him. I have a high regard for him, too. In the early years of the century, he came up with a line that, as geopolitical paradigmatic drollery goes, is better than Jon Stewart’s writing staff could muster: “Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus.” Granted, even at the time, one was aware that many Americans were trending very Venusian, but the gag was worth it just for the way it infuriated all the right Continentals. Nothing so deftly distilled emerges from The World America Made, an extended essay that paints with a very broad brush. This time around, Kagan hangs his thesis on the film It’s a Wonderful Life, although he’s not quite confident enough in the conceit to call the book It’s a Wonderful World. Instead, he offers section headings like “Meet George Bailey: What Is American about the American World Order?”

I’m not a big fan of the movie, but it would be the work of moments to riff off its metaphoric power. Like Jimmy Stewart, America is on the bridge about to jump, wondering what the point of it all was. And then kindly angelic Robert Kagan shows up to show us what the world would be like had Uncle Sam never lived: Why, there’s Europe (Gloria Grahame)! She never recovered from the Second World War, and then she turned to drink, and got run over by the Soviet Union (Lionel Barrymore). There’s Africa (H. B. Warner)! He poisoned all the children, because there was no Centers for Disease Control and no innovative American pharmaceutical industry. In the final heartwarming scene, Uncle Sam gets talked off the bridge, and goes home to face his creditors only to find that his salt-of-the-earth Bedford Falls neighbors (the Sultan of Brunei, Prince Alwaleed, Sinocom Savings & Loan, the Russian oligarch who owns the local vodka bar) have had a whip-around and his subprime-housing project can go ahead!

Instead, Kagan seems faintly embarrassed by his framing device and prefers to stick to big-picture generalizations, as if nervous his argument won’t withstand close contact with specifics. What few there are raise far more questions than Kagan assumes they answer. For example, on the very first page: “In 1941 there were only a dozen democracies in the world. Today there are over a hundred.” Back in 1941, you couldn’t have had a hundred democratic nations, because there weren’t a hundred nations. The European empires were still intact. One continent, from Marrakesh to Mbabane, was (excepting a pocket or two) entirely the sovereign property of another. And that latter continent, in 1941, was itself colonized, the German army’s sweep west having temporarily extinguished some of the smallest but oldest democracies, from Denmark to the Netherlands. All in all, it’s an odd starting date for the point Kagan is making—that the spread of democracy around the planet is “not simply because people yearn for democracy but because the most powerful nation in the world since 1950 has been a democracy.”

Put aside those small European nations that, post–Third Reich, recovered their liberty: Norway, Belgium. In 1941, half the democracies were His Britannic Majesty’s Dominions—Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. After the war, they were joined by what remains the world’s largest democracy, India, and then Jamaica, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea, Belize, etc. Democracies all, and all operating with a local variant of the throne speech, speaker, mace, Hansard, and all the other features of the “Westminster system.” During the deliberations on the post-Saddam Iraqi constitution, I received from a retired colonial civil servant in Wales an e-mail with the enviable opening line, “Having helped write seven constitutions . . .” Perhaps he was moved to do so “because the most powerful nation in the world since 1950 has been a democracy,” or perhaps he was just continuing an imperial evolutionary process begun in January 1848 in Nova Scotia. Likewise, the French decolonized (or attempted to) in their own image.

Which raises a more interesting question: Why hasn’t America tried to export its own distinctive constitutional ideas? If England is the mother of parliaments, America’s a wealthy spinster with no urge to start dating.

In all those new nations supposedly inspired by American democracy, you’ll search in vain for, say, a First Amendment, or a Second. Even when the U.S. has expended a decade’s worth of blood
and treasure in “nation-building,” the nation it’s built is not in its own image but a sharia state complete with child marriage, legalized rape, and death for apostasy.

Which raises another question: What does Kagan mean by “democracy”? An election twice a decade good enough to pass muster with Jimmy Carter and the U.N. observers? Or genuine liberty? Kagan never defines terms, which is perhaps just as well. The Arab Spring may be the bleak dawn of the post-Western Middle East, and the Coptic Christians are fleeing in terror, and the al-Qaeda flag’s flying in Benghazi, and the new guys all seem to have Iran on speed dial, and the only viable alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood is the Even More Muslim Brotherhood, and they’re tossing the offspring of U.S. cabinet secretaries into holding cells, but for Kagan it’s all nevertheless “an essential attribute of the American world order,” and therefore even the booming burqa troops’ yellow-ribbon stickers, and the priority boarding for military personnel on U.S. airlines, and the other genuflections are there to help a disillusioned citizenry distinguish between the value of the soldiery and the thanklessness of their mission; it’s a way of salvaging something decent and honorable from the grim two-thirds-of-a-century roll call of America’s unwon wars.

Why can’t the United States win? The question never seems to occur to Kagan—to the point where, toward the end, he argues that, if America is set for British-style imperial sunset, it is today nevertheless “not remotely like” the old lion at the dawn of the 20th century but “more like Britain circa 1870, when the empire was at the height of its power.” I had a strong urge at this point to toss the book out of the window and back my truck over it. In 1870, Britain’s military victories were honored in the imperial metropolis by Trafalgar Square and Waterloo Station; there’s a suburb of Pax Britannica to today’s Pax Americana was accomplished so smoothly it was barely noticed. The United States inherited the global networks of its predecessor: American sailors were stationed in Bermuda, and RCAF officers at NORAD in Cheyenne Mountain; Washington joined Australia and New Zealand in the ANZUS alliance, and built a new base on the British island of Diego Garcia. For Britannia’s lion cubs, from Ottawa to Canberra, getting a hearing in Washington became more important than getting one in London.

As for the mother country, Britain accepted its diminished status with as much grace as it could muster. As with an old, failing firm, its directors had identified the friendliest bidder and arranged, as best they could, for a succession in global leadership that was least disruptive to their interests and would ensure the continuity of their brand: the English language, English law, English trade, English liberties. It was such an artful transfer it’s barely noticed and little discussed. Indeed, even Kagan mentions it only en passant: “Just sales and state-of-the-art clitoridectomy clinic are in their fashion a tribute to American influence. If some mad scientist crossed Dr. Pangloss with George M. Cohan, he’d sound a lot like Robert Kagan: Once one accepts this is the most American of all possible American worlds, all is as American as it can possibly be.

At such moments, the author, the consummate American interventionist, sounds in need of an intervention himself. He is confident his compatriots retain “a degree of satisfaction in their special role” as global-order maker. Where’s the evidence? Well, “during the seventh-inning stretch in every game at Yankee Stadium, the fans rise and offer ‘a moment of silent prayer for the men and women who are stationed around the globe’ defending freedom and ‘our way of life.’ A tribute to those serving, yes, but with an unmistakable glint of pride in the nation’s role ‘around the globe.’”

Really? I’d say he’s mistaking that glint pretty comprehensively. Those moments of prayer, and the “We support our
as the British could safely cede power to a rising United States,” he writes, “so Americans could have an easier time ceding some power and influence across the Pacific to a rising democratic China.” I marvel that anyone could type that sentence without realizing the absurdity of the comparison.

And, that aside, it’s not in the offing, is it? For 30 years, the foreign-policy “realists” have assured us that economic liberalization would force political liberalization. Instead, we’ve helped China come up with the only economically viable form of Communism. So, sometime this decade or next, the dominant economic power will be a totalitarian state with no genuine market, no property rights, no free speech, an abortion policy that’s left it with the most male-heavy population cohort in history, and, a little ways inland from the glittering coastal megalopolises, 40 million people who live in caves. This is not your father’s transfer of global dominance.

“Great powers rarely decline suddenly,” says Kagan. Well, it depends how you define “suddenly.” By the time Odoacer took Rome in 476, the city’s population had fallen by 75 percent in barely half a century—or the equivalent of the Beatles to now. As Paul McCartney might put it, yesterday came suddenly: Within a few years, a prototype “globalization” of European commerce had reverted to a subsistence economy of local agriculture. Likewise, by 1788, Louis XVI’s government in France was spending a mere 60 percent of revenues on debt service; by 1789, it wasn’t his problem anymore. This is where Kagan’s complacency serves him ill. America currently spends around $600 billion a year on its military, more than every other major and medium power put together. In five years or so, we’ll be spending more than that just on debt service—that’s to say, our interest payments on the federal debt will be greater than the combined military spending of China, Britain, France, Russia, Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia, India, Italy, South Korea, Brazil, Canada, Australia, Spain, Turkey, and Israel. The People’s Liberation Army of China will be entirely funded by our interest payments. Nevertheless, says Kagan, “the cost of remaining the world’s predominant power is not prohibitive.” He’s right in the narrow sense that it’s small potatoes next to Medicare. But he’s wrong in his understanding of the underlying political realities.

Kagan is a geopolitical guy. Economics seems to bore him: The T-word—“trillion”—makes just one perfunctory appearance before the end, although it’s profoundly relevant to America’s fate. As Paul Ryan put it at the House Budget Committee recently, the entire U.S. economy “shrinks down” in 2027 on this path. Might that not have some impact on our “superior expenditures” on “advanced weaponry”? What about human capital? For Kagan, “America” and “Europe” are entities that seem to exist independent of any actual Americans and Europeans and their respective dispositions. Much of “the world America made” is in steep demographic decline—or transformation. For three of the five permanent members of the Security Council, an accommodation with Islam will be not just a prudent foreign policy but necessary for domestic tranquility, too; the fourth member—China—already has a very friendly working partnership with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation at the U.N. and elsewhere.

What of Americans? Any post-war British general can tell you that, when it comes to a choice between the nanny state and the military, it’s the latter that takes the hit, no matter how footling the savings. In an ever broker America, it will always be easier to cut defense—for the Left, as a matter of principle; and, for ever larger numbers of the Right, because, for whatever reason, a lavishly funded military’s “unmatched capability” seems utterly incapable up against those it actually gets matched with. Indeed, for Ron Paul Republicans, the more relevant thesis would be “The America the World Made”...
NR’s Other Bill

LINDA BRIDGES

Buckley was the founder and editor of NR, and the fountain of much of its cheeky personality. Bill Rusher became, early in the magazine’s life, the publisher who made sure the bills were paid, the bad cop in dealing with young staffers’ derelictions, and a guardian of ideological discipline. Outside the walls of 150 East 35th Street, he was also a serious presence—a consummate debater, a mentor of young conservatives, and a skilled political operator, the man most responsible for keeping the Draft Goldwater movement going and, thus, for fostering the shift in the Republican party that eventually gave us President Reagan.

David Frisk, a young newspaperman who turned academic, has done a superb job of chronicling the life and times of William A. Rusher, from his discovery as a high-school freshman that, as he later put it, “I am 100 percent a political animal,” through his years as a lawyer and Senate investigator of Communist subversion, on to 31 years as publisher of National Review, and finally to retirement in his beloved San Francisco.

Rusher was born in Chicago, but he was only six when his parents moved to Long Island. Evan and Verna Rusher were staunch Republicans, and Bill’s first political memory was the Landon debacle of 1936—he told Frisk that he could barely drag himself to school the day after the election. But so far from killing his interest in politics, the defeat stoked it.

Although many of his friends thought the Ivy League too “upper-class,” Bill went to Princeton, like his future NR colleagues James Burnham and Frank Meyer before him, and flourished there, especially in the Whig-Clio debating society. But unlike Burnham and Meyer, he did not go on to Oxford, but instead (after a boring stint in India as a supply officer during World War II) enrolled at Harvard Law School. There he again threw himself into politics, revitalizing the Harvard Young Republican Club, which soon became a huge presence on campus. Frisk gives a hilarious account of one of Rusher’s maneuvers—placing a spy in the Young Democrats. Rusher, Frisk writes, “felt speechless for one of the few times in his life” when the spy called to tell him he had just been elected president of the YDs. There was a glorious uproar when, using Truman’s “ineptitude” as his excuse, the spy resigned and rejoined the YRs.

Despite the time he spent on politics at Harvard, Rusher did well enough in his studies to be hired by a prestigious Wall Street law firm. He was well paid, which permitted him to indulge his developing taste for good food and wine, but he found the atmosphere too hushed, and the work uninteresting. Also, by that time he had read Whittaker Chambers and became a passionate anti-Communist. When his older friend Robert Morris became chief counsel of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, he asked Rusher to become his deputy.

Much of that I knew, though not in the rich detail Frisk provides. What I did not know about was Rusher’s political odyssey during his pre-National Review days. His senior thesis at Princeton was titled “The Progressive Element in the Republican Party from 1936 to the Present,” and a progressive is what Rusher considered himself. Not, to be sure, a Teddy Roosevelt Progressive, but one who sought “moral and material progress.” Progressivism, for Rusher, “connote[d] activity, move-
ment forward, constructive processes.” After the war, Frisk writes, “Within his party, Rusher still preferred the East Coast–oriented elite to the Middle American, small-town Republicans.” He supported first Dewey and then Eisenhower over Taft, partly for that reason, but even more because Taft had opposed our entry into World War II (which Rusher had passionately supported) and because Rusher believed Taft would not vigorously prosecute the Cold War. Dewey’s narrow defeat was as painful to him as Landon’s crushing one had been. Then, with Eisenhower’s election, “he experienced ‘a sense of joy I had not previously known’ in 16 years of watching politics.”

That joy was short-lived. Rusher did not expect Ike to attempt to dismantle the New Deal, but he did expect him, Frisk writes, “to challenge the Democratic Party’s later ‘redistributionist and collectivist tendencies.’” Worse was Eisenhower’s participation “in the liberal onslaught” against Senator McCarthy. It was when Rusher heard Vice President Nixon’s radio address attacking McCarthy in March 1954 that he had his epiphany. He had always thought of himself as a Republican. Hearing Nixon, he realized that “I was a conservative.” (He later wrote a breathtaking comparison of his and Frank Meyer’s early political identities: Meyer “had been a militant Communist, . . . and I had been a militant Republican. They’re not all that far apart, except in what they believe.”)

When he learned in the summer of 1955 of the imminent founding of National Review, he became a charter subscriber, and when, in June 1957, Bill Buckley invited him to lunch at his home in Stamford and offered him the position of publisher—with a voice in all editorial deliberations—he pondered for a month and then, as Buckley wrote, “came aboard—happily aboard.”

Not that it was all happy sailing. The long-running disputes between Burnham on one hand and Rusher, Meyer, sometimes Brent Bozell, and later Bill Rickenbacker on the other are legendary. Furthermore, Bill and Priscilla Buckley usually (though not always) wound up siding with Burnham. We junior editors at the time tended to see these disputes partly as a matter of personalities (Burnham loved to tease people who predictably rose to the bait), partly as a matter of Burnham’s insisting on realism whereas Rusher believed in keeping the troops’ spirits up even if, as in the Goldwater campaign, that meant writing more hopefully than the situation warranted. But Frisk does a masterful job of examining the philosophical differences among these men. I think he somewhat overstates the Europeaness of Burnham’s cast of mind—but only somewhat. And he skillfully tells how Meyer came to understand that neither order nor liberty can stand by itself—leading to his fusion (it was Bozell who dubbed it “fusionism”) of the libertarian and traditionalist strands of conservatism.

The Seventies and Eighties brought Rusher his most intense political disappointment, followed by his greatest joy. The former “militant Republican” had first talked during the 1960 campaign about the unlikeliness of conservatives’ ever regaining the ascendancy in the party they had had before the Great Depression, and he therefore wondered whether they shouldn’t start a new party of their own. Those thoughts dimmed after 1964, when, despite Goldwater’s shattering loss, the campaign had changed the balance within the party. (At the San Francisco convention, Henry Cabot Lodge, looking through the list of delegates, wailed: “What in God’s name has happened to the Republican party! I hardly know any of these people!”)

But by December 1974, when it had become apparent that Rusher’s far-and-away favorite candidate, Ronald Reagan, would be facing an incumbent Gerald Ford for the nomination, Rusher started to revive the third-party idea in a big way. His hope was that if he could actually launch such a party, Reagan would gladly run on its ticket. As Frisk chronicles, Reagan repeatedly said no; Rusher each time found some phrase in the governor’s reply that let him believe that no meant maybe. He put prodigious effort into the organization of what became the American Independent Party, reconvening his old YR and Draft Goldwater colleagues and himself leading the research into how to get the party onto the ballot in each state. But even after Reagan narrowly lost the nomination to

**EXPOSURE**

The wind is much too strong. He tries to shelter where a split rock hides a narrow patch of grass beneath the summit shining like stained glass and sees the sun go down on his adventure.

He thinks about the shell he didn’t pack.
He has a box of matches, but no fuel, and when the weather changed he was a fool to push on when the ranger said go back.

He knows it’s cold. When he exhales the steam solidifies his beard against his face. But he is summer warm and folds his fleece on a smooth stone and curls into a dream:

Six angels from the AMC hut climb the ridge to feed him coffee and massage his limbs before they bear him to their lodge.
He watches as their ponytails keep time.

If only he looked eastward he would find a cabin waiting with a stove and bed by Lonesome Lake two hundred yards ahead.
Exhausted hikers rarely face the wind.

—STEPHEN SCAER

NATIONAL REVIEW 45

as we visit Grand Cayman, Ocho Rios (Jamaica), Roatan (Honduras), Half Moon Cay, and Ft. Lauderdale

Sailing November 11–18 on Holland America’s luxurious Nieuw Amsterdam

2012 Post-Election Cruise

JOIN us for seven balmy days and cool conservative nights

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The “typical” NR cruise alumnus (there are thousands) has gone on four of our voyages and knows that NR trips are marked by riveting political shoptalk, wonderful socializing, intimate dining with editors and speakers, making new friends, rekindling old friendships, and grand cruising. That and much more awaits you on the National Review 2012 Post-Election Cruise.

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✓ Watch John Miller, Brian Anderson, Peter Robinson, and Roger Kimball discuss just how deep the media is in the liberal tank.
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Pollster Scott Rasmussen will analyze the numbers and explains why this candidate won and that one lost, while Ralph Reed, Mona Charen, Cal Thomas, and John Fund provide expert analyses of the conservative movement and the GOP.

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BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

Ford, he declined to join the AIP. With a vacuum at the top, the new party was hijacked by Lester Maddox—“a notorious racist,” as Rusher accurately wrote—Ford lost the election, and America entered its Carter-induced malaise.

Three years later, Rusher, and Buckley, worried that Reagan was too old to be elected. But when he declared, they both backed him—and the rest, as they say, is history. For Rusher, the victory “slaked at last and in full the burning thirst that first developed in me in 1936.” He didn’t always agree with Reagan—but when his friend Larry Arnn, then president of the Claremont Institute, told him how disappointed he was with the administration, Rusher replied, “My boy, you’re going to remember this time as a golden age.”

Rusher’s retirement coincided with the end of the Reagan administration, and soon after stepping down as publisher he made his long-anticipated move to San Francisco. But even in his retirement, there were columns to write, speeches to give, boards to chair. Arnn had already invited him to join the Claremont Institute as a senior fellow, and Russell Kirk had given him the inspiration for what became a series of important conferences on the Enlightenment sponsored by Claremont: “Your mission is, William of Nob Hill that shall be, to undo Voltaire and all his works.” Rusher spent the next 20 years, as he wrote to an old friend, “working somewhat harder than I did before.”

He gradually cut down on the board service and the travel, and in 2009 he gave up his column. In April 2011, William Allen Rusher died at an age, 87, that would have astounded his younger self: He had always assumed that, like his father and his Rusher uncle and grandfather, he would die of a heart attack in his fifties. Another thing that might have astounded the younger Rusher was that he died an Anglo-Catholic, having been baptized in 1978 by a bishop of the breakaway Anglican Church in North America. Over the ensuing years, faith became “an integral part of my life,” he told Frisk. “It has become a comfortable, congruent part of my world outlook.” And so the implacable debater, unyielding arbiter of conservative principle, and scourge of errant taxi drivers left this life with a serenity that in his younger days no one could have envisioned.

Tales of the Tellers

FLORENCE KING

T hick reference books traditionally have been solemn tomes, housed and read in library reference rooms where sudden snorts of laughter are unexpected and unappreciated. By this standard, the doorstopper under review here would be, to undo Voltaire and all his works.” His publisher calls it an idiosyncratic history of fiction in 294 Lives, by John Sutherland (Yale, 832 pp., $39.95)

Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives, by John Sutherland, is emeritus professor of modern English literature at University College, London, as well as a former long-time member of the Caltech faculty, a dual background that makes him accessible to readers on both sides of the Pond. Now an editor, columnist, and critic in London, he has written what he calls “an idiosyncratic history of fiction in English.” His publisher calls it “opinionated,” and I call it a reference book that rocks.

He begins with what scholars agree is the first novel in the English language, The Pilgrim’s Progress, by John Bunyan, the 17th-century Christian soldier in Cromwell’s Roundhead army who threw over the simple comforts of hearth and home to do battle for the Lord. This much is found in every Bunyan biography, but Sutherland also relates the kind of minor details that grab the reader’s attention, e.g., The Pilgrim’s Progress is the only book Huck Finn ever read. He didn’t understand it (“[It was] about a man that left his family. It didn’t say why”) but it stuck in his mind because he and its author were both troubled runaways. We also learn that Thackeray found his title “Vanity Fair” in Bunyan’s text—and Sutherland suggests wryly that the peace and quiet in which to write that Bunyan found in prison was what Virginia Woolf wanted for women when she called for a room of one’s own—except that “the lock was on the outside.”

Most of the volume concentrates on writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, when the novel peaked. Bridging the two is Henry James, whose critics have ever been faced with the impossible task of finding some way to comment on his maddening, interminable, convoluted sentences without having to quote those same maddening, interminable, convoluted sentences. Sutherland gets around this by quoting instead Henry’s explanation of the physical injury that made him 4-F for the Civil War. Something happened when he was 18 as he helped to put out a fire in a stable. This is how he described it in a memoir: “[He was] jammed into the acute angle between two high fences, where the rhythmic play of my arms, in tune with that of several other pairs, but at a dire disadvantage of position, induced a rural, a rusty, a quasi-extemporized old engine to work and a saving stream to flow, I had done myself, in face of a shabby conflagration, a horrid even if an obscure hurt.”

What did he do to himself? As with so many of his sentences, nobody has ever untangled this one, but it “has been interpreted as everything from castration to lumbago.” His literary bent for concealment, inconclusiveness, and cryptic allusions did not extend to his personality: “His conversational charm was legendary and he developed table-talk into an art form.” But he had something to hide that has kept a century’s worth of biographers busy, chiefly in pursuit of shameful sexual secrets. Perhaps, says Sutherland, it was “the size of the master’s membrum virile.” (Rejoice with me: Couth is back and it’s funnier than vulgarity.)
He has no patience with “the fogs of feminist mystification” surrounding Virginia Woolf’s claim that she was sexually abused as a child, contending that the story, now accepted as Revealed Truth, has become “the royal road to understanding her tormented genius” and given her “canonical status . . . [as] a writer of near-Shakespearian importance to English literature.” He argues that a more realistic reason for her 1941 nervous breakdown and suicide was something that alarmed most of Britain at the time: the prospect of a German invasion. “She was the wife of a leftist intellectual Jew. . . . The Hogarth Press, which she and her husband Leonard ran, was Freud’s authorised English publisher.”

Many of Sutherland’s most interesting picks are writers we have forgotten, never heard of, or remember for the wrong reasons. In the last category is Frank R. Stockton, acclaimed adventure novelist of late-19th-century America, who was praised by Mark Twain. Nobody today reads his novels but everybody knows his 1882 short story “The Lady, or the Tiger?” It tells of the trial by ordeal undergone by the prisoner of an ancient “semi-barbaric king.” The prisoner is shown two doors. Behind one is a beautiful woman who will love him; behind the other is a ravenous tiger that will tear him to pieces. Ordered to open one of the doors, he steps up to them, and . . . The next words are The End. The reader was left to stew in frustration and Stockton became our national tease.

He might have had a subconscious reason for stopping his character just in time. In 1844, his cousin, Captain Robert Stockton, was demonstrating new state-of-the-art weaponry on the U.S.S. Princeton, docked on the Poto-mac, at an A-list political event attended by President John Tyler, several cabinet members, and Dolley Madison. When Cousin Robert’s cannon was fired, it exploded, sending flaming shards of molten iron into the crowd and killing Secretary of State Abel Upshur and Secretary of the Navy Thomas W. Gilmer.

“Ouida”—not to be confused with the board game—was the pen name of Louise Ramé, an English girl with a touch of Frenchness from her Channel Islands father that she pieced out with an unquenchable romanticism and a gift for self-promotion to make herself the Barbara Cartland of mid-Victorian publishing. Her blockbuster bestseller of 1867 was Under Two Flags. The hero is the Hon. Bertie Cecil of the Life Guards, who battles wicked Arabs in North Africa. Captured and condemned to death, Sutherland recounts, “he is saved from execution by Cigarette, the gamín camp follower who loves him madly, and who throws herself into the hail of firing-squad bullets meant for his breast (ballistically improbable—romantically beautiful).”

Ouida made a fortune and spent it with no concern for the future, renting whole floors in luxury hotels, buying a villa in Italy, and giving money away to animal-rights and anti-vivisection causes until, by the time of her death in 1908, she was destitute, with “more dogs than readers.” England, once at her feet, commemorated her with a small monument in her home town of Bury St. Edmunds: a watering trough for stray animals.

Mickey Spillane? He didn’t look a thing like Bela Lugosi, because he was Irish: red-haired, handsome, a brilliant scholar and star athlete at Trinity College, Dublin. All in all, what Americans call “well-rounded,” a Big Man on Campus who boned up on Transylvania in the British Museum.

Bram Stoker? He didn’t think of anything like Bela Lugosi, because he was Irish: red-haired, handsome, a brilliant scholar and star athlete at Trinity College, Dublin. All in all, what Americans call “well-rounded,” a Big Man on Campus who boned up on Transylvania in the British Museum.

“Tabor on, owd nag!” says Kester. “But no!” I said. “It mun be frommet, Kester. You mun marry a girl like a lily. See, I be hare-shotten!”

Webb got an even better celebrity plug for this one shortly after her death, when Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, in an Oprah-ish moment, praised her “neglected genius” and her publisher brought out her entire collected works. Her revival lasted long enough to make a bestseller of a spoof of Gone to Earth called Cold Comfort Farm (1932), by Stella Gibbons, who sets her story in “Howling, Sussex,” and pens a spot-on Webb-ian opening paragraph: “Dawn crept over the Downs like a sinister white animal followed by the snarling cries of a wind eating its way between the black boughs of the thorns.”

This is no way to maintain scholarly silence in library reference rooms. Better to read your own copy at home where you can underline it to your heart’s content.
WHEN Terrence Malick returned to filmmaking after a two-decade hiatus, the result was 1998’s The Thin Red Line, which is in many ways the most Malickian of all his movies: all gorgeous imagery and pantheistic reveries, with only a few thin sticks of plot and character to serve as scaffolding for the visual broad- cade. It’s a beautiful film, but ultimately a tedious and unsuccessful one, and its failures suggested that the long hiatus had left Malick’s artistic gifts intact but robbed him of his discipline.

Something similar seems to be at work with Whit Stillman, whose new film Damsels in Distress represents his first cinematic foray since The Last Days of Disco in 1998. Everything that earned Stillman’s earlier work its cult following is present in his latest movie: the elaborate, elevated dialogue; the young actors playing old souls; the running critique of conventional wisdom in all its varied forms; the gently reactionary spirit. Indeed, in many ways Damsels is the most unmistakably Still - manesque film the director has made yet. But it’s also in many ways his weakest movie: uneven in its comic tone, unfocused in its plotting, haphazard in its characterizations, and generally lacking a narrative that makes sense of its individual scenes and set pieces.

Stillman’s setting is Seven Oaks, a fictional liberal-arts college that only recently succumbed to the sexual revolution and began admitting men. The new arrivals are mostly boors and brutes and dimwits, squatting uncouthly in fraternity houses and polluting the campus with their body odor. Meanwhile, depression and despair seem to be sweeping the non-jock, non-frat portions of the campus, inspiring attempted suicides in a variety of forms.

Enter the titular damsels, a group of idealists on a mission civilisatrice. There are four: the strong-willed Violet (Greta Gerwig), the suspicions, Brit-accented Rose (Meghyn Echikunwoke), the daft and chirpy Heather (Carrie MacLemore), and the transfer student they take under their wing, the big-eyed, coltish Lily (Analeigh Tipton). Their goal is uplift, moral and intellectual and aesthetic, but they follow Violet’s idiosyncratic ideas about how to make that uplift happen: They set out to date the dimmest frat boys they can find in order to elevate and improve them; they run a suicide-prevention center that offers dance lessons as therapy; they emphasize hygiene as a cure for knuckleheadedness, even distributing a particularly extraordinary-smelling soap; and they evince a deep suspicion of what Rose calls “playboy-operators” and good-looking men of all varieties.

Needless to say, this suspicion doesn’t prevent them from running into male-related difficulties. Violet bestows her affections on Frank (Ryan Metcalf), a squinting “sad sack” (in her words), only to have him betray her with one of her protégées, the formerly suicidal Priss (Caitlin Fitzgerald). Heather falls for Thor (Billy Magnussen), the dimmest of all the fraternity brothers. Lily is torn between a French charmer named Xavier (Hugo Becker) and a “strategic development” hotshot (Adam Brody) who may not be all that he seems. Meanwhile, Violet’s larger causes—the quest to start a new dance craze, a battle to save fraternity life from the pre-Raphaelite light that falls on the girls to the broad-beyond-belief stupidity of the fraternity characters (one of them literally doesn’t know his colors)—to the dance number that breaks out just before the closing credits. This creates problems for the movie’s tone, but even more for the controlling theme: If the world of Damsels in Distress isn’t the real one to begin with, then how much can we care about the characters’ struggles to build up their own equally unreal alternatives?

Stillman’s fans, though, can take heart from the example with which this review began. Terrence Malick’s big return to filmmaking was a disappointment, but his follow-ups, The New World and The Tree of Life, have been near-masterpieces. Let’s hope for the same for the Bard of Urban Haute Bourgeoisie: May Damsels in Distress be a true new beginning rather than a valedictory, and may it make a bridge to better Stillman films to come.
Night Time Is the Right Time

RICHARD BROOKHISER

E ating late was a sign of sophistication. To eat in darkness, even in midsummer, when sun and birds have gone to bed and parents, back in their suburban habitats, are tiring; to eat in a blaze of artificial light, the auxiliary of restlessness and stimulation; to finish with coffee, last slap to the circadian rhythms, and tell any midwesterner who might be gaping, “Oh it never interferes with my sleep” (that’s because we don’t sleep, you rube); to pluck, from the rush of oncoming headlights, bouncing over the not-so-paved streets, the cab that will take you home (there will be no shortage of cabs, because cabbies know when city dwellers require their after-dinner rides): What could be better? I mean ordinary lateness, mind you: not the lateness of students pulling all-nighters, clubgoers, trannies, Balzac, garbage men, or fishmongers. Just the regular lateness of regular sophisticates. The one time I was in Madrid I learned that the locals are called gatos, cats, because of the hours they keep. That’s the idea.

For a while one of the local TV stations had the perfect tack-you-in-inafterwards ritual—Honeymooners reruns at 11:30, Star Trek reruns at midnight. You only had to watch a few minutes of the Star Trek rerun because you had long ago learned all the episodes: This is the one where the Americans have become tribesmen and Kirk gives a dramatic reading of the Preamble of the Constitution. Click.

But if everyone is a sophisticate, then the restaurants get a little crowded at cat-time. And changes in the layout and acoustics of restaurants have made that very unpleasant indeed.

There are two places in my neighborhood that are typical of the new order of things. Let’s call one Café Mononucleosis. The menu is Spanish, for all those cats, and I am told the food is good. I will never know, because it is impossible to get in. Youngsters snake out the door like a tail. The walls are wrap-around glass windows, so you can see where they are yearning to go: an array of narrow tables, packed together like lines on graph paper. The wineglasses are huge, which makes the tableaux even smaller. The bare thighs of the women touch the iPhones in the pants pockets of the men, and that is contact between strangers at different tables, not between dates facing each other. Everybody screams. Let’s call the other place Be It Ever So Humble. This is in some little leftover building with a bit of 19th-century charm, a converted carriage house perhaps. The charm is nice, but maybe the owners should have bought another and put them together. Each room is the size of a large oven. Diners sit on punishingly tall stools, taller than director’s chairs, with no backs, arrayed around tables that were too small even for Café Mononucleosis. Everybody screams.

No room, and chairs that you cannot comfortably sit in; the third baneful innovation is the communal table. The first time I saw one was in the restaurant of a boutique hotel (then a newish thing), where JFK Jr. was holding a party for the magazine he edited at the time, George. The guests of honor were Donald Trump, Larry Flynt, and Al Sharpton. If it had been ordinary restaurant hours, why should I have had to share a communal table with any of these gentlemen, much less all three of them? Screaming might have been a welcome distraction.

The new noise level might be explained by years of earbuds (no one can hear anymore). But why the easy acceptance of discomfort, or of subway-platform proximity? It is possible that no one knows how to eat anymore; I have read that the sit-down family meal is gone, slain by multiple televisions and social media. The Norman Rockwell tableau of the Thanksgiving turkey is not just bad art, it is bad art whose subject has died. Certainly everyone of a certain age texts and tweets as he or she eats, or masticates dumbly while the person across from him or her does so. Samuel Johnson reached down and twitched the shoes off women’s feet for less. So when they all get together to eat in a restaurant why shouldn’t they sit in midair, in each other’s laps, and scream?

If this is the new sophistication, then six must become the new ten-thirty. More and more I find myself dining at the blue-plate-special hour, the time once reserved for stout bland people in cornland IHOPs, or old Jews at older delis in Florida. I have in a sense become those people; I am certainly their age, or closer to it. I still have two claims to sophistication, one small, one large. My small claim is that I know what I am avoiding at ten-thirty (knowledge is the seal of being in with the in crowd, or in this case, in with the out crowd). —You’re eating stones. —But I know it. —Well that’s all right then. My larger claim to sophistication is that outside the doors of the momentarily quiet restaurants are not acre-size parking lots or Gulf Coast miasma, but foot traffic, car traffic, rush-hour traffic, rushing, jostling, who’s in my way? The chameleon takes the color of his background, which is humanity. When a woman is tired of London I will take off her shoe. We’ll go out later, when it’s dark, for coffee.

The season brings its own solution to the dilemma of six versus ten-thirty, which is tables outside. Tables on the deck, tables on the sidewalk, tables on the park. Vendors closing up shop: hats, bags, fresh fruit, stale art. Buskers playing bagpipes, banjos, washboards, overturned white plastic buckets. Noise and nearness dissipate, float away in the mild air. Even in the city, with its buildings and residual smog, you can see the evening star. And skin comes out like the flowers of bloodroots. But I won’t start on that.
A Ravening Justice

Thus, the DoJ case rests on the novel legal theory that, as the “centerpiece of Edwards’s candidacy was his public image as a devoted family man,” his “family image” and the costs of maintaining it are a political matter regulated under Title 2, Sections 431–455 of the U.S. Code. At least Section 377B of the Malaysian penal code is about sodomy, and nothing but. If the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 now covers “family image,” what doesn’t it extend to? So John Edwards “broke” a “law” that neither he nor anyone else knew existed. Which it didn’t, until he came along.

Edwards now faces 30 years in jail, for the crime of getting a couple of pals to pay for his baby’s diapers. For purposes of comparison, Anders Breivik murdered 77 people and is looking at 21 years in jail, the maximum sentence permitted under Norwegian law. So Mr. Breivik could be out of jail a decade before Senator Edwards. Scandinavian law is certainly too lenient (I am in favor of hanging Breivik), but U.S. law is stark staring nuts. And there are very few Anders Breiviks, while there are untold numbers on whom the caprices of U.S. justice can and do descend.

When they do, the prosecution has too many advantages. With corporate fraud, the tradition is that, in order to skewer the CEO, the government buys the CFO. Having deemed a politician’s “family image” to be in effect a business venture, the feds identified Andrew Young as Edwards’s CFO.

Young is a confessed liar whose loyalty to his boss was such that he claimed to be the father of Edwards’s baby. But it’s remarkable how the offer of federal immunity can wither the devotion of even the most stout-hearted of retainers. Having bought its witnesses, the Justice Department files multiple counts, generally ensuring that jurors suffering Edwards with a mistress or a love child, but with funding his mistress and love child via illegal campaign contributions. In federal justice, they throw the bookkeeping at you, a time-honored American judicial tradition: If you can’t get Al Capone for the Valentine’s Day Massacre, get him for tax evasion. The average citizen seems to have a sneaky admiration for this artful sidestepping, notwithstanding that very few individuals gun down large numbers of people, while millions of us are vulnerable to ever-metastasizing definitions of “mail fraud,” “wire fraud,” and the other catch-alls of federal justice. It’s not the crime that gets you, it’s the cover letter.

Mr. Steyn blogs at SteynOnline (www.steynonline.com).

BY MARK STEYN
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