

The K.F. Stone Weekly

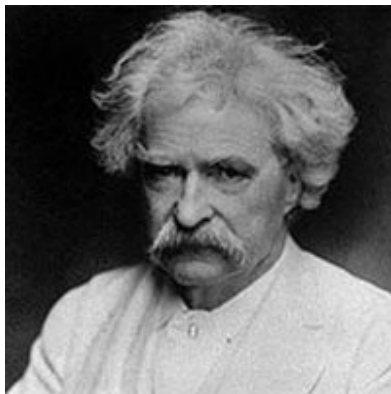
(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



January 07, 2012

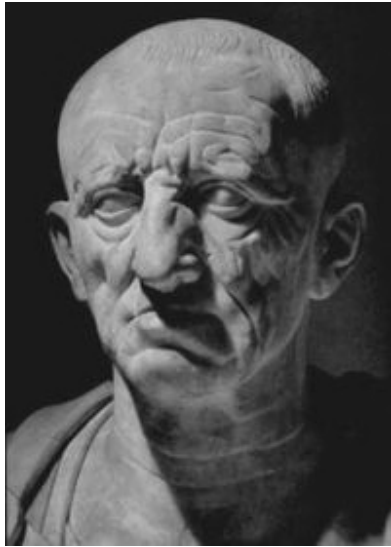
LIES TO LIVE BY

The study of history can be both instructive and curious; instructive in how it illuminates the progress of man; curious in that often, the more one learns, the less one understands. Shining a light on the events -- not to mention the personalities and politics -- frequently tarnishes the patina of noble ingenuousness with which said historic ingredients have long been imbued. This is because history -- as instructive and curious as it is -- is also filled with myth, half-truths and outright lies. Or, as Mark Twain would have it, *The history of our race, and each individual's experience, is sown thick with evidences that a truth is not hard to kill, and that a lie told well is immortal.*



History, of course, has its quaint myths: Every Jewish child knows that the "miracle" of Hanukkah is a cruse of oil that lasted for eight days. (In fact, the real miracle is that a group of farmers, shopkeepers, artisans and scholars went to war for an idea and actually defeated a professional army.) It used to be that every American school child knew the story about the young George Washington who, after being confronted by his father about the chopping down of a cherry tree famously proclaimed, *"I cannot tell a lie . . ."* (This engaging





little tale was actually invented by Parson Mason Locke Weems in his biography of the great man, written shortly after his death.)

History can also be numbingly repetitive; when Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson a blank check for war in Vietnam, it was based on a lie ("The *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* were fired on by North Vietnamese torpedo boats!") -- and Johnson knew it; when President George W. Bush beat a mendacious drum for war in Iraq it was based on a lie ("Saddam has weapons of mass destruction!"), and he knew it. In so lying,

both men were -- perhaps unknowingly -- following in the footsteps of Cato the Elder who purposefully misrepresented the Carthaginian threat to Rome (*Carthago delenda est* -- "Carthage must be destroyed!"), thus precipitating the Third Punic War. Moreover, Rome's utter destruction of Carthage, gave rise to one of history's most dubious -- yet durable -- claims: that Rome, seeking to ensure that Carthage would never rise again, sowed the fields with salt so that nothing would ever grow there again. (**n.b.** *This is highly dubious; salt was an expensive commodity in the ancient world. The amount needed to permanently destroy the fertility of the soil would have been so enormous that the supposed benefit would not have been worth the financial cost.*)

Myths and lies have a long history in American politics. Now, before any of our more conservative readers say, "Oh, he's at it again . . . he's going to go after the Republicans and give the Democrats a free pass . . ." let me assure you that in politics *all sides, all parties* lie. Federalists, Whigs, Republicans, Democrats, Tea Partiers, Libertarians, Socialists, Flat-Earthers . . . It goes with the turf. Then again, this *is* a progressive blog, so if it appears that we're going after one party more than another well, that *too* goes with the turf . . .

Moving from the realm of Cato, Carthage and conspiracy to the present day, we present several lies currently being promulgated; lies we sincerely hope will *not* become a part of history!

- **The salvation of the American economy lies in lowering taxes on corporations and the rich, cutting middle-class entitlements, deregulation, extreme deficit reduction and a balanced budget.** This mantra, sung by virtually every Republican in America is, to be diplomatic, a gross mistruth. The economic quagmire known as "The Great Recession" was far more the result of the deregulation of banks and tax cuts for the rich than entitlements for the middle-class. And while it is certainly true that deficits and debt do matter -- and must ultimately be addressed in a serious, purposive manner -- clamoring for draconian cuts in the midst of an economic downturn isn't mere fiscal imprudence; it betrays an utter disconnect. For too long, we've heard that placing ever greater wealth in the hands of corporations and the already wealthy will ultimately benefit everyone -- that "a rising tide raises all boats." This, of course, presumes that everyone has a boat . . .
- **No one has ever died because they didn't have health care:** This maddening mistruth came from the mouth of Republican "flavor-of-the-month" Rick Santorum, during a Q&A session with students at a small Christian college in Iowa this past December 5. A student asked the former Pennsylvania senator about health care and the Christian responsibility of caring for the poor. The student said "I don't think God appreciates the fact that we have 50 to 100,000 uninsured Americans dying due to a lack of healthcare every year," citing a 2009 study out of Harvard University. *"Dying?"* Santorum answered. *"I reject that number completely . . . that people die in America because of lack of health insurance. People die in America because people die in America."* Actually, according to the [Harvard study](#), published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, if you take two Americans who are physically identical – same age, same gender, same race, same weight, same smoking history – and one of them has health insurance and one does not, then the one without health insurance is 40% more likely to die each year.
- **States need to pass laws to ensure against voter fraud:** Of late, an increasing number of states -- all of which have Republican governors and Republican-majority legislatures -- have been introducing and passing legislation cutting back on early voting, changing rules for presenting absentee ballots and requiring voters to

present state-issued i.ds in order to vote. Their argument is that all of these moves are necessary in order to "protect the sanctity of the ballot from unscrupulous voters." And yet, according to [a recent study](#) by the Brennan Center for Justice has shown that instances of voter fraud in America are extraordinarily, unbelievably rare. Ohio, as an example, has documented four instances of voter fraud (out of more than 9 million ballots cast) in the last two presidential election cycles. Kansas, where the secretary of state pressed the legislature to pass a draconian i.d. law, admitted that his office could only document 221 cases of voter fraud since 1997. The real purpose behind all this is to make it far more difficult for certain groups -- students, ethnic minorities and the elderly -- to vote. Not surprisingly, all three of these groups have a greater tendency to vote Democratic than Republican. This is a naked attempt on the part of Republicans to create a "cure" for a problem that does not exist. One has a greater chance of being hit by lightening or winning the lottery than engaging in an act of voter fraud.

This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list of "lies to live by." We could easily have included such canards as "President Obama wants to turn America into a European Social Welfare state," or "The mainstream media is run by liberals for liberals," or "Corporations are people," or "There is no such thing as man-made global warming," or "Ronald Reagan never raised taxes . . ."

The truth of the matter is that from Cato to Cantor, and from Maccabees to McConnell, lies abound.

Which makes history both instructive . . . and curious.

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January 14, 2012

WHERE HAS ALL THE PROPOFOL GONE?

Propofol -- one of the drugs that led to Michael Jackson's untimely death -- is a short-acting, intravenously administered hypnotic agent. Known in some circles as "Milk of



Amnesia," its uses include the induction and maintenance of general anesthesia, sedation for mechanically-ventilated patients, and procedural sedation. Propofol -- and its generic equivalents -- has been widely and successfully administered in hospital operating rooms around the world for nearly 30 years. And, as of June 4,

2010, Teva Pharmaceuticals, the Israeli-based firm that was the major supplier of Propofol, no longer manufactures it. Today, it is almost impossible to find.

Where has all the Propofol gone?

And while we're at it, where has all the Doxil, Adderall, Mitomycin, Morphine Sulphate, Avalide, Ondansetron, Succinylcholine, Dextrose, B-12 and more than 200 other important meds gone? Shockingly, between 2006 and 2010, drug shortages increased by more than 200% according to a Government Accountability Office Report released late last month. Many of the drugs declared "MIA" are critical chemotherapeutics; intravenously infused medicaments and "cocktails" that can often mean the difference between remission and metastasis -- between life and death. Some of the shorted meds -- though far less exotic -- are just as critical to the health and well-being of patients in need: things as basic as injectable cobalamin (vitamin B-12) and Tylenol 1 (the 325 mg version). Although a lack of injectable B-12 might not seem as critical as a dearth of Propofol or Doxil (a chemotherapeutic drug used in the treatment of breast cancer), it can be for the patient in need; severe B-12 deficiency can lead to

irreversible damage, especially to the brain and nervous system. I know; I'm supposed to receive a weekly injection . . .

When and *if* a supply of these drugs can be located, it is at a cost; there are reports of drugs which distributors sold just two years ago for \$25.00 per dose, now going for as much as \$1,200 per dose on the "Grey Market." And this phenomenon is not confined to certain states or regions; it's happening all over the United States. Large, well-heeled establishments like the Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic and Vanderbilt University Medical Center at least have the possibility of purchasing critical medications -- at monstrously inflated prices - - because they have both the ability and the resources to order in great quantity. But one should keep in mind that there are just as many -- if not more -- patients whose lives depend on receiving chemotherapeutic drug protocols who live in small towns and are served by small hospitals that don't buy in quantity and thus cannot afford to pay hyper-inflated prices. Sometimes, when a drug that a patient tolerates well can't be readily located, the physician will prescribe an alternative -- which frequently the patient cannot tolerate. With some medical conditions, an interruption in treatment of a month, even a week, can be disastrous . . . even deadly.



The question is not only "Where has all the Propofol gone?" but "What has led to its scarcity?"

It all depends on who you ask, what ones starting point might be . . . even what axe they may be grinding. Make no mistake about it: the scarcity of pharmaceuticals is an issue and a problem for both Democrats and Republicans, ultra-conservatives and ultra-progressives. Anyone, regardless of his or her political philosophy, can contract cancer or Crohn's Disease, require surgery or suffer from a thousand-and-one life-threatening ailments. And yet, when it comes to analyzing the current situation, politics and point of view *do* count for something.

At base, market forces have a lot to do with the scarcity of drugs. The prices we pay for pharmaceuticals in the United States are far higher than those paid by the citizens of any other country in the world. In large measure this is why the pharmaceutical industry has for years been the most profitable of all businesses in the U.S. According to the annual *Forbes* 500 survey, the American pharmaceutical industry tops the list of all industries with a return of 17% on investment. And although the cost of *manufacturing* a new drug is relatively low, the cost of *inventing* and then patenting a new drug is relatively high. Drug manufacturers have always claimed that the high cost of pharmaceuticals is due to this latter issue. Then too, a hefty part of the price for bringing a new drug to market can be found in advertising costs; ever notice all those commercials urging us -- the patient -- to tell our physician that we want them to

prescribe drug "x" or "y" for condition "a" or "b?" Silly me; I thought it worked the other way around; that the doctor did the suggesting and prescribing to me, and not I to her .
..

Many, many pharmaceutical giants have seen their patents lapse and other companies manufacture, then market, generic versions of their creations. Generally speaking, when a drug goes off patent and becomes generic, the price drops precipitously; the companies making them are in the business of gaining as much market share as possible. This is a no-brainer. But then, the generic manufacturers cry, the price remains both low and flat; profits are minimal -- too minimal, many say, to warrant continued manufacturing of generic "a" or "b." Some place blame on the *Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act* (H.R. 1) which Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law on December 8, 2003. This act limits Medicare payment for physician-administered drugs to the average sales price plus a 6% administrative fee, which manufacturers claim has limited profit margins and thus their ability to maintain and upgrade their facilities. And despite the fact that H.R. 1 provides for an analysis of average sales prices twice a year, it still means that the profit to be made on these generics is going to rise at a pretty slow pace. Many companies have concluded that if drug "a" or "b" can't bring in more than 6% profit above cost, they simply will discontinue its manufacture.

Another factor is the drug distribution system itself. Physicians face pressure from health insurers to obtain the best prices for prescription drugs through multiple distributors. However, as noted above, distributors tend to provide the best prices and most stable supply to high-volume purchasers. Then too, according to information provided by [IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics](#), most of the nearly 170 prescription drugs in a shortage status as of October 2011 were offered by a single supplier or a small number (under 4) of firms.

Some claim the problem has been exacerbated by tighter Food and Drug Administration (FDA) enforcement of drug manufacturing standards. (According to public records, over the past 2 years the FDA expedited more than **300** industry applications for new or updated manufacturing facilities. So much for the "*It's-the-fault-of-all-those-damned-regulations*" argument.) This past October, President Obama signed an executive order requiring the FDA to expedite regulatory review of drug manufacturers and investigate price gouging. At the same time, the White House announced that they would immediately begin requiring some drug manufacturers to report production interruptions to the FDA. The manufacturers that have to report to the FDA are those drug manufacturers that have no generic equivalent and are critical to maintaining life. There are currently two pieces of legislation making their way through Congress calling for advanced warning of impending drug shortages and more FDA action. But passage is both uncertain and a long way off. For now, drug distributors would appear to be in the driver's seat.

Today, a majority of the shorted meds are being manufactured overseas -- in China, South America, Eastern Europe and Israel. The FDA simply does not have the budget or the manpower to inspect these foreign manufacturing plants. As a result, there are a lot of pharmaceuticals on the market that do not meet American safety standards -- another cause of shortages.

That the country which prides itself on having "the best healthcare on the planet" should have these problems -- drugs shortages, an unscrupulous "grey market" charging sky-high prices for life-saving meds, and a fast-declining manufacturing base - is unconscionable. That no other industrialized country suffers from a similar set of problems likely shows that we do *not*, in fact have "the best healthcare on the planet." To my way of thinking, many of these problems would be alleviated by going to a single-payer system; one that recognizes that although industries -- especially those that employ more lobbyists than any other on the planet -- have a constitutional right to make a reasonable profit, human beings have a God-given right to live.

If Michael Jackson's doctor could get his hands on Propofol why can't my doctor at the Cleveland Clinic?

And while we're at it, where in the hell is my B-12?

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January 22, 2012

A KEYSTONE COMEDY



This past week President Obama and the State Department rejected a permit for the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline. What a perversely ironic name: "Keystone." For me, a child of Hollywood, that name conjures up images of anarchic Kops who jump up and down, run to and fro, and throw pies with gay abandon; all perfectly predictable, all in the service of that low-brow class of comedy known as "slapstick." If the issues involved in the current Keystone -- the pipeline -- weren't so deadly serious -- energy, ecology and employment

-- it too could qualify as slapstick: anarchic, predictable and low-brow.

Except this Keystone isn't a silent flick; it's got a sound-track and special effects and everything.

And it's more of a tragicomedy . . .

For anyone who's paying close attention to this ongoing tragicomedy, the State Department's rejection should come as no surprise; it is all part of an election-year scenario composed by the Republicans Caucus. From the moment late last month when Boehner & Company attached a provision to the payroll tax extension bill requiring the president to decide on the pipeline permit within 60 days, their intention was as obvious as the plotline of a Keystone Comedy: to hit Barack Obama and the Democrats with an election year pie in the face. Even before Republicans attached the provision, the White House had stated that it would need a minimum of another year in order to evaluate the various potential

impacts of the pipelines. (For those not yet aware of what "fracking" -- hydraulic fracturing -- is, check out an article from [The Guardian](#).) What has not been generally reported is that Nebraska and North Dakota -- two states that would be along the proposed pipeline route -- expressed severe reservations about the impact it might have on farmlands and aquifer. As a result, TransCanada -- the firm set to build the pipeline -- went back to the drawing board in order to create a new route. Both the president and the State Department have made it clear that they are willing to revisit this issue in the future, once TransCanada maps out a new route proposal. To listen to the opposition, the denial is both eternal and unalterable.

Guess again.

From day one, most Republicans -- and a number of Democrats -- proclaimed that approving the Keystone XL was absolutely essential; both for the jobs it would create, and for the energy independence it would guarantee. With the Obama Administration's denial, Republicans can now breathlessly accuse the president of being callously unconcerned about either. "He is," more than one Fox commentator has complained, "anti-oil and anti-Capitalism."



How predictable.

Anti-oil? Anti-Capitalist? Really? In his statement on the decision, the president said his administration is *looking at another proposed pipeline in the Midwest*. Just last month, his administration made available 21 million acres - an area about the size of South Carolina - of offshore drilling sites in the Gulf of Mexico -- not precisely the action of a man or an administration that is "anti-oil." The lease auction attracted more than \$337 million in high bids from oil companies.

Moreover, when the State Department issued its original negative report on the proposed Keystone-XL, it was marred by enough controversy and scandal to warrant an investigation by Foggy Bottom's inspector general. (Yes, that's right; the administration was investigating itself!) Last year, a Freedom of Information Act request by environmental groups revealed that a former Hillary Clinton campaign aide was working as a lobbyist for TransCanada, and that Cardno Entrix, a massive contracting firm and TransCanada client, was hired to prepare much of the original environmental assessment.

And the Teeheezels of the right still would have us believe that the administration is anti-oil!

What a predictable script.

In the run-up to Obama's permit denial, the entertainers at Fox, emoting from scripts written by TransCanada, claimed that the proposed \$7 billion, 1,700-mile pipeline would create 12-15,000 jobs. Now that it has been put on hold, that number has magically grown to anywhere between 20,000 and 50,000 construction and manufacturing jobs as well as more than 120,000 indirect jobs. So far as I can tell, this is the only jobs program the Republicans have put forth since taking over Congress -- except for cutting taxes and regulations.

Want to talk about jobs?

A recent 40-page study published by the Cornell Global Labor Institute entitled [*Pipe Dreams? Jobs Gained, Jobs Lost by the Construction of Keystone XL*](#) concludes that the job estimates put forward by TransCanada are "unsubstantiated." The folks at Cornell GLI found that "50% or more of the steel pipe, the main material input used for Keystone XL, will be manufactured outside the U.S." Another study concluded that at best, Keystone would create between 2,500 and 6,000 temporary construction positions. It follows that if the number of direct jobs -- and their economic impact -- are far less than TransCanada has claimed, that the number of indirect positions will also be far less.

Another line in the script goes, "*The oil carried by the Keystone XL will go a long way towards weaning America off of foreign oil -- something the president obviously could care less about!*" Here again, there's a bit of a problem with reality . . . and reportage. It turns out that the United States, for the first time in 62 years, is a *net exporter* of petroleum products. According to data released in late November of 2011 by the U.S. Energy Information Administration -- and reported that notorious Socialist rag [*The Wall Street Journal*](#) -- "The U.S. exported 753.4 million barrels of everything from gasoline to jet fuel in the first nine months of 2011, while it imported 689.4 million barrels." As recently as 2005, we imported nearly 900 million more barrels of petroleum than we exported. The last time we were a *net exporter* of oil, gas cost 26 cents a gallon, the price of a first-class stamp was 3 cents, and a typical house cost \$13,500.



This bit of good news has gone largely unreported. The question is why. I suspect it is because the lion's share of oil that would flow through the Keystone XL would be exported overseas . . . which does a lot for corporate profits but precious little for energy independence.

It has been loudly suggested that President Obama canceled the Keystone XL pipeline as "an election-year gesture of good will to his most ardent supporters on the Left." While it is true that environmentally-conscious Americans are gleeful that at least for now the pipeline and the dangers of fracking have been put on the shelf, not all of the president's "most ardent supporters" are happy. In putting the Keystone XL on hold, President Obama has earned a ton of enmity from organized labor -- a key group he will need if he is to be reelected. Labor believes that the president's action is short-sighted; that it kills unionized jobs. I don't think anyone's crystal ball is powerful enough to see whether or not jobs produced by the pipeline project would be unionized.

One thing I *do* know that in denying TransCanada their permit, President Obama has done precisely what the Republicans set him up to do; he has faithfully acted out the script they wrote for him. The president and his advisers are wise enough to know that in denying the Keystone permit, he was setting himself up to have a political pie thrown his way.

The question now is, how good are his reflexes . . . ?

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January 28, 2012

COUPON CLIPPERS OF THE WORLD UNITE!



Last Wednesday in my "All Politics All the Time" course at Florida International University, we spent a few minutes discussing Mitt Romney's tax return, which he had released just the day before. Not surprisingly, most of students were well versed on how much

Romney's Home in Deer Valley, UT

Governor Romney earned per year (roughly \$20 million), the percentage he paid in taxes (approximately 15%) and the various sources of his vast wealth.

In the midst of our conversation -- for which I had originally allotted no more than ten minutes -- one student asked, "If Romney gets elected, will he be the richest president in American history?"

"That's a fascinating question," I answered slowly, doing a quick "Google search" in my head. "Although I'm not sure," I answered after a few seconds of silence, "*al regel achat* (Hebrew for *while standing on one foot*) I would have to say the answer is 'no' -- Mitt Romney would *not* be our wealthiest president. I think that distinction goes to George Washington, who in addition to being one of the

tallest men in the nation (nearly 6'2"), was likely its richest as well." My answer drew a few skeptical head

wags -- about both his height and wealth. I promised the class that I would do some serious research and hopefully have an answer for them by our next class session.

Another student challenged the class with a comment/question: "What does it all mean in the long-run? Just because the man's super-rich does that mean he can't understand people who aren't? Are we going to hold his wealth against him?"

The student was bringing up an intriguing point which, in a time of gross economic disparity, will likely be a major issue lurking just beneath the surface should Governor Romney get the Republican nomination.

As a society, our fascination with the "lifestyles of the rich and famous" is somewhere between widespread and universal. A quick survey of which magazines and tabloids are hawked at virtually every supermarket checkout line in America amply proves the point. How many people who don't even know the name of the family living across the street can give you line and verse about how



Romney's Home in La Jolla, CA

much famous people earn . . . or the price of their mansions or the "toys" they play? We know so much about people we don't truly know as to become inured to real life. We read or hear so much about other people's wealth that we can actually say of an athlete making \$2 million a season that "he's a real bargain." \$2 million a bargain? That's \$38,461.53 a week!

Sounds pretty outrageous when you break it down by the week -- or the game, at bat or even hour. Consider the following:

- Kobe Bryant makes \$307,853.66 per game -- if he plays all 82 games in a season.
- A-Rod makes \$50,000 per at bat -- if he comes to the plate 600 per season.

- Tom Brady earns \$825,507.50 per game, 16 games a season.
- In 2011, Lady Gaga earned \$1,730,770 a week.
- Mitt Romney earns \$2,285.00 an hour, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Don't get me wrong, I am *not* denigrating anyone making a king's ransom; God bless 'em all I say. But at the same time, you have to wonder if all that money might not create a wall of separation between *some* seriously wealthy people and the rest of us who *don't* have a 7 or 8 figure income. Yes indeed, there certainly *are* very wealthy people who never forgot where they came from; who still have a deep and thorough understanding of what it means to be living on the edge. Take former Representative Alan Grayson who, despite possessing a net worth somewhere north of \$30,000,000.00 is one of the wild and woolliest progressives in America. (Check out the essay on Alan in my book, [*The Jews of Capitol Hill*](#)) Then there are Senators Frank Lautenberg and Herb Kohl, two multi-multi millionaires who are at the forefront of those arguing for higher taxes for the wealthy and against cuts to Social Security and Medicare.

And then there's Mitt Romney. The son of former Michigan Governor -- and American Motors CEO -- George Romney, Mitt wasn't exactly born into the middle class. His father earned, on average, more than \$300,000 a year during his peak years.



Romney's Home in Belmont, MA

As such, Mitt and his 4 siblings were raised first in the upscale Detroit Palmer Woods neighborhood and then the even more tony Bloomfield Hills, where he prepped at the Cranbrook School. And although Mitt Romney is, without question, a good, decent and charitable man -- he tithes his church -- he acts and sounds like a man who hasn't the slightest idea what it is like to worry over whether one will have enough money to pay the mortgage, health insurance and utility bill, or is barely able to cover the monthly minimum on their credit cards - - despite working two jobs.

A person who is truly in touch with the challenges of daily life would not say -- even as a joke -- "I should tell my story . . . I'm also unemployed," despite earning 54,795.00 *a day* off of his investments. Who in the real world can blithely afford to

challenge someone to a \$10,000.00 bet -- as he did with Texas Governor Rick Perry? Then there's Romney's off-the-cuff comment, "I get speakers fees from time to time, but not very much." (In this case, the "not very much" amounted to more than \$350,000!)

When a candidate like Mitt Romney -- who in his lifetime has gone from being privileged to richer-than-Croesus -- or Newt Gingrich -- who has gone from lower-middle-class to multimillionaire -- argues for lower taxes for the rich and against, say, collective bargaining rights for union workers, it smacks of being completely out of

touch. When a man like President Barack Obama -- the child of a mixed-race broken home -- who earned more than \$5 million writing books -- argues in favor of the rich (which now includes him) paying "their fair share," one gets the sense of a person still in touch with real people living real lives, facing real challenges.



With economic disparity looming as the subtext for the 2012 presidential election, one can't help but believe that Mitt Romney is going to be at a decided disadvantage.

Romney's Home in Wolfboro, NH

Now, as to the question of our wealthiest president: turns out I was correct. According to a fascinating story published on the acclaimed website [24/7 Wall Street.com](http://247WallStreet.com) George Washington was, far and away, our wealthiest Commander in Chief. The editors of 24/7 Wall Street estimate that Washington was worth -- in 2010 dollars -- somewhere in the neighborhood of \$525 million. Additionally, he made far, far more than subsequent presidents; his salary was 2% of the total U.S. budget in 1789! Other truly wealthy chief executives include Thomas Jefferson (\$212 million), James Madison (\$100 million), Andrew Jackson (\$119 million), Theodore Roosevelt (\$125 million), Herbert Hoover (\$70 million), and Lyndon Johnson (\$98 million). (Those wondering about JFK should know that had he lived, he stood to inherit more than \$1 billion from his father. Such, however, was not to be his fate . . .)

As a society of voyeurs, we are, without question, addicted to the "lifestyles of the rich and famous." One hopes that when it comes to being a society of citizens and voters, we seek out those who, despite having earned -- or not -- great wealth, still have their fingers on the pulse of real people living real lives, facing real challenges.

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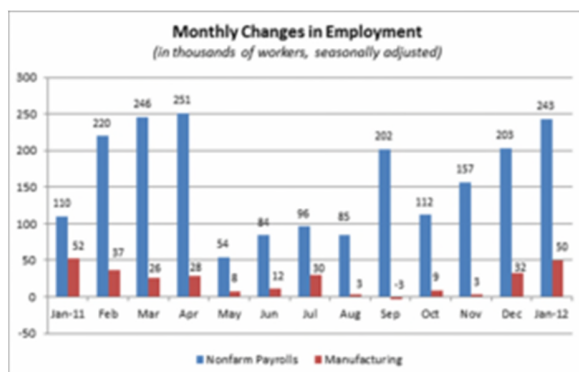
February 05, 2012

WHEN GOOD NEWS IS NO NEWS

On Friday, the Labor Department reported that the economy added 243,000 jobs in January, which dropped the unemployment rate to 8.3% -- the lowest jobless rate since January 2009, the month Barak Obama took the oath of office. Although certainly slower and weaker than the president and millions of un- and underemployed Americans would wish, there is no question but that the American economy is improving. Indeed, over the past year, the economy has added nearly 2 non-government million jobs; over the past 23 months that figure is 3.7 million.

This represents the best 12 months in at least 5 years. Buoyed by the good news, the Dow rose by slightly more than 200 points, ending the week at 12,862.23 -- a 77.4% rise since Barack Obama took the oath of office slightly more than 3 years ago.

According to a broad array of data, the economy has been gaining strength for almost six months, offering some reason for hope that the effects of the deep financial crisis are finally starting to fade. Still, the economy will need several more years of strong job



growth to return to anything resembling full health. And although many forecasters are growing more hopeful about this year, several factors — including Europe's financial troubles and the turmoil in Iran — could change the situation quickly. As such, in speaking about the economy this past Friday, the president essentially laid out the theme that will be at the center of his re-election campaign, reminding voters

how bad an economy he inherited and hailing recent progress while being careful to add that there is still a long way to go. "The economy is growing stronger; the recovery is speeding up," the president said. But he then quickly conceded: "These numbers will go up and down in the coming months."

In other words, despite the much-needed good news, the president neither crowed nor took a rhetorical victory lap. He knows that while the path we're on is a good and solid one, it nonetheless contains many ruts, jags and potholes. Sounds pretty realistic to me; hopeful and cautiously optimistic. There is much to be both proud and hopeful about:

- After more than a decade of job losses, American manufacturing has been creating jobs since December 2009.
- The American auto industry is back. GM is again No. 1 in the world; auto manufacturers are expected to add more than 100,000 new jobs in the next 2 years.
- American oil production is at its highest level in more than 8 years.

To listen to the none-too-loyal opposition, none of the above is true; things are getting worse. For them, there *is* no good news. Or, to put it another way, "good news is no news." Representative Jeb Hensarling of Texas, chairman of the House Republican Conference, like many of his colleagues, essentially ignored the positive economic news. "Today is an indication of another failure of this president's policies -- 36 months in a row of 8 percent-plus unemployment," he said. Speaker John Boehner said, "The American people are still asking, 'Where are the jobs?'"

According to Romney, Gingrich, Paul and Santorum, President Obama and his administration, far from leading the economy down the road to recovery, are lost at sea clinging to a deflated life raft. According to them, the newest Labor Department figures are meaningless at best, suspect at worst. (Limbaugh and Hannaty both argued "The jobs report is corrupt." Hannaty said the report ". . . has phony numbers all around it.") Such a position places President Obama's potential challengers -- especially Gov. Romney -- in the position of ignoring statistical evidence and sounding the tocsin of angry, conspiratorial negativity . . . never a great strategy in a presidential campaign. It also leaves voters wondering whether these guys are actually pulling for the economy to remain in the tank -- at least until they can take over. If so, this is, to my way of thinking, ideological treason.

Speaking at a campaign in Sparks, Nevada just a few hours before that state's caucus gatherings, Romney said, "This recovery has been slower than it should have been. People have been suffering for longer than they should have had to suffer. Will it get better? I think it'll get better," he added. "But this president has not helped the process. He's hurt it." And despite making these comments in Nevada -- the state with the highest unemployment rate in the nation (slightly above 13%), Romney's only "cure for

what ails us" is -- like virtually every other Republican in America -- lower taxes and less regulation. From day one, Romney has been proclaiming that as a businessman -- one who has "an intimate knowledge of the private sector" -- he "knows what it takes" to get America out of its economic doldrums.

There is ample evidence that having "an intimate knowledge of the private sector" is no guarantee of succeeding in government. Take the last American president to come from the ranks of business: Hoover Hoover. Need one say more? Or Florida's current Governor, Rick Scott. Despite having experienced enough success in the private sector to pay for a campaign out of his own pocket, he has been an utter disaster as governor; running a for-profit business is one heck of a lot different than running a state. Even Scott's fellow Republicans are turning against him. (It should be noted that despite spending \$73 million of his own money, Scott only managed to defeat Democrat Alex Sink by a razor-thin margin of 48.87%-47.72%). One can also site the failed governorships of Arnold Schwarzenegger (R-CA) and John Corzine (D-NJ), two highly successful, fabulously wealthy men, which were more notable for their failures than successes. The short and sweet of it is that running a business and running a government are two very different enterprises.

It is in no way surprising that Mitt Romney, a man who made an unfathomable fortune in the private sector, should ask us to place our faith in the free market. After all, from his perspective -- and that of most of his Republican colleagues -- this is from whence all economic health and success emanates. Their argument has long been that by lowering taxes for the wealthy, by cutting -- if not eliminating -- the tax on capital gains, it will permit business owners to expand their enterprises, thus increasing employment and thus strengthening the economy. Over the past generation, this argument has gone by the name "supply-side" economics. There is, I am sorry to say, no historic evidence for its ever having succeeded. In order for "supply-side" to work, there must be a "demand-side" -- consumers -- who have the cash to buy what the wealthy are supplying.

One need not agree with "the free market is the salvation of us all" philosophy to understand how it could be quite appealing to many -- especially those who have been taught that "government is the problem, not the solution." What is terribly difficult to comprehend, is how people can take good news and spin it into being no news at all.

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



February 12, 2012

AN ESSAY WITH SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE TO DISLIKE

We begin with a handful of quotes on the subject of conservatives and conservatism:

- **Alexis de Toqueville:** *"I cannot help fearing that men may reach a point where they look on every new theory as a danger, every innovation as a toilsome trouble, every social advance as a first step toward revolution, and that they may absolutely refuse to move at all."*
- **Mark Twain:** *"Conservatism is the blind and fear-filled worship of dead radicals."*
- **Woodrow Wilson:** *"A conservative is someone who makes no changes and consults his grandmother when in doubt."*
- **William F. Buckley, Jr.:** *"A Conservative is a fellow who is standing athwart history yelling 'Stop!'."*
- **William E. Gladstone:** *"Liberalism is trust of the people tempered by prudence. Conservatism is distrust of the people tempered by fear."*
- **Barry Goldwater:** *"Today's so-called 'conservatives' don't even know what the word means. They think I've turned liberal because I believe a woman has a right to an abortion. That's a decision that's up to the pregnant woman, not up to the pope or some do-gooders or the Religious Right. It's not a conservative issue at all."*
- **P.J. O'Rourke:** *"The Democrats are the party that says government will make you smarter, taller, richer, and remove the crabgrass on your lawn. The Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work and then get elected and prove it."*

Now that we've got the conservative diastolic on the rise, let's move on to a handful of quotes about liberals and liberalism:

- **Thomas Sowell:** *"Liberalism is totalitarianism with a human face."*
- **Robert Frost:** *"A liberal is a man too broad-minded to take his own side in a quarrel."*
- **E.J. Dionne, Jr.:** *"Liberals and conservatives disagree over what are the most important sins. For conservatives, the sins that matter are personal irresponsibility, the flight from family life, sexual permissiveness, the failure of individuals to work hard. For liberals, the gravest sins are intolerance, a lack of generosity toward the needy, narrow-mindedness toward social and racial minorities."*
- **Charles Krauthammer:** *To understand the workings of American politics, you have to understand this fundamental law: Conservatives think liberals are stupid. Liberals think conservatives are evil.*
- **Ann Coulter:** *"Liberals become indignant when you question their patriotism, but simultaneously work overtime to give terrorists a cushion for the next attack and laugh at dumb Americans who love their country and hate the enemy."*
- **Yevgeny Yevtushenko:** *"Why is it that right-wing bastards always stand shoulder to shoulder in solidarity, while liberals fall out among themselves?"*
- **Lenny Bruce:** *"The liberals can understand everything but people who don't understand them."*

The above should raise the liberal systolic by a few points.

Now on to a statement that should get both sides riled:

If, God forbid, America ever becomes a second-rate nation, it will undoubtedly be because the cupidinous morons on the right have been aided and abetted by the weak-kneed cowards on the left. You read me correctly: the conservatives are morons; the liberals are cowards. The former is scientifically verifiable; the latter, anecdotally conjectural.

Last month, Gordon Hodson, a widely respected Professor of Psychology at Brock University in Ontario (Canada) published a long-awaited study in the journal *Psychological Science*. Entitled [*Bright Minds and Dark Attitudes*](#), Professor Hodson's controversial study compared childhood intelligence with political views in adulthood across more than 15,000 people. Hodson and his colleagues came to the conclusion that " . . . lower general intelligence in childhood predicts greater racism in adulthood, and [that] this effect was largely mediated via conservative ideology." In other words, as summarized by the *Daily Mail*'s [Rob Waugh](#), *"Right-wingers tend to be less intelligent than left-wingers, and people with low childhood intelligence tend to grow up to have racist and anti-gay views Conservative politics work almost as a 'gateway' into prejudice against others People with low intelligence gravitate towards right-wing views because they make them feel safe."*

This by no means is meant to suggest that all conservatives are stupid. Goodness knows, it certainly takes clever people to convince a fearful segment of the American public of such patent inanities as:

- Barack Obama was not born in the United States.
- Those who claim that climate change is man-made are elitist members of an eco-fascist-communist-anarchist conspiracy.
- A tax break for the 1% is the only hope for the 99%.
- Any regulation that claims to prevent big banks and corporations from exploiting us, is in reality, an assault on working man and woman.
- The federal deficit results largely from the greed of the poor.
- The President of the United States is waging a war on religion.

Writing about the new conservatives in the online journal *Truthout*, former longtime GOP congressional staffer [Mike Longren](#) noted, *To be sure, the [Republican] party, like any political party on earth, has always had its share of crackpots But the crackpot outliers of two decades ago have become the vital center today: Steve King, Michele Bachman . . . Virginia Foxx, Louie Gohmert, Allen West. The Congressional directory now reads like a casebook of lunacy.*"

Not to be outdone, former George W. Bush speechwriter [David Frum](#) (who coined the phrase "Axis of Evil") wrote in a recent *New York* article:

Backed by their own wing of the book-publishing industry and supported by think tanks that increasingly function as public-relations agencies, conservatives have built a whole alternative knowledge system, with its own facts, its own history, its own laws of economics. Outside this alternative reality, the United States is a country dominated by a strong Christian religiosity. Within it, Christians are a persecuted minority. Outside the system, President Obama, whatever his policy errors, is a figure of imposing intellect and dignity. Within the system, he's a pitiful nothing, unable to speak without a teleprompter, an affirmative-action phony doomed to inevitable defeat. Outside the system, social scientists worry that the U.S. is hardening into one of the most rigid class societies in the Western world, in which the children of the poor have less chance of escape than in France, Germany, or even England. Inside the system, the U.S. remains (to borrow the words of Senator Marco Rubio) the only place in the world where it doesn't matter who your parents were or where you came from.

Creating and selling (if not fully believing) this right-wing reality takes a lot of craftiness, if not downright intelligence; it also takes a trainload of cash and a cadre of folks who have no problem taking advantage of millions upon millions of what Lofgren calls "low-information voters." What the likes of the Koch Brothers, Sheldon Adelson, Foster Friese and the other right-wing billionaires (among those possessing the trainloads of cash) have discovered is that there is no pool too shallow in which millions cannot and will not drown.

But beyond the creating, the funding and the selling of this "alternate knowledge," there is the cowardice and downright complaisance of America's liberals and progressives. As Thomas Frank notes in his latest book, [Pity the Billionaire](#) much of the blame rests with liberals and progressives, who suffer from what he calls "terminal

niceness." As the *Guardian*'s [George Monbiot](#) describes it, the Democrats, ". . . *fail to produce a coherent analysis of what has gone wrong and why, or . . . make an uncluttered case for social justice [and] regulation.*" Instead, he argues, they "*triangulate and accommodate, hesitate and prevaricate.*"

Indeed, the conceptual stupidities of conservatism are more than matched by the strategic stupidities of liberalism. If ever the American political system is to right itself, the Right will have to stop feeding caustic misinformation to a haunted, fearful, low-information public, and the Left will have to overcome its reticence and shout STOP!

Enough of this even-handedness! Let us end with one last quote . . . from John Stewart Mill:

"Although it is not true that all conservatives are stupid people, it is true that most stupid people are conservative."

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February 19, 2012

IS RICK SANTORUM RUNNING FOR POTUS OR POTMA?

By now, former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty must be kicking himself in the backside and feeling like Terry Malloy. Terry who? Malloy -- the character



Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. If you use your imagination, you can Pawlenty muttering: "You don't understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it. If only I'da stayed in the race, even I coulda been the Republican flavor of the month . . . instead of all those other guys . . . like Bachmann, Perry, Cain, Gingrich and now this guy Santorum . . . If only I'da known, I too coulda run for

beatification insteda nomination . . ."

Indeed, listening to the former Pennsylvania senator these past few weeks -- and going back over what he's said these past few years -- its difficult to tell if he's running for POTUS (President of the United States) or POTMA (Pope of the Middle Ages). Since he has emerged from the shadows, Santorum has been making one outrageous statement after another -- on issues ranging from Global Warming and Evolution to Contraception, Gay Marriage and the Crusades. Not only has he shown himself to be as rigidly far-right as any presidential candidate in memory; he has proven that his grasp of history is as tenuous as that of Sara Palin. A sampling of some of Santorum's more ludicrous comments make the determination as to whether he is running for President or Pope truly a difficult endeavor:

- **On Global Warming:** *"I believe the earth gets warmer and I also believe the earth gets cooler. And I think history points out that it does that*



and that the idea that man, through the production of CO₂ – which is a trace gas in the atmosphere, and the man-made part of that trace gas is itself a trace gas – is somehow responsible for climate change is, I think, just patently absurd when you consider all the other factors . . . [Global Warming is] just an excuse for more government control of your life, and I've never been for any scheme or even accepted the junk science behind the whole narrative.” ([Santorum on the Rush Limbaugh Show](#))

- **On contraception:** *“One of the things I will talk about, that no president has talked about before, is I think the dangers of contraception in this country. It's not okay. It's a license to do things in a sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be. [Sex] is supposed to be within marriage. It's supposed to be for purposes that are yes, conjugal...but also procreative. That's the perfect way that a sexual union should happen...This is special and it needs to be seen as special.”* ([Santorum speaking in Minnesota 2/7/12](#))
- **On homosexuality and gay marriage:** *“Let's look at what's going to be taught in our schools because now we have same sex couples being the same and their sexual activity being seen as equal and being affirmed by society as heterosexual couples and their activity. So what is going to be taught to our people in health class in our schools? What is going to be taught to our children about who in our stories, even to little children – what are married couples? What families look like in America? So, you are going to have in our curriculum spread throughout our curriculum worldview that is fundamentally different than what is taught in schools today? Is that not a consequence of gay marriage?”* ([Speaking in Iowa, Jan. 2012](#))
- **On the teaching of Evolution:** *“What we should be teaching are the problems and holes and I think there are legitimate problems and holes in the theory of evolution. And what we need to do is to present those fairly from a scientific point of view. And we should lay out areas in which the evidence supports evolution and the areas in the evidence that does not.”* (On NPR's ["Morning Edition,"](#) Aug. 4, 2005)
- **On Health Care and World War II and the Normandy Invasion (!):** *“Almost 60,000 average Americans had the courage to go out and charge those beaches on Normandy, to drop out of airplanes who knows where, and take on the battle for freedom. Average Americans, the very Americans that our government now, and this president, does not trust to make a decision on your health care plan. Those Americans risked everything so they could make that decision on their health care plan.”* ([June 6, 2011](#))
- **On President Obama:** *“The president's agenda is not about you. It's not about your quality of life. It's not about your job. It's about some phony ideal, some*

phony theology. Oh, not a theology based on the Bible, a different theology. But no less a theology." ([2/18/12](#))

- **On the Relationship Between Social Security and Abortion:** *"The Social Security system, in my opinion, is a flawed design, period. But having said that, the design would work a lot better if we had stable demographic trends. We don't have enough workers to support the retirees . . . A third of the young people in America are not in America today because of abortion."* ([Radio Interview](#) in New Hampshire, Mar. 29, 2011)
- **If Barack Obama is Reelected, Christians May Well be Beheaded:** *"When you marginalize faith in America, when you remove the pillar of God-given rights then what's left is the French Revolution. What's left is a government that gives you rights. What's left are no unalienable rights. What's left is a government that will tell you who you are, what you'll do and when you'll do it. What's left in France became the guillotine."* ([Speech in Plano, Texas](#), Feb. 9, 2012) and lastly,
- **Satan is Attacking America:** *"If you were Satan, who would you attack in this day and age. There is no one else to go after other than the United States He didn't have much success in the early days. Our foundation was very strong, in fact, is very strong. But over time, that great, acidic quality of time corrodes even the strongest foundations. And Satan has done so by attacking the great institutions of America..."* ([Speech at Ave Maria University](#) in 2008)

The above quotations don't even come close to giving a full accounting of the Santorum catechism. Suffice it to say that his views are so arch, so far off the beaten track as to make him un-electable. And for that, all forward-thinking people can breathe a collective sigh of relief.

America has no need of a Pope -- especially a medieval one.

Yes indeed, Tim Pawlenty is kicking himself in the rear . . .

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February 25, 2012

Forty-Five Pictures Might Be Worth Ten Million Votes

Something quite a bit different this week . . .

With so much time, attention and ink being devoted to the retrograde lunacy and schoolyard caterwauling that is the Republican field, I thought it would be appropriate to devote a column -- in a few words and forty-five pictures -- to a class act: President Barack Obama. It comes as no surprise that in the midst of debates and screaming headlines concerning such contrived "dog whistle" issues as contraception, transvaginal ultrasounds and personhood, we wonder "are there any adults left in the room?" Actually there are. And one of them is President Obama. There is such a vast chasm in this country between those who can't find a single positive thing to say about our president and those who find him to be the embodiment of the American Dream. I must admit to being in the latter camp.

And so, without further ado, a "Thank You" to the man and the family who reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

(Deep thanks to my friend and student Al Blake for bringing the following to my attention . . .)

Thanks Mr. President

For . . .

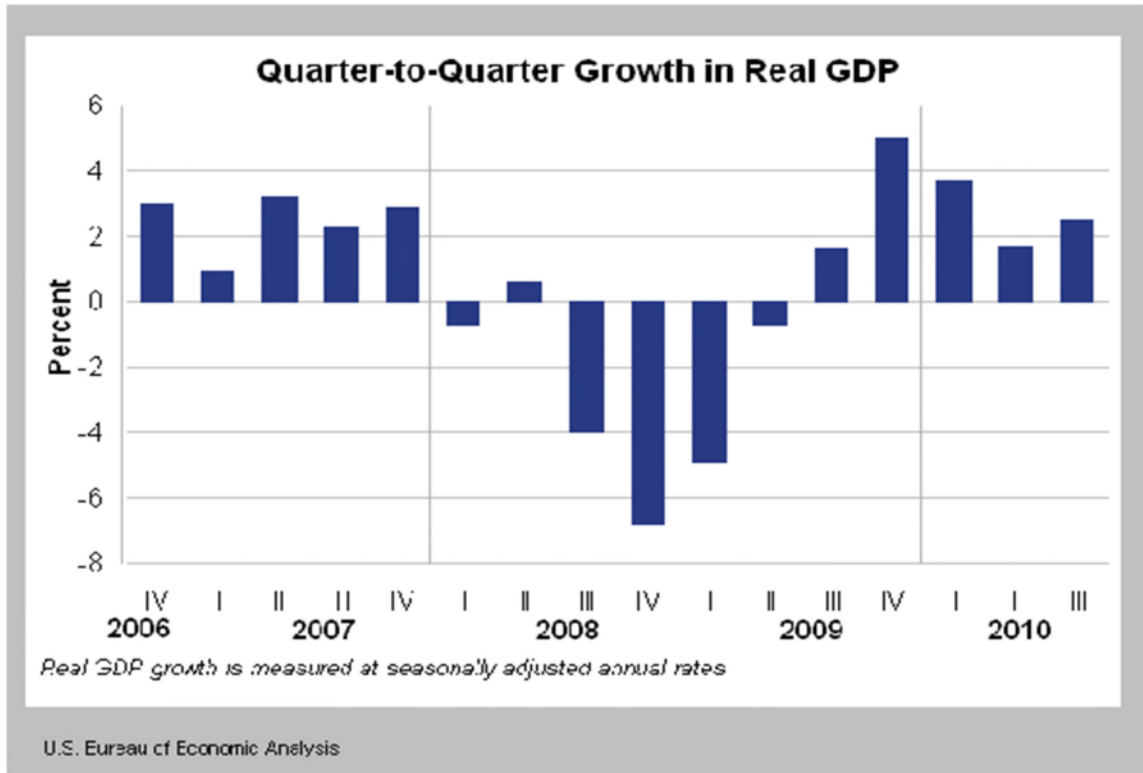
... the "room lightening" smile:



The mind that always thinks:



Preventing a second Great Depression:



the humor:





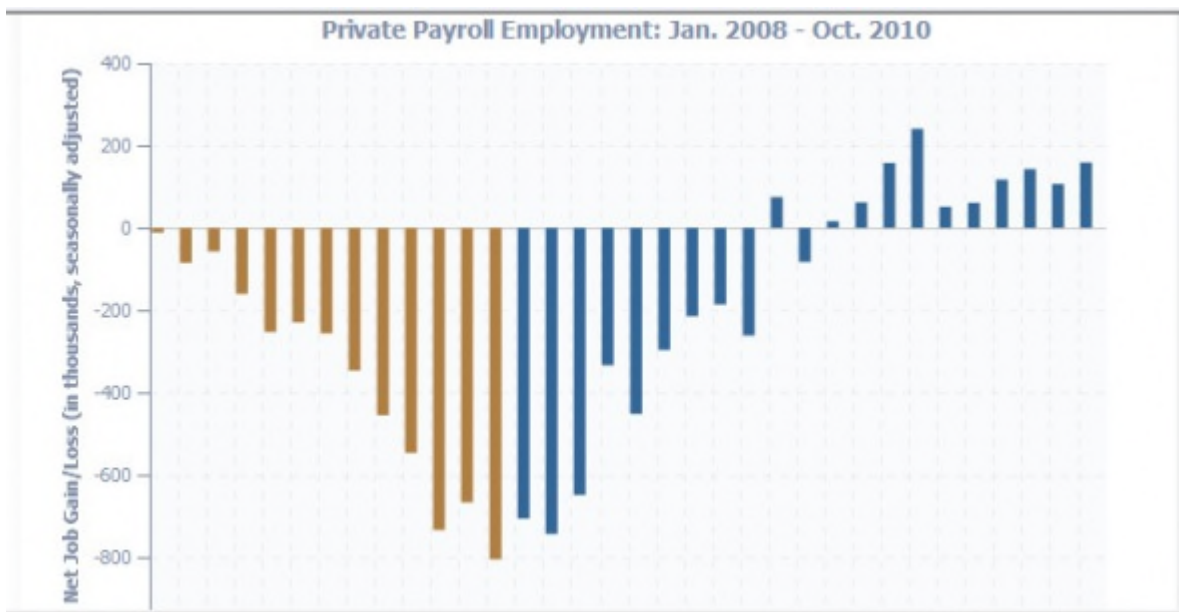
For bringing the number of women on the Supreme Court to 3:



For making the White House the "People's" house:



For 1.1 million jobs created in 2010 alone, more than the entire 8 years of George W. Bush:



For the love of people:





For the love of family:

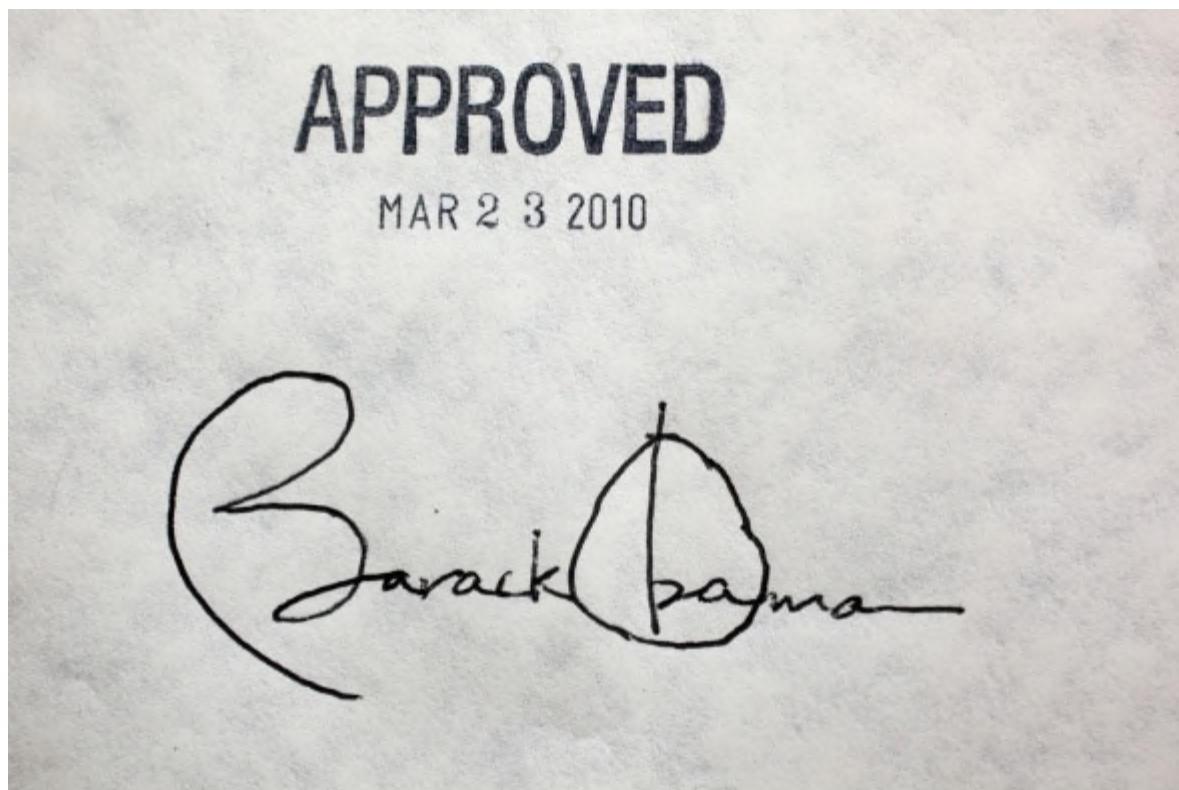




For the First Lady:



For Health Care Reform:



For leaving the past behind:





For the world having respect for America again:





For quietly and calmly dealing with crisis after crisis, after crisis, after crisis, even if not being responsible for any of them:



For being so "cool":





For being fierce - when need be:





For having the intellect to be curious:



For the capacity to know that you are, as we are, imperfect:



For having the sense to not let it destroy you:



For the capacity to be compassionate:



For being an inspiration to so many:





For saving the auto industry and at least 1.4 million jobs:



For loving our troops:



For understanding the horrible price of war, and



For bringing 100,000 men and women back from Iraq.

For facing the most difficult and loneliest job in the world with grace, dignity, honesty and guts in spite of so many "Haters":





For being, in spite of all the hate, pettiness, racism, corruption and immaturity around, the most progressive and 'for the people' president in decades.

And simply for this:



**For Being.....
"MR. PRESIDENT**

The K.F. Stone Weekly

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March 03, 2012

TO BELIEVE OR NOT TO BELIEVE

For any blogger with a penchant for politics, the past several days have produced a veritable embarrassment of riches. Consider that within less than 168 hours (a week), we have been learned that:

- Mitt Romney's wife drives two Cadillacs;
- That while the former Massachusetts governor does not follow NASCAR closely, he is "great friends" with several team owners;
- That Romney declared himself to be against the "Blunt Amendment" -- which would permit employers to opt out of certain kinds of health coverage for moral reasons -- then backtracked, claiming that he misunderstood the question and "of course" supported the measure.
- That John F. Kennedy's landmark 1960 speech on the separation of church and state made Rick Santorum want to vomit;
- That the former Pennsylvania senator thinks President Obama is a "snob" for urging people to continue their education beyond high school. (Santorum, it should be noted stayed in college long enough to earn a B.A., M.B.A. and J.D.)
- That Maryland Governor Martin O'Mally signed a gay marriage bill into law;
- That at almost the same moment, his next-door neighbor, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell was ruining his chances of ever becoming a GOP vice presidential candidate by getting ready to sign legislation mandating that women seeking an abortion must first undergo an

ultrasound. (The demand for an ultrasound represented a bit of backtracking; as originally written, the legislation would have required all women to undergo a transvaginal -- not an external ultrasound.

And if all the above were not enough, there was the entire "turn-back-the-clock-at-least-50-years" argument over women, sex and contraception in which talking head Rush Limbaugh called Georgetown law student Sandra (he called her "Susan") Fluke a "slut" and a "prostitute" because of her belief that women should have access to birth control. The stridently woman-bashing Limbaugh declared that Ms. Fluke couldn't afford contraceptives because "she's having so much sex." (Sorry Rush, women don't take a pill every time they're about to enter into a conjugal act! On the other hand, if you're speaking of men and condoms . . . well that's another story!) Limbaugh then made the leap from garden-variety idiot to drooling cretin when he added:

"So miss Fluke and the rest of you Feminazis, here's the deal. If we are going to pay for your contraceptives, and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it. We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch."

(As of 6:30 p.m. Saturday March 3, five of Limbaugh's on-air sponsors -- Sleep Number, the Sleep Train, Quicken Loans, Legal Zoom and Citrix have all pulled ads from his program, and several others are considering following their lead. Also, it remains to be seen whether or not Ms. Fluke will pursue a defamation claim against Rush Limbaugh; there is, as I understand it, the question of whether her status as a "[limited purpose public figure](#)" insulates him from a suit.)

Fellow conservative talker Michelle Malkin added her two cents, proclaiming "Young Sandra Fluke of Georgetown Law is not a 'slut.' She's a moocher and a tool of the Nanny State. She's a poster girl for the rabid Planned Parenthood lobby and its eugenics-inspired foremothers." When asked what *he* thought about Limbaugh's tirade, Speaker John Boehner used the rather tepid word "inappropriate," then in the same breath criticized Democrats for "using the issue to raise funds . . ."

Newt Gingrich avoided criticizing Rush Limbaugh but was quick to attack President Obama, saying he acted "opportunistically" when he called the Georgetown Law student to express his disappointment in Limbaugh's comments. *"I think the president will opportunistically do anything he can,"* Gingrich said. *"I think the most important use of language in the last week has been the president's apology to religious fanatics, and I want to stay focused on what the president has said, and I think what he said was inexcusable and is exactly the wrong policy at a time of life and death, and playing political games is irrelevant as far as I'm concerned."* (If you can figure out what *that* means, you're a better man than I, Charlie Brown!)

For his part, Rick Santorum, when asked by CNN's Wolf Blitzer what he thought about Limbaugh's remarks, said:

Well, he's taking -- you know, he's being absurd. But that's, you know, an entertainer can be absurd. And -- and he's taking the absurd, you know, the absurd -- absurd, you know, sort of, you know, point of view here as to how -- how far do you go? And, look, I'm -- he's -- he's in a very different business than I am.

I'm -- I'm -- I'm concerned about the public policy of this president imposing his values on the people -- on -- on -- on -- on people of faith who morally object to -- to the government telling them they have to do something which they believe is a grave moral wrong. And government should not be in the business of telling -- you know, when you talk about the separation of church and state, you hear it all the time."

"Well, the -- the real separation of church and state in -- that -- that our founders believed in was that the state cannot tell people of faith what to do and run over their rights. And that's what this president is doing right now. (Again, what in the world is he talking about?)

As a lifelong dyed-in-the-wool political junkie, I've been following the careers, positions and pronouncements of Romney (both George and Mitt), Gingrich, Santorum, Boehner and literally hundreds of other governors, senators, representatives, and presidential aspirants for years and years. (Indeed, the first presidential campaign I followed was Eisenhower versus Stevenson back in 1956 when I was all of 7 years old; I even have a hazy recollection of the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings). Over the years, I have

observed politicians on both sides of the aisle whose positions are based on the consistency of principle -- progressives like William Proxmire, Tom Harkin and Paul Simon, moderates and conservatives such as Barry Goldwater, Warren Rudman and former Oklahoma Representative Mickey Edwards. These individuals -- to name a mere handful -- could be counted on to vote their conscience; they were all firmly grounded in a set of principles, and staked out consistent positions with intelligence and collegiality. And whether one agreed or disagreed with the positions they took, there was at least the comforting knowledge that their beliefs ran far deeper than mere political expedience.

I have also paid close attention to the creatures of expedience; to the vast majority of politicians who over the course of a career -- or a single campaign -- can attach themselves to many different positions. These are the men and women who seemingly don't, won't and can't make a pronouncement without first checking with their in-house pollster. These are the politicians -- like Romney and Gingrich to name but two -- who don't seem to believe anything they say but will say anything that they believe will get them elected.

So the question becomes: which is worse? The politician or candidate who doesn't believe much of anything and will say just whatever it takes to get elected -- like Mitt Romney or Newt Gingrich -- or folks like Rick Santorum and Ron Paul, who truly believe in returning to a world in which money was backed by gold, mothers stayed home and schooled their children, gays remained locked in a closet and Ward Cleaver was everyone's ideal father?

Then there's the special case of the shock-jocks, pseudo-journalists and other mass-media opinion shapers -- like Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Michelle Malkin, Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly and the rest, whose belief structure can be summed up in one word: RATINGS.

To believe or not to believe . . . which is worse?

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March 11, 2012

A CANVAS OF WORDS – A PORTRAIT OF ACTIONS

Without question the 2012 presidential election will be a referendum on the progress and efficacy of President Obama's policies, versus his challenger's promises and rhetoric. As well it should be. The election will, to a great extent, turn on how voters answer several critical questions, chief among them being:

- Which candidate – and party – seems to have the best handle on how to create jobs in the short-run while retooling the American economy for the future?
- Which candidate -- and party – appears to best understand and relate to the needs and aspirations of America's vast middle class?
- Which candidate – and party – will be best able to keep America safe from external threats, support our allies and keep our enemies in check?

The questions are posed in a conditional sense, for one simply never knows which campaign promises will become policy. In the world of bare-knuckled political partisanship, there are far too many variables at play; translating rhetoric into reality is a Herculean task. For the challenger in a presidential race, there is a canvas of words; for the incumbent, there is a portrait of action. While campaigning is, generally speaking, akin to playing a game of "Texas Hold-Um," governing is far more intricate -- like a game of chess. As the late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once sagely noted, "We campaign in poetry but govern in prose." Or to put it a bit more prosaically, "actions speak louder than words."

President Obama's well-received speech before the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference a week ago Sunday was a unique convergence of poetry and prose – of words describing actions. In his soaring 33-minute address, he noted that “. . . over the next several days, you will hear many fine words from elected officials describing their commitment to the U.S.-Israel relationship. But,” he continued, “As you examine my commitment, you don't just have to count on my words. You can look at my deeds.”

Indeed, actions *do* speak louder than words. The close relationship between the Obama Administration and Israel is far more than a canvas of words; it is a portrait of action. Since entering office in January 2009, President Obama has increased security funding for Israel three times; it is now at its highest level in history. He has provided critical funds for the “Iron Dome” missile defense system which, he told Policy Conference attendees, “has intercepted rockets that might have hit homes and hospitals and schools . . .” The president further detailed how “When one-sided resolutions are brought up at the Human Rights Council, we oppose them. When Israeli diplomats feared for their lives in Cairo, we intervened to save them.”

The president reminded the gathering how in September 2011, he “. . . stood before the United Nations General Assembly and reaffirmed that any lasting peace must acknowledge the fundamental legitimacy of Israel and its security concerns. No American President,” he noted “has made such a clear statement about our support for Israel at the United Nations at such a difficult time. People usually give those speeches before audiences like this one -- not before the General Assembly.” The president drew laughter when he noted, “And I must say, there was not a lot of applause.”

And yet, despite a welter of actions that mark this president and his administration as true and unhesitating friends of Israel – of “having Israel's back” -- there are many who continue accusing him of having “Thrown Israel under the bus,” and wondering aloud “If he's such a great friend of Israel, why hasn't he been there yet?” (*It should be noted that President George W. Bush, did not make his first visit to Israel until January 9, 2008 – near the end of his second term, and the 39th of his 46 presidential trips abroad. Presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush never visited the Jewish State. President Bill Clinton, who visited Israel on four separate occasions, paid his first official visit on October 26, 1994, 21 months after taking office.*)

There are so many statements and claims made by the president's opponents which fly in the face of reality. And while it may be true that “all's fair in love and war,” America's relationship with Israel, the president noted in his AIPAC address, “is simply too important to be distorted by partisan politics.”

The one area where President Obama and his surrogates may well be faulted is in not detailing both clearly and precisely just how many positive actions they have undertaken on behalf of our friend and ally. "If you want to know where my heart lies," the president told AIPAC, "look no further than what I have done – to stand up for Israel."

The president's opponents may have claim to a canvas of words, but he has a portrait – a portrait of tangible deeds.

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C.A.N.D.O.

March 19, 2012

The other day, while going through boxes and boxes of pre-computer era files, I came across a cache of essays, sermons and stories written back in the 1970s and 80s. One particular piece -- a Rosh Hashana sermon I delivered nearly 25 years ago -- brought back a lot of memories. Entitled "C.A.N.D.O.," the sermon dealt in general terms with what is called *tikkun olam* -- the Jewish imperative to "repair the world" -- and specifically, with a campaign to replace non-recyclable Styrofoam coffee cups with ceramic mugs.



Doing a little math, I was shocked to discover that if you stacked 50,000 cups one inside the other, the resulting tube would be slightly more than 2 1/2 miles long. And we were but one organization in a small town! I couldn't begin to imagine how many millions of non-biodegradable cups were being put into our local landfill -- colorfully called "Mt. Trashmore" -- to sit and fester for the next 10,000 years. And what about the tens upon tens of thousands of other towns, cities, organizations, businesses and households across the country that were similarly using and then quickly burying Styrofoam cups in landfills from Bangor to Burbank? My mind reeled at the thought.

In rereading the sermon, my mind wandered back to research and legwork that went into it. About a month before the High Holidays that year, it came to my attention that our 1500-member congregation used upwards of 50,000 non-recyclable Styrofoam cups per year.

And so, flashing on an idea, I started making calls and quickly fleshed out a campaign to be called *C.A.N.D.O* - "Citizens Against Non-biodegradable Disposable Objects." The idea behind it was three-fold:

1. To raise consciousness about how much mindless damage we were doing to the environment;
2. To empower people to do something simple -- yet hopefully effective -- about it;
3. To raise enough money to start a pilot project whereby *C.A.N.D.O.* would offer to replace a group's or business's Styrofoam cups with ceramic mugs free-of-charge.

Within a few days, I had raised enough money to purchase about a thousand ceramic mugs, spoke to students at several elementary- and middle-schools and got our mayor to agree to replace all city hall styrofoam cups with our mugs. He agreed that using washable mugs was not only environmentally responsible; in the long-run it would be more cost-effective than purchasing all those non-biodegradable cups.

Out of these early efforts came a sermon -- then disaster. A handful of the congregation's most visible elders pronounced themselves "aghast" that I, a young rabbi, would "speak about trash on the holiest day of the year." (In truth, I was *not* sermonizing on 'trash,' and Rosh Hashana is *not* the holiest day of the year. As noted above, I was really speaking on the imperative to repair and heal the world.) And so, I was muzzled. As an employee, I had two choices: to defy the elders and risk losing my job, or to obey. I was young. I was cowed. *C.A.N.D.O.* was packed away for another day . . .

Fast forward a quarter century. We have a far, far bigger problem -- one that did not exist in 1987: bottled water. And for two reasons: first, the water is an unbelievable rip-off; second, the bottles are a lethal menace to both environment and economy.



First, a few facts:

- Last year, Americans spent more than \$15 billion on some 50 billion bottles of water, which works out to 167 single-use bottles for every person in the country.
- One billion dollars worth of plastic water bottles goes into landfills and litter each year.
- 30 billion plastic water bottles are thrown away every year. Plastic can take up to a thousand years to disintegrate and make up a big deposit of plastic toxic waste in both the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean.
- Making bottles of water out of plastic takes more than 1.5 million barrels of oil, every year. That much oil could fuel 100,000 American cars for a year.
- 66 million water bottles will go into the garbage or litter today.
- Aquafina (Pepsi) and Dasani (Coke) sell 24% of all US bottled water. Yet, both are merely treated municipal tap water, resold to the public at a premium mark-up.
- San Francisco's tap water comes from Yosemite National Park and is so pure the EPA does not require it to be filtered. A bottled of Evian water at \$1.35 could be refilled with San Francisco tap water once a day for over ten years before the cost would total \$1.35.
- If tap water cost the same as the cheapest bottled, monthly water bills would come to \$9,000.
- At nearly \$4.00 a gallon, gasoline costs 3.1 cents an ounce; at an average of 10 cents an ounce, bottled water goes for nearly \$13.00 a gallon.

So what is to be done? Is there a new *C.A.N.D.O.* project on the horizon? You had better believe it. There are a number of rather simple cost-effective, environmentally responsible things we all can do:

- Sign [the pledge](#) to "Take Back the Tap."

- Buy a stainless steel or glass thermos and use it.
- If you don't like the taste -- or worry about the quality -- of your local tap water, purchase an inexpensive carbon filter; it will greatly improve the taste at a fraction of the cost.
- Encourage your school, place of employment, house of worship, gym -- wherever people gather -- install simple "[hydration stations](#)" -- drinking fountains with an extra spigot to make filling a reusable bottle quicker and easier.
- Purchase a [water bottle with its own reusable filtration system](#) -- about \$10.00.
- [Familiarize yourself](#) with the facts.

One of the frustrating -- indeed dangerous -- aspects of modern life is how easily immediacy and acquiescence can trump both individual responsibility and collective conscience. Frequently, it seems that all society demands of us is that we be consumers, rather than creators; that we entrust power to the titans, whether or not they have our best interests in mind. We have not been placed on this earth to be its egocentric, despoiling masters but rather its sensitive nurturing stewards. Together -- as a community and as individuals -- there is much we *C.A.N.D.O.* to re-empower ourselves. Starting with something as wholly basic as the water we drink is a good first step.

And that is *not* trash talk . . .

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March 25, 2012

"THE JOURNEY, NOT THE ARRIVAL MATTERS"

I wish I had a dollar for every Tom, Dick and Mary who told me -- with utter certainty -- that "President Obama is no friend of Israel," or that "Obama has thrown Israel under the bus." If I did have that dollar-per-head, I would have easily more than enough *gelt* to purchase a couple of hundred trees through the Jewish National Fund. For indeed, there are easily that many people who have bought into the canard that not only is Barack Obama bad for the State of Israel, he's "obviously and transparently on the side of the Palestinians."

In the immortal words of Mr. Pitt: "Stuff and nonsense!"

Whenever I challenge a person, asking "what is the basis for your belief that President Obama is anti-Israel?" about the only tangible response I get is "Well, he has yet to visit Israel." Frequently, this comment will be coupled with statements like: "Mitt Romney said that as



president, his first trip abroad would be to Israel," or "When he was a candidate, Rick Perry said that one of *his* first trips would be to Israel."

After hearing this "If Obama truly cared about Israel he would get his fanny there ASAP," dig more times than I care to count, I decided to do some heavy duty research on presidential travel over the past half century. From John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama, America has had ten presidents. Of these, five -- Kennedy, Johnson, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama -- traveled first to Canada; three -- Ford, Reagan and George W. Bush -- made *their* first presidential trips Mexico.

On June 16, 1974, Richard Nixon became the first president to visit Israel. This particular foreign trip, which had begun a week earlier, included prior stops in Austria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, and concluded with one-day visits to Jordan and Portugal. During his 24-hours in Jerusalem, Nixon met with then-President Ephraim Katzir and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. (During his 6+ years in the White House, Nixon took 11 trips abroad; his visit to Israel came during his 9th trip.)

Presidents Ford, Reagan and George H.W. Bush never visited Israel. President Carter made two trips to Israel, in December 1977 and March 1979. To date, Bill Clinton has the all-time record for visits by an American president; during his eight years in the White House, he went no less than four times. During his eight years in the White House, Clinton made 53 separate trips abroad, during which time he made 133 different stops. His initial journey to Israel -- October 27-28, 1994 -- came during his sixth trip abroad, slightly less than 22 months after having taken the oath of office.

By comparison, President George W. Bush, who was inaugurated in January 2001, did not make *his* first visit to the Jewish State for more than seven years -- not until January 9, 2008. During his eight years in the White House, W took forty-six trips abroad, encompassing 140 stops. This initial journey to Israel came on the 109th stop of his 39th foreign trip. In doing my research, I did not find a single instance of

anyone questioning George W. Bush's Israeli *bona fides* because he had yet to go to Jerusalem.

And yet, there are all those who see President Obama's not having visited Israel -- and he's only been in office for 38 months -- as somehow being proof that he is against the Jewish State. Up until today -- when the president is in Korea for the "Nuclear Security Summit," President Obama has made 21 trips abroad, incorporating 44 separate stops. And while he has been repeatedly pilloried for "all his visits to Arab countries," it is fascinating to note that during his first 38 months in office, he has spent precisely one day in Egypt and one day in Saudi Arabia. But to listen to his detractors, one might conclude that he has spent so much time kowtowing to King Abdullah and the House of Saud that he has his own personal suite of rooms at the Tuwayq Palace in Riyadh.

So far as the "If elected, my first foreign trip will be to Israel" crowd goes, they are engaging in nothing more than campaign rhetoric meant to shore up as many Jewish votes as possible. As rhetoric, the promise is understandable; as policy, it is neither intelligent nor wise.

Why?

An analogy might help: imagine that it's the night before the Superbowl, and you are your team's star quarterback. You go out to dinner and low and behold, who do you see but your opposite number and several members of his team -- dining with the fellow who's going to be refereeing tomorrow's game! Naturally, you wonder about how in the world that ref can be impartial or neutral; he's so chummy with the other team. To announce up front that one's first presidential visit will be to Jerusalem is tantamount to having drinks and dinner with one team the night before the big game. Any overture emanating from that administration; any call for talks between Israelis and Palestinians would likely fail before they even commenced; the latter would see the deck being stacked against them -- or to continue in terms of our analogy, to suspect that the coin toss is going to be rigged in favor of the opposition.

Any foreign policy team that would advise a candidate to announce that if elected, his first foreign trip will be to Israel -- rather than Canada, Mexico, England or Belgium as the last 10 presidents have done -- is not worthy of their paychecks. They have staked their candidate to a promise he'd be smart not to keep -- if he's truly concerned about seeking a two-state solution.

The fact that President Obama has yet to touch down at Ben Gurion Airport will continue to provide all the "proof" many need to back up their belief that he is not a friend to Israel. Countering this falsity is not easy, for many Americans have suspected Barack Obama of anti-American, anti-Democratic, anti-Israel tendencies from the day he first won the Democratic nomination -- without a scintilla of substantiation. George W. Bush did not arrive in Jerusalem until he had nearly completed two terms, and yet -- as noted above -- nobody raised a peep, no one thought to inquire if he -- who entertained Saudi princes at his ranch and was photographed kissing them -- was a friend or foe of the Jewish State.

Yes, yes, I know, politics is *not* fair. And to further prove it, one of these days, Barack Obama will arrive at Ben Gurion. And at that time, the same people who are damning him for not having been there before, will accuse him of pandering to the American Jewish community -- even if he is not running for reelection.

Although Barack Obama has yet to arrive in Jerusalem his journey in getting there is both sound and sincere.

And, as the late, great British political theorist/author/civil servant Leonard Woolf (Virginia's husband) once noted, "The journey, not the arrival matters . . ."

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THE OIL OF POLITICS

Of all the meaty issues that are going to be served up on the presidential election platter -- health care, Iran, deficits, the future of Social Security, Medicare, immigration, the future of America to name but a few -- it is highly likely that the price of gas will be that platter's main course. For unlike any other issue, this one affects our lives not in the abstract, but in capital letters; not once a month, but nearly every day. And, where one might, through an act of will or self-preservation, hide just about any other issue under the mental rug, the price we pay for a gallon of gas is simply too central, too overwhelming, to be separated from our daily concerns.



As central a focus as the price of gas-at-the-pump is going to be, it is an issue which candidates will address with fatuous finger-pointing, superficial slogans and brainless bromides where *tachlis* -- Yiddish for "seriousness of purpose" -- should reign supreme. Moreover, most every challenger -- whether running for President, Senate or House of Representatives, will espouse the same simple-minded solution for this utterly complex challenge: "Vote for me! I will lower gas to \$2.50 a gallon!" "Vote for me! I will drill everywhere from Butte, Montana to the Beaufort Sea" "Vote for Me! I will free America from its dependence on Arab oil!"

Sorry fans, but it ain't gonna happen. Candidate who suggest that utter complexity can be parsed through sheer simplicity are charlatans; voters who buy into that simplicity are to be pitied.

And so, in keeping with the old adage "To be forewarned is to be forearmed," we present a little quiz about oil, energy independence and the price of gas . . .

1. The world's largest producer of oil is:

- A. Saudi Arabia
- B. Iran
- C. United States
- D. Russia
- E. China

The correct answer is **D**, Russia. The next four, in order of production output are Saudi Arabia, United States, Iran and China.

2. The largest single foreign source of American oil comes from:

- A. Mexico
- B. Venezuela
- C. Saudi Arabia
- D. Nigeria
- E. Canada

The correct answer is **E** Canada. In order of quantity imported, ranging from most to least, America's gets its oil from Canada, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Nigeria.

3. **True or False:** During Barack Obama's first three years in office, America's rate of oil production and exploration has fallen dramatically.

False: According to the [International Energy Agency](#) (IEA), during the last 3 years of the George W. Bush administration (2006-2008), America produced 1.78 billion barrels of oil. During the first three years of the Obama administration (2009-2011), America produced 2 billion barrels of oil, a nearly 13% *increase*.

4. **True or False:** The best way to lower the price of gas at the pump is to drill for more oil here in America.

False. A [statistical analysis](#) of 36 years of monthly, inflation-adjusted gasoline prices and U.S. domestic oil production by The Associated Press shows no statistical correlation between how much oil comes out of U.S. wells and the price at the pump. If more domestic oil drilling worked as politicians say, we'd now be paying about \$2 a gallon for gasoline.

5. True or False: If America could reduce its oil imports to zero, we could insulate ourselves from the global market and set our own prices.

False. It is virtually impossible to be insulated from the global market -- even if we do not import a single barrel. Gasoline prices will always be determined by world petroleum prices. The only way to keep prices significantly lower than the world market would be to institute price controls, which President Richard Nixon did in March 1973. (In 1973 Congress passed the Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act which created a two-tier system of price controls on domestic oil. The price of "old" domestic oil was frozen, but "new" domestic oil was decontrolled. These controls were phased out by the end of the Carter Administration.)

There is no single reason why gas prices rise or fall. Having said that, the price of gas at the pump has more to do with the petroleum futures' market than with either the production or consumption of gasoline. And what frequently "fuels" the petroleum futures' market is a combination of worry, fear and uncertainty about the future. When, as an example, there is a rise in bellicose rhetoric vis-à-vis Iran (*"If elected, Iran better watch out!"* or *"If you persist in putting more economic sanctions on us, we'll retaliate by shutting down the Straits of Hormuz!"*) speculators drive up the price per barrel against the possibility of what might happen in the future. Interestingly, even if Iran finds itself only able to sell half the oil due to sanctions, if the price per barrel will increase 30% or 40% -- which it could well do -- their income is not all that much less.

Is the market really that sensitive to rumor and possibility? Absolutely. Just listen to any day's closing market report on CNN, MSNBC or the BBC, and you will hear analysts explaining why the Dow Jones went up or down. Uncertainty about the Greeks ability to handle their debt, for example will send the market down. If, however, the next day the EU and the IMF hint at providing Athens with a \$100 billion in loans, the market will go up. It's just that sensitive.

So too with energy.

America's and the world's energy future is a highly complex issue. The Department of Energy's "International Energy Outlook" anticipates that world oil consumption will increase from 85.7 million barrels per day (mbpd) in 2008 to 112.2 mbpd in 2035. And the largest increase in consumption is not going to be taking place in the United States, but rather in emerging economies in Africa and Asia. This means that America's energy

needs are going to increasingly come from unconventional sources like oil sands, extra-heavy oil, biofuels, coal-to-liquids, natural-gas-to-liquids and shale oil -- all of which we have (at least potentially) in abundance, and all of which come with serious ecological consequences.

As noted above, complex problems require far more than simple slogans or birdbrained bromides. "Vote for me!" is obviously not a serious solution to a complex problem. Any candidate who suggests that simply doing "X" or "Y" will solve America's -- and the world's -- looming energy crisis is full of hot air.

And the last time I looked, hot air -- although existing in great abundance -- isn't a great source of energy.

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April 9, 2012

IF A TREE FALLS IN THE FOREST . . .

I would imagine that at one time or another, most of us have pondered that eternal question "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it does it make a sound? Hard as it may be to believe, that question has, over the years, attracted the attention of some pretty serious thinkers -- philosophers, physicists and garden-variety ponderers.



Jim Baggot, a well-respected British professor and author of, among other works, [*The Quantum Story: A History in Forty Moments*](#), opined that "The answer depends on how we choose to interpret the use

of the word 'sound'. If by sound we mean compressions and rarefactions in the air which result from the physical disturbances caused by the falling tree and which propagate through the air with audio frequencies, then we might not hesitate to answer in the affirmative."

I guess some folks just can't resist the temptation to "complexify" where others would see the need to simplify. In all fairness to professor Baggot, he is truly a marvelous writer and teacher; one endowed with sufficient genius to take things which are inherently complex and esoteric -- like quantum physics and the nature of reality -- and make them eminently understandable. It takes a lot of brains to simplify that which is complex . . .

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the folks who take things which are inherently simple and somehow make them seem as complex or esoteric as quantum physics. From time to time, President Obama, I am sorry to say, falls into this category.

Case in point, his recent use of the term *social Darwinism*.

The other day, the president was speaking about the House Republican budget plan -- the one Governor Romney termed "marvelous." The plan, which would save millionaires a minimum of \$150,000 a year in taxes while gutting Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, transportation, child nutrition, college aid and almost everything else average and lower-income Americans depend on. Where former Labor Secretary Robert Reich attacked the plan -- created by Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan -- in rather simple terms, calling it ". . . *the most radical reverse-Robin Hood proposal propounded by any political party in modern America,*" the president took the "complexifier's" path, stating, "*Disguised as deficit reduction . . . it is really an attempt to impose a radical vision on our country. It is thinly veiled social Darwinism.*"

While what President Obama said hits the nail on the head -- the Ryan plan *does* smack of "social Darwinism" -- it is a statement which sadly, very few people will understand. Case in point, the arch-conservative who just the other day demanded that I explain to her, "How in the hell can Obama accuse Governor Romney of being a Socialist?" I tried to explain that "social Darwinism" has nothing to do with Socialism, and next to nothing to do with the Theory of Evolution -- which in any event, a huge number of Americans -- herself included -- don't subscribe to.

Indeed, as correct and trenchant as his assessment of the Ryan Plan may be, President Obama really should avoid using a term like "social Darwinism," which few people have ever heard of. "Social Darwinism" is a 19th concept that originates with sociologist William Graham Sumner. Sumner (1840-1910), who taught social and political science at Yale for nearly 40 years, argued that laissez-faire economics is justified by the theories of Charles Darwin. In numerous essays, he argued for near-absolute individual liberty and staunchly opposed all forms of business regulation, labor unions and public welfare. Accused by his critics of being hard-hearted, Sumner wrote, "*The sociologist is often asked if he wants to kill off certain classes of troublesome and bewildered persons. No such interference follows from any sound sociological doctrine, but it is allowed to infer, as to a great many persons and classes, that it would have been better for society and would have involved no pain to them, if they had never been born.*"



Sumner -- like modern day Republicans -- treated the market the way Darwinians treat natural selection -- as the sole natural and correct mechanism for distributing rewards. He saw the free market as a moral arbiter, not merely a tool for creating wealth. This attitude was in perfect step with America's Calvinist tradition, which from the time of the Pilgrims understood wealth to be a tangible sign of Divine approval, and poverty an obvious sign of Divine rejection. Those who were received their college educations in

the 1950s, 60s and 70s, likely learned about this from reading the late Richard Hofstadter's [*Social Darwinism in American Thought*](#).

Greg Mankiw, one of Mitt Romney's key economic advisors put the Republican allegiance to social Darwinism (even if not specifically called that) rather starkly when he wrote, *"People should get what they deserve. A person who contributes more to society deserves a higher income that reflects those greater contributions. Society permits him that higher income not just to incentivize him, as it does according to utilitarian theory, but because that income is rightfully his."*

As much as conservative writers like David Brooks, Geoffrey Norman and the above-referenced Greg Mankiw might disparage Barack Obama for "smearing" them with the term "social Darwinism," the president was speaking the truth. Unfortunately, truth -- like the tree which falls in the forest without benefit of a set of ears -- may make a sound, but if it comes in wrapped in words or phrases that the majority does not understand, can be neither appreciated nor apprehended.

If I could give the president and his campaign advisors a bit of advice, it would be this: please, ladies and gentlemen, do a better, less complex job of explaining. The fewer the syllables, the less the academic terminology -- regardless of how correct it is -- the greater the chance you have that the voting public will conclude that indeed, you know what you're talking about.

It's just that simple.

As simple as a tree falling in the forest.

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April 15, 2012

A WHALE OF TWO PITIES

So you tell me: who's more dangerous, divisive and delusional -- CNN contributor Hilary Rosen or U.S. Representative Allen West? Based on their past declarations and history -- plus a judicious Google search -- I'd have to say Allen West by about twelve thousand furlongs. For while Rosen's comment about Ann Romney ("*... she's never worked a day in her life ...*") has become the political flashpoint of the week, Representative West's statement that "*... there's about 78 to 81 members of the Democratic Party that are members of the Communist Party*" sounds and feels like the rebirth of McCarthyism. I don't know about you, but when it comes to being dangerous, divisive and delusional, Rep. West wins this one hands down.

When asked to recant and apologize for her comment, Ms. Rosen issued a statement in which she said, "*I apologize to Ann Romney and anyone else who was offended. Let's declare peace in this phony war and go back to focus on the substance.*" Ms. Rosen (who herself has raised two children) also published a piece in [*The Huffington Post*](#), which said in part, "*... Let's be clear on one*



thing. I have no judgments about women who work outside the home vs. women who work in the home raising a family. I admire women who can stay home and raise their kids full-time. I even envy them sometimes. It is a wonderful luxury to have the choice. But let's stipulate that it is

NOT a choice that most women have in America today."

For those who at this point are crying out "But that's no apology!" guess again. Even former first lady Barbara Bush commended Rosen's *mea culpa*, telling people ". . . forget it. Life is good. Women who stay home are wonderful, women who go to work are wonderful. Whatever." At a time when all sides of the media love playing "Gotcha!" the response to Hillary Rosen's verbal gaffe is far from unique. That she has been taken to the woodshed by both the stalwarts of the Right and members of her own party is hardly surprising. Obama campaign chair David Axelrod told CNN's John King that Rosen's comments were "unfortunate," but quickly reminded him that ". . . she works for you (CNN), not for us . . ."

While everyone in America now knows that Hilary Rosen accused Ann Romney of "never having worked a day in her life," few realize that this was only the first part of her statement. For beginning with the very next sentence, Rosen added, "*She's never really dealt with the kinds of economic issues that a majority of the women in this country are facing in terms of how do we feed our kids, how do we send them to school and why do we worry about their future.*" In checking out numerous websites -- right, center and left -- dealing with the Rosen/Romney scrap, it is amazing how many people have felt the need to mention that Hilary Rosen is a lesbian, but that "this has nothing to do with how I feel about what she said." Well, if it has "nothing to do with . . . what she said," why bring it up in the first place?

Lost in the current imbroglio is the fact that there is still more than a germ of truth in what Hilary Rosen said; people like Ann Romney cannot truly understand just how difficult it is for two-wage earner families to make ends meet. For most American families raising children is something one does after eight -- or ten, or twelve -- hours of work. Staying home with a sick child can mean a loss of income; taking time off to give birth can mean a loss of employment.

Then there's Alan West.

Where Hilary Rosen quickly gave in to demands that she apologize to both Ann Romney and the women of America, Allen West has remained unbowed, unapologetic and defiant; he truly believes that of the 193

Democrats in the House, more than 40% are members of the Communist Party. When asked to comment on West's assertion, Libero Della Piana, a vice-chair of the Communist Party said, *"I think it's an absurd way to cast a shadow over his colleagues. It's kind of a sad ploy."*

While it's a pity that Hilary Rosen's remark threw a rhetorical monkey wrench into an otherwise serious, much-needed political debate, it is an even greater pity that Rep. West should attempt to recycle and revive one of the darkest, most gruesome episodes in American history. To be certain, there *are* some mighty big differences between the America of [Martin Dies](#), [Joe McCarthy](#), [J. Parnell Thomas](#), and the [John Birch Society](#) than that of Allen West, Sarah Palin, Mitt Romney and the [Koch brothers](#). Back then, people got their news from journalists like Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Howard K. Smith and Eric Severeid; today we've got a thousand-and-one cable entertainers, few of whom qualify for the title "newsman." In the McCarthy era, nearly 35% of the American labor force belonged to a union; today the percentage is not quite 12%. Back in the day, the "international conspiracy" was made up of Jews, unions, Zionists, even plutocratic bankers, all puppets dangling on strings manipulated by Stalinist agents in Moscow, Hollywood, the Lower East Side and certain segments of Capitol Hill. Today, all that has changed; the Soviet Union no longer exists, and thus can no longer act as puppet master.

Or does it? Just three weeks ago Mitt Romney told CNN's Wolf Blitzer that " . . . Russia is, without question, our biggest geopolitical foe. They fight every cause for the world's worst actors."

Representative West, who has been suggested as an "ideal running mate" for Romney, would appear to agree with the former Massachusetts governor; Russia is still the enemy, Communism still the greatest source of evil.

West is of course well-known for making outrageous comments:

- *"If Joseph Goebbels was around, he'd be very proud of the Democrat party."*



- *[Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz is] "Vile, unprofessional and despicable . . . not a lady."*
- *"I am sick and tired of this class warfare, this Marxist demagogic rhetoric that is coming from the president of the United States. Barack Hussein Obama is nothing more than a low-level socialist agitator."*
- *Speaking of Congressional Democrats: "Take your message of equality of achievement...You can take it to Europe, you can take it to the bottom of the sea, you can take it to the North Pole, but get the hell out of the United States of America."*

From where I sit, Allen West, like Joseph McCarthy, is divisive, delusional, and just plain dangerous. Like McCarthy, he says things he knows are not true in order to garner public attention; in order to separate himself from the nameless pack. Like McCarthy he has identified a segment of the American public that is beset with fear, loathing and resentment -- and announced that he can be counted on to be their champion. And like McCarthy he is a master of political misdirection -- of creating conspiracies out of thin air.

Hilary Rosen has apologized for her gaffe; her political compass will lead her back to a proper path.

Allen West, on the other hand, is a man without a compass . . . or a conscience.

It's a whale of a pity.

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



April 22, 2012

THE SKY IS NOT FALLING – THE HORIZON IS RISING

This past Thursday (April 19, 2012), House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi held her weekly press conference -- an event that rarely rates more than a line or two in either the New York or Los Angeles *Times*, the Washington *Post*, or even the San Francisco *Chronicle*. At one point during the press session -- which focused mainly on taxes, the so-called "Buffett Rule," and the Secret Service scandal in Columbia -- The former House Speaker made reference to [Senate Bill 2219](#), the DISCLOSE Act. This act, introduced by Rhode Island Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse in the senate and Representative Chris Van Hollen in the House would " . . . amend the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to provide for additional disclosure requirements for corporations, labor organizations, Super PACs and other entities." In speaking of the Whitehouse/Van Hollen proposal (which has 40 cosponsors in the Senate and more than 100 in the House), the former Speaker said:



On another subject, but related, yesterday House Administration Democrats held a forum on the need to create a new politics free of special interest money. I call it a forum because we were not allowed to call it a hearing because the Republicans will not allow a hearing on DISCLOSE. They did not allow the camera system of the room to be used to transmit the proceedings from the forum to the rest of the world. We think that this is about transparency, DISCLOSE. Stand by your ads. If you are so proud of what you are doing with your effective political action, then let the world know who is paying for this ad; not by the end of the year, or the end of the month, but by the end of the ad, in real time. We have to do it as candidates. They should have to do it as contributors.

We have a clear agenda in this regard. DISCLOSE, reform the system, reducing the role of

money in campaigns, and amend the Constitution to rid it of this ability for special interests to let secret, unlimited huge amounts of money flow into campaigns. I think one of the presenters yesterday said it was – that the Supreme Court had unleashed a predator that was oozing slime into the political system, and that indeed is not an exaggeration. Our founders had an idea. It was called democracy. [They] said the elections are determined by the people, the voice, and the vote of the people, not by the bankrolls of the privileged few. The Supreme Court decision flies in the face of our founders' vision, and we want to reverse it.

As noted above, Pelosi's comments went unreported by the nation's major media outlets. Nonetheless, her 280-word comment was picked up by chatterboxes at Fox, who then proceeded to dice, slice and skewer. So far as they -- and virtually all of their colleagues in the conservative media -- were concerned, Pelosi's support of the DISCLOSE Act was and is nothing short of a declaration of war on both the First Amendment and the United States of America. "*How dare Nancy Pelosi stand there and blatantly admit that she and her fellow Democrats are going to amend Constitution in order to overturn a Supreme Court decision?*" the likes of Sean Hannity, Dana Perino and Bob Beckel asked in mock abhorrence -- as if they haven't at one time or another pushed for overturning of the [14th](#), [16th](#) and [17th](#) Amendments to the Constitution. (These amendments, in order, guaranteed "Due Process," gave Congress the legal right to collect income taxes and permitted the direct election of U.S. Senators.)

Call it an act of collective, selective amnesia. When the right seeks to repeal the entire 20th century, it is an act of sheer patriotism -- a strengthening of liberty's beneficent embrace. When Nancy Pelosi and her colleagues call for the repeal *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* it is a sure sign that the sky is falling and a reborn Soviet Union is on the brink of swallowing America whole.

Truth to tell, the SCOTUS *Citizens United* decision -- which declared that corporations, like people are guaranteed the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" -- has made it likely that America will one day be swallowed whole . . . but not by Communists, by Corporatists. As a result of *Citizens United*, the wealthiest Americans can dump hundreds of millions of anonymous dollars into committees that will then back those office holders or candidates who will do their bidding -- regardless of how reckless or retrogressive their wishes may be. (See my October 29, 2010 article ["Worse Than Dred Scott,"](#) which was published a few days after the Supreme Court's decision.)

As a result of *Citizens United*, the will of the people has been replaced by "Gold's Law" -- namely, "He (or she) that's got the gold will make the law."

Don't believe that the will of the people is being buried? A bit of anecdotal evidence:

- According to an [ABCNEWS/Washington Post Poll](#), 57% of the American public say abortion should be legal "in all or most cases," and 54% continue to support the court's 1973 *Roe v Wade* decision. And yet, legislatures in nearly every state

have enacted draconian anti-abortion measures up to and including a recently passed [Arizona law](#) which states that life begins two weeks BEFORE CONCEPTION.

- The [Gallup Poll reports](#) that for the first time in its tracking of the issue, a majority of Americans (53%) believe ". . . same-sex marriage should be recognized as valid with the same rights as traditional marriages." And yet, both Congress and a majority of state legislatures are pushing for a "Defense of Marriage Act," which would declare that marriage is only between one man and one woman.
- According to a [Reuters/Ipsos poll](#), a whopping 65% of those polled are in favor of an overhaul of the U.S. health care system. Of that 65%, nearly one-in-four did not believe that so-called "Obama Care" went far enough. And yet, everywhere one looks or listens, there are demands for a repeal of the president's "socialist" program.
- [A recent CBS/New York Times poll](#) reveals that 56% say they oppose cutting the pay or benefits of (largely unionized) public employees to reduce state budget deficits, and 60% percent oppose eliminating some collective bargaining rights for public employee unions, while just one in three Americans supports that idea. Despite this, several state legislatures have voted to curb union rights, claiming that in large measure, the nation's economic doldrums are caused by unions.
- A poll conducted by [Hart Research Associates](#) found that nearly 8 out of every ten voters (79%) support passage of a Constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court's decision in the Citizens United case and make clear that corporations do not have the same rights as people. This figure includes 42% who would definitely support it. Just 21% are opposed. Large majorities of Democrats (87%), independents (82%), and Republicans (68%) support passage of the amendment.

And yet, there are those who are warning that the sky is falling.

Well, I'm here to tell you that the sky is *not* falling; rather, the horizon is rising. We are beginning to see the largely ignored majority band together and make their/our voices and desires heard. Just ask Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, who is spending nearly every waking hour trying to keep from being recalled. Just ask the folks of ALEC (see my [July 30, 2011 article](#)) who are underwriting so many of these issues; within the past two weeks, they have lost the financial backing of Coca-Cola, Kraft Foods, PepsiCo, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and MacDonalds. Lastly, ask state legislators in Hawaii, Vermont, New Mexico and shortly Montana, as well as members of city councils across the country, who have all passed resolutions calling for a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United*.

Finally, people are saying "Enough's enough! America is a nation built on the will of the people, not the wealth of the plutocrats." For those interested in adding their voice to the "Overturn *Citizens United*" campaign, check out [Free Speech For People](#).

Let the Foxifiers warn that the sky is falling. It will keep them too busy to realize that for the rest of us, the horizon is rising . . .

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April 30, 2012

CLUELESS

Seems like hardly a news cycle goes by without Mitt Romney putting his foot in his mouth, thus proving to the 99% who weren't born into wealth and privilege, that he is one clueless dude. You've got to hand it to the former Massachusetts governor; in his inimitable stiff-as-a-board way, he is the reincarnation of Thurston Howell III, the clueless millionaire of *Gilligan's Island*. Gilligan fans will recall that millionaire Howell (Jim Backus) was so rich that he took tens of thousands of dollars and innumerable changes of clothing for what was supposed to have been "a three hour tour."



Unlike the fictional Thurston Howell III however, Willard Mitt Romney is both real and running for President of the United States. Every time Romney puts a bespoke [John Lobb](#) into his silver spoon fed mouth, a phalanx of political pundits utter prayers of thanksgiving. Indeed, Juvenal, the father of all satirists, was undoubtedly correct when, nearly 2,000 years ago he wrote "In times like these, it is difficult not to write satire."

It would seem that the late George Romney's greatest bequest to his son (besides a great head of hair) was a penchant for misstatement. Seasoned political junkies may recall that the elder Romney's 1968 presidential aspirations were dealt a crushing blow when he told a Detroit television reporter "When I came back from Vietnam [in November 1965] I'd just had the greatest brainwashing anyone can get . . ." Within a week of making what was likely an off-the-cuff remark, George Romney became the fodder for television talk show hosts; his presidential aspirations began swirling around the political toilet bowl.

Like his father, Mitt Romney can't go off-book without putting his foot in his mouth. But unlike George, who never spoke about his personal economic status, Mitt has a long record of bringing up his wealth -- of putting his foot in his mouth and coming off as a clueless dilettante. A couple of the former Massachusetts governor's more memorable gaffes include:

- Telling an AP reporter "I have some great friends who are NASCAR team owners."
- Informing members of the Detroit Economic Club that his wife drives ". . . a couple of Cadillacs."
- Letting CNN's Soledad O'Brien know that "I'm not concerned about the very poor. We have a safety net there."
- Saying that the speakers fees he earned during the previous year (\$374,000) did not "amount to much."
- Telling hecklers at the Iowa State Fair that "Corporations are people, my friend . . . Of course they are. Everything corporations earn also goes to people."

And now Romney's latest venture into the realm of fatuous feasting. The other day, while speaking at Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, Romney had some simple advice to students who wanted to start their own business: simply borrow the money from their parents. During his speech Romney pointed to sandwich chain Jimmy John's, in which owner Jimmy John Liautaud borrowed \$20,000 from his father (in return for 48% of the business) to start the shop. *"We've always encouraged young people: Take a shot, go for it. Take a risk, get the education, borrow money if you have to from your parents, start a business."*

More than one Republican strategist has averred that perhaps Mitt Romney is "a bit tone-deaf" and "should stick to his script."

A "bit" tone-deaf?

How about "More mechanical than Robby the Robot?" Or just plain "Certifiably clueless?"

And what's worse, when Romney responds to those who critique his seeming vacuity, he comes off sounding even more out-of-touch. Back in January, as an example, Romney came under withering criticism for his record at Bain Capital -- in which he and his fellow corporate raiders were responsible for tens of thousands of people losing their jobs. So how did the former Massachusetts governor respond? By calling such criticism un-American "class warfare" that is simply motivated by "envy." Romney added that our broken economy -- one that is only working for the wealthy few right now -- should not even be discussed in public, saying discussions of income inequality were only fit for "quiet rooms."

Again, Romney hasn't a clue. Americans have nothing against wealth. We don't envy the rich. For most people, the rich are like the characters in a fairy tale: fascinating, remote and mostly unreal. Heck, if there's one constant in American history, it's our fascination with the lives of the rich and famous; what they drive, where they live and how they spend. But it's celebrities, not potential Presidents and First Ladies whose lives and wealth fascinate us. When it comes to those who seek our votes, we want to know that they can relate to real lives and challenges, real dreams, fears and aspirations. On that score -- and by his own words -- Mitt Romney hasn't a clue.

Just the other day, House Speaker John Boehner was asked by CNN's Candy Crowley whether he thought Mitt Romney's wealth would present him a "hill to climb" in tough economic times. "No," the speaker responded, *"The American people don't want to vote for a loser. They don't want to vote for someone that hasn't been successful. I think Mitt Romney has an opportunity to show the American people that they too, can succeed."* While I certainly agree with Speaker Boehner that the American people "don't want to vote for someone that hasn't been successful," I wonder who in the world he's comparing Governor Romney to, and what his definition of success is.

By definition, anyone and everyone who runs for president is a success. But success is not necessarily confined only to that which is taxable. When Bill Clinton was elected President of the United States, he was, without question, one of the most successful men in the world. And yet at the time, his net worth likely amounted to far less than a week's unearned income -- \$384,615.00 -- for the Romneys. Today, the President and Secretary Clinton are multi-millionaires. By the same token, by the time he was elected President, Barack Obama was a millionaire; a man who had risen from the middle class by dint of his literary skill. Because they are products of the middle class, both Clinton and Obama can easily relate to the lives and aspirations of most people.

This is not to suggest that those who are either born to wealth -- (West Virginia Sen. John D. (Jay) Rockefeller IV, the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, or Colorado Representative Jared Polis) or those who have amassed a fortune on their own (Cal. Rep. Darryl Issa, Wisc. Senator Herb Kohl or former Rep. Alan Grayson) are incapable of relating to people who are not "to the manor born." Most people succeed in politics precisely because they relate well to people; because voters sense that -- to paraphrase Bill Clinton -- they "feel our pain." With Mitt Romney, however, one wonders whether he has a clue; whether he understands that while the majority of Americans don't begrudge him being wealthy, we do wish he'd show sensitivity to the fact that most people aren't.

Years ago, comedian Steve Martin did a *Saturday Night Live* sketch that puts Mitt Romney's cluelessness into satiric perspective:

You can be a millionaire and never pay taxes! You can be a millionaire and never pay taxes! You say, 'Steve, how can I be a millionaire and never pay taxes?' Well, I'll tell 'ya: first, get a million dollars . . ."

Or as Mitt Romney might say, "You can always borrow it from your parents . . ."

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May 07, 2012

AMENDMENT 8: BEWARE OF CREEPS BEARING GIFTS

Nearly 3,200 years ago (1184 B.C.E., to be precise) the Greeks found themselves about to enter the second decade of a fruitless war against the city of Troy. Fans of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Brad Pitt will recall that the Greeks had laid siege to Troy after Paris had spirited away Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus. Try as they may, the Greeks simply couldn't deal Troy that final punishing blow. Year after year, the war dragged on -- sort of like the U.S. in Afghanistan. Finally, Odysseus, the Greek's go-to guy, hit upon a brilliant stratagem that he believed would permit his troops to enter the city and bring the war to a close: a huge, hollow wooden Horse containing a select force of Odysseus' best soldiers. Wheeling the gigantic horse to the gates of Troy, the Greeks then pretended to sail away. Thinking that Odysseus and his troops had given up, the Trojans pulled the horse into the city as a victory trophy. Wrong!



That night, the soldiers emerged from their equine sanctuary and threw open the gates of the city for the rest of their comrades. The rest is history; the Greeks quickly overtook Troy, thus ending the war. In the *Aenid*, Virgil sums up the story thus: *timeo Danaos et dona ferentis* -- namely "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

And ever since, the term "Trojan Horse" has been a metaphor for any trick or stratagem that causes a

target to invite a foe into a securely protected bastion or space. Like the folks of ancient Troy, we, the citizens of Florida have a Trojan Horse parked outside the gates of our once "securely protected bastion":

Amendment 8

For those in the dark, this Trojan Horse, which will be on the ballot this November 6, is a legislatively-referred constitutional amendment. Its backers and supporters swear on a stack of Bibles that its passage is essential for the preservation of religious freedom here in the Sunshine State. In matter of truth, it is a Trojan Horse, designed to do precisely the opposite. Far from being a measure to preserve religious freedom, Amendment 8 is intended to enshrine state government funding of religious schools and organizations. Its secondary purpose is to further weaken public schools by diverting more and more money to charter school -- read "religious school" -- vouchers.

On the surface, the amendment's working seems to be fairly straightforward:

Proposing an amendment to the State Constitution providing that no individual or entity may be denied, on the basis of religious identity or belief, governmental benefits, funding, or other support, except as required by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, and deleting the prohibition against using revenues from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.

If passed, Amendment 8 would amend Article III Section I of the Florida State Constitution to read:

*There shall be no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting or penalizing the free exercise thereof. Religious freedom shall not justify practices inconsistent with public morals, peace, or safety. **No individual or entity may be discriminated against or barred from receiving funding on the basis of religious identity or belief.** ~~No revenue of the state or any political subdivision or agency thereof shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.~~*

As benign as the wording may seem at first blush, it is, in truth, as dangerous as the Trojan Horse at the gates of Troy.

How so?

According to [Americans United For Separation of Church and State](#), The goal of Amendment 8 is to allow taxpayer money to flow to religious schools and houses of worship. Passage of the Amendment would strip the religious freedom protections

currently enshrined in the Florida Constitution, thus allowing for direct funding of religious organizations that provide faith-based social services and opening the door to taxpayer funded vouchers for religious schools.

This is not to say that the State of Florida has not heretofore funded faith-based organizations. It certainly has. Florida has partnered with religiously affiliated organizations -- Catholic Charities, Jewish Federation, Lutheran Social Services -- to perform social service programs. This is in keeping with a 2004 state court decision, *Bush v. Holmes*, which acknowledged that the state may fund nonprofit organizations that are affiliated with a religious order or organization. But, the current Constitution places safeguards on the partnership to guard religious organizations from government intrusion and to protect taxpayers from paying for or being subjected to government-funded proselytization. The proposed amendment would tear down the safeguards.

Proponents of Amendment 8 claim that as currently written, the no-aid provisions of the Florida Constitution (as incorporated in 1885 and reenacted in 1968) reflect a late 19th-century bias against Catholics. This is both inaccurate and incredibly simplistic. And, as Grandma Ann would have said, "You're really full of canal water!" The no-aid provision in the Florida Constitution (as well as that of 37 other states) was based on the so-called "Blaine Amendment," an 1875 proposal which would deny federal aid to religious schools. Although the amendment failed on a federal level, it was adopted by three-quarters of the states. And while it is true that there was some Catholic animus behind the measure's failure in 1875, it did not emanate from James G. Blaine, the measure's eponym: he was the son of a Catholic mother.

The most dangerous aspect of Amendment 8 is that in providing aid for faith-based schools -- largely in the form of vouchers -- it will further gut public education. In 1999 Florida became the first state to establish a statewide voucher system. In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court ruled 5-2 that the program violated the state constitution. Nonetheless, charter schools -- which receive public funding but are not subject to the same standards as public schools -- continue to be sold as the answer to a failing public system. As has been shown in state after state and in school district after school district, the more money taken out of public schools in the form of private- and charter-school vouchers, the worse it is for students. Numerous [studies](#) have shown that charter school students do not "out-perform" public school students on standardized tests.

The voucher system, which passage of Amendment 8 would no doubt enhance, is part-and-parcel of the "privatize-privative-privatize" philosophy of so contemporary many politicians.

In brief, Amendment 8 has as much to do with religious freedom as Odysseus' Trojan Horse had to do with surrender.

May the citizens of Florida learn the lesson that the citizens of Troy learned nearly 3,200 year ago: Beware of creeps -- which rhymes with Greeks -- who come bearing gifts.

DEFEAT AMENDMENT 8!

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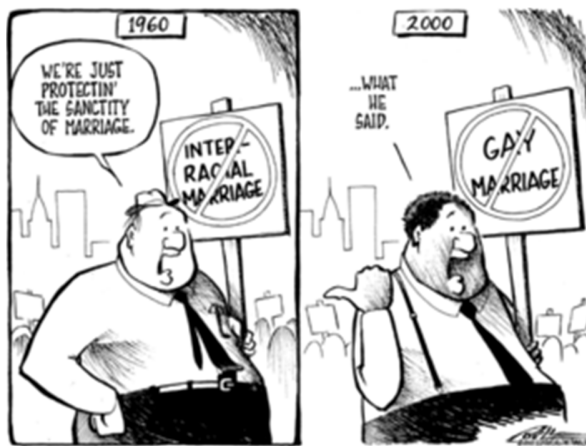
The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



May 14, 2012

OF BULLIES AND BANKS



The lion's share of this past week's press ink -- and public interest -- has been devoted to two essentially interconnected stories: President Obama's "coming out" in favor of gay marriage and Mitt Romney's bullying of a gay student nearly 50 years ago. Of the two, President Obama's announcement is without question vastly more significant. and, coming in an election year does carry the potential for both risk and reward. Writing in [*The Daily Beast*](#), presidential historian Robert Dallek -- waxing a bit hyperbolically -- described it as "Obama's LBJ moment . . . at least mak[ing] him a candidate for Kennedy's Profiles in Courage." Predictably, Obama's pronouncement has drawn breathless praise from his supporters, and holy damnation from his detractors.

At the same time [a major investigative piece](#) by the *Washington Post*'s Jason Horowitz alleged that the teenaged Mitt Romney held down a gay classmate and cut his hair. When confronted with the facts of this and at least one other so-called "schoolboy prank" -- and the corroboration of several of his prep school buddies -- Romney

said that while he didn't remember the incident, he'd ". . . seen the reports" and was "not going to argue with that." Predictably, the [conservative media](#) see it as either a total fabrication on the part of the "left-wing" or a tempest in a teapot. Romney revilers see it as evidence that the former Massachusetts governor has always lacked empathy and compassion.



Although both presidential campaigns are already using these two interconnected stories as goads for enhanced fundraising, it will likely have little impact on the presidential race. Few voters will switch from Romney to Obama -- or Obama to Romney -- on the basis of gay marriage or bullying.

What one might hope *would* decide the final vote is an issue -- and a story -- which received far less ink or interest this past week . . .

On Thursday, J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.'s, chief executive, Jamie Dimon announced that his bank -- the nation's largest -- had lost \$2 billion in trades over the past six weeks and could face an additional \$1 billion (some fear \$6 billion) in losses, due to excessively risky bets. And yet, when first interviewed by [MSNBC](#), Dimon, the so-



called "smartest guy in the room," termed the bets "poorly executed" and "poorly monitored," a result of "many errors," "sloppiness," and "bad judgment." But not to worry, Dimon told Bloomberg News, "We will admit it, we will fix it and move on." In other words, what Dimon is saying, "Trust us; we'll tweak a bit here, tweak a bit there and I promise it will never happen again. It's really not such a big deal."

Now I may not know Hell's first whisper about high finance, or the difference between a "hedge" and a "bet" or be able to define "credit default swap" and "collateralized debt obligation," but I *can* spot a hubristic B.S. artist a mile off.

In attempting to understand how such a fiasco could occur, four words come to mind: A LACK OF REGULATION.

To the lion's of Wall Street, as well as Mitt Romney, John Boehner, Eric Cantor, virtually every Republican and many Democrats as well, the notion of regulating financial markets is as anathema as a cheeseburger to a *chasid*. They argue that government regulations impinge on their ability to make a profit. To me, this makes about as much sense as burglars complaining that home alarm systems hurt their ability to make a living.

Shortly after the 2008 financial meltdown, Congress began the work of investigating precisely what made the markets go haywire, who the responsible parties were, and what sort of legislation would be required to hopefully keep it from happening again. That process would eventually lead to the [Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Protection Act](#). Despite being hailed as a heavy-weight piece of legislation that would bring ". . . the most significant changes to financial regulation in the United States since the regulatory reform that followed the Great Depression," by the time this 848-page measure was enacted on July 21, 2010, it lacked both muscle and spine. Why? Because dozens of CEOs, along with hundreds of lobbyists armed with millions of dollars went up to Capitol Hill with the singular aim of convincing the members of Congress that the more toothless the legislation, the better for all concerned.

Arguably, the two most important aspects of Dodd-Frank are its creation of a powerful Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which -- at least in theory -- represents the interests of consumers against Wall Street; and the so-called "Volker Rule," which ideally restricts United States banks from making certain kinds of speculative investments that do not benefit their customers. In essence, the Volker Rule is supposed to be a ban on proprietary trading ([PTT](#)) by commercial banks, whereby deposits are used to trade on the bank's own accounts. Despite the fact that the final version of Dodd-Frank included many exceptions to this rule -- and that most of its provisions do not go into effect until July 21, 2012, Wall Street has

been yowling long and hard that this "draconian measure" is taking away their ability to turn a profit.

Draconian? Anyone who thinks that Congress and the White House's attempts to remedy the causes of the Great Recession are "severe," "overly restrictive" or "draconian," obviously knows very little about America's political history. In response to the Crash of '29 -- which was caused largely by institutions and individuals buying stock on tremendous margin -- Congress enacted several sweeping measures that focused on a single theme: protecting consumers by forcing Wall Street into the light. These measures included:

- **The Securities Act of 1933**, which required all publicly traded companies to register themselves and offer prospectuses to investors;
- **The Securities Exchange Act of 1934**, which forced publicly traded companies to make regular financial disclosures;
- **The Commodity Exchange Act of 1936**, which required all commodities and futures to be traded on organized exchanges.
- **The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC)** to protect bank depositors through an insurance fund paid for by the banks themselves;
- **The Glass-Steagall Act** which separated insurance companies, investment banks and commercial banks.

In 1999, Congress passed the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Financial Services Modernization Act, which spelled the end of Glass Steagall. It was, without question, one of Congress' all-time worst pieces of legislation. Wall Street argued that unless and until Glass Steagall was overturned -- thus toppling the "Chinese Wall" between commercial and investment banking -- their ability to engage in derivative trading (the lucrative practice of making bets on bets) and hedging (using some bets to offset the risks of other bets) was seriously hampered. And they were correct; not too long after Gramm-Leach-Bliley was passed by the House (362-57) and Senate (90-8) and signed by President Bill Clinton, the American public added the word "Enron" to their vocabulary.

Although it's likely pie-in-the-sky, I firmly believe that we must reinstitute Glass-Steagall. To take people like J.P. Morgan's Jamie Dimon at their word when they say that Wall Street can solve its own problems without any government regulation or oversight is foolhardy at best, disastrous at worst. To leave everything to free market forces is to put faith in the faithless. The nation's financial giants, with the acquiescence of Presidents from Reagan to Obama, have made sure that profits remain privatized, risk socialized. Both Wall Street and Congress have convinced a wide swath of America that some banks are "too big to fail."

But there may be a glimmer of hope on the horizon. In its most recent annual report, the Dallas Federal Reserve Bank -- one of that institution's most conservative branches -- noted that *"The too-big-to-fail institutions that amplified and prolonged the recent financial crisis remain a hindrance to full economic recovery and to the very ideal of American capitalism. It is imperative that we break up the big banks."*

Willem Buiter, one of my all-time favorite economists once wrote that "Self-regulation is to regulation as self-importance is to importance."

It is time to stop paying so much attention to bullies -- whether at prep school or on Wall Street -- and pay more attention to banks . . .

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May 21, 2012

DEALING WITH DYSFUNCTION

It takes precious little experience, insight or intellect to recognize that the American political system is somewhere between dysfunctional and broken. Capitol hill is awash in cash and cowardice. Steely partisanship stands athwart principle to such an extent that the nation's most pressing and systemic problems



-- jobs, the economy, education and gross inequality to name but four -- are all being held hostage. Tens of dozens of crucial positions in both the executive and judicial branches of government remain vacant because one party thinks it more important to deny the president of the opposing party a "victory" than to do what is right. Where once the filibuster was a rare and theatrically exhausting exercise in political brinksmanship, today, it is as

commonplace as sushi in San Francisco. Once upon a time, when a senator or representative cosponsored a piece of legislation they could be counted on to support and vote for that legislation. Believe it or not, this is no longer a given. Today, cosponsors frequently conspire to kill their own creations. Why? For fear that said bill's passage might gain the president some political credit.

Nowadays, just about the only solution one party offers -- after blaming every ill from aging to zero population growth on the other party -- is to vote the culprits and miscreants out of the White House and off of Capitol Hill. As a result of such

political puerility nothing gets done; Congress's popularity is lower than the Dead Sea; an entire nation suffers.

Without question, the utter dysfunctionality of the American political system did not begin with the election of Barack Obama -- or George W. Bush, or Bill Clinton for that matter. It has been building for more than a generation. In an important new work, [*It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*](#) veteran congressional scholars Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann point back to 1978, the year Republican Newt Gingrich was first elected to Congress. At the time of his election, Democrats had controlled the House of Representatives for 44 of the past 48 years -- and would continue to do so for the next 16. Gingrich's strategy to overcome his party's historic minority status, as noted by [Ornstein](#) and [Mann](#) was, for the time, utterly unique: ". . . so intensify public hatred of Congress that voters would buy into the notion of the need for sweeping change and throw the majority bums out. His method? To unite his Republicans in refusing to cooperate with Democrats in committee and on the floor, while publicly attacking them as a permanent majority presiding over and benefiting from a thoroughly corrupt institution."

Gingrich's strategy eventually paid off; by 1994, he was Speaker of the House. With the election of 2010, his method had become akin to divine law: Where once "compromise" and "bipartisanship" for the sake of the greater good were a politician's or legislator's stock-in-trade, today those concepts languish on the political "disabled list." Taking their place on the starting lineup are such tactics as "opposing," "obstructing" "discrediting" and "nullifying."

To be certain, both Republicans *and* Democrats stridently accuse each another of being the real obstructionists and discrediting nullifiers. "It's because of those socialistic ultra-left, deficit-loving Democrats that we're in such abysmal fiscal shape," Republicans cry. "Our economic crisis is the fault all of those plutocratic, intransigent right-wing, tax-avoiding Republicans," their Democratic counterparts respond. And how does the American public respond? By saying "A pox on both your houses." This attitude is born out by the latest [Politico/GWU/Battleground Poll](#); Congress's approval rating is a mere 13%.

Should it be any surprise then that fewer and fewer people of quality are running for office? I mean, what truly sane man or woman would devote a year -- or two or four or more -- to raising vast sums of money in order to run for a position that will require them to spend the lion's share of their time raising even more money for the right to keep the other side from getting anything done and making them look bad in the process?

Scholars Ornstein and Mann, neither of whom is particularly partisan, conclude that far more of the dysfunction can be laid at the feet of one party than the other:

" . . . However awkward it may be for the traditional press and nonpartisan analysts to acknowledge, one of the two major parties, the Republican Party, has become an insurgent outlier -- ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition."

Over the past several years, Republicans have become so obsessed with not offending or going against the will of those on their far-right that they have been transformed from that flank's leader to its creature. So much so that were he alive in 2012, Ronald Reagan would never be able to capture his party's nomination; he would undoubtedly be called a RINO -- a "Republican in Name Only." It is unsettling to the max when one realises that today, the most moderate Republican in either house of Congress (likely Maine's outgoing Senator Olympia Snowe) is still to the right of that institution's most conservative Democrat (likely Pennsylvania Representative Jason Altmire).

Despite the extraordinary ideological chasm between the two parties, Americans themselves have never been all that extreme; we have a long and -- for the most part -- successful history of sticking to what one wag called "the sensible center." So where are all the centrists in 2012? Have they moved to the fringes; have they all morphed into left-winged socialists and right-wing flat-taxers? According to Ornstein and Mann, the answer is no; those occupying the sensible center are have become so cynical and turned off to what now passes for politics as usual, that they simply stay the hell away from the polls on election day. When a large majority of the American people favor higher taxes for the extremely wealthy and Republicans say "absolutely, categorically no"; when poll after poll shows that most Americans place job creation ahead of deficit reduction yet Republicans say "If you don't cut spending we'll destroy America's credit rating"; when so many Americans are struggling to make ends meet then hear that the Republicans' plan for creating prosperity begins with catering to the wealthy and ends with cutting entitlements for the poor -- is it any wonder that so many opt out of participating?

So how do we deal with the dysfunction we call a political system? In truth, I do not know. I wish I had a simple, sure-fire answer to what ails us. What I do know is that throughout our history as a nation, no problem was ever solved, no issue ever addressed, no wrong ever righted without the people standing firm. It is our function to stand up against dysfunction.

The critic/essayist George Jean Nathan once wrote that "Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote."

How true it is . . . how true it is.

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



May 28, 2012

BUYING INTO BS

A couple of days ago, one of my university students sent me a powerful email entitled "So Now You Get Mad???" It began with the capitalized, bolded words **SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT!!!** and then continued:

Now, since Obama's Presidency, all of a sudden, folks have gotten mad, and want to take America Back...BACK TO

WHAT/WHERE is my question?

At this point, the email listed more than a dozen issues from the Bush/Cheney years for which, at least in retrospect, the American public ". . . didn't get mad."

A brief sampling:

- *You didn't get mad when the Supreme Court stopped a legal recount and appointed a President.*
- *You didn't get mad when Cheney allowed Energy company officials to dictate Energy policy and push us to invade Iraq.*
- *You didn't get mad when Bush borrowed more money from foreign sources than the previous 42 Presidents combined.*
- *You didn't get mad when Bush embraced trade and outsourcing policies that shipped 6 million American jobs out of the country.*
- *You didn't get mad when they didn't catch Bin Laden.*
- *You didn't get mad when lack of oversight and regulations from the Bush Administration caused U.S. citizens to lose 12 trillion dollars in investments, retirement and home values.*

The email concludes with:

"You finally got mad when a black man was elected President and decided that people in America deserved the right to see a doctor if they are sick. Yes, illegal wars, lies, corruption, torture, job losses by the millions, stealing your tax dollars to make the rich richer, and the worst economic disaster since 1929 are all okay with you, but helping fellow Americans who are sick . . . Oh, Hell No!"

I read, reread, digested, and pondered the email while partaking in a pot of McNab's Earl Grey. I have continued thinking about the piece for a couple of days, and have reached a couple of conclusions.

First and foremost: although the basis for much of the hostility, vituperation and outright lies directed at Barack Obama ("*He is not an American.*" "*He hates America.*" "*He wants to turn America into a Socialist nation*" "*He hates Israel and is always apologizing for America.*") may well be tinged, if not undergirded with racism, it is next to impossible to prove . . . so why engage in the conversation? No one but the most committed bigot would ever admit that the basis for despising President Obama -- to an extent all but unknown in American history - - is the color of his skin. And yet, when one remembers that the attacks and prevarications began even before Obama took the oath of office, one is forced to ask "What makes this president so different from all the others?"

- Is it that he is far more liberal than the rest? Decidedly not.
- Is it that he is demonstrably less patriotic than his predecessors? Hardly.
- Is it that he alone lacks the faith of our Founding Fathers? Give me a break.
- Is it that he is our only "foreign-born" president? Ask Donald Trump.
- Is it that he is far more pro-tax, pro-spending and anti-gun than the rest? No.

The fact of the matter is, the two things which make President Barack Obama *sui generis* are his name and his ethnicity. However, as suggested above, asserting that racism -- whether overt or subliminal -- is a key component in the fuel that fans the flames of "anti-Obamaism" is an exercise in utter futility. . . even if it be true. Again, as noted above, none but the most toxic of bigots would ever publicly admit to hating President Obama because of his race.

At this point, two comments come to mind. The first is an old rabbinic statement: *ha-mayvin yahvin* -- "The enlightened one understands." The second, from the late British writer Douglas Adams: "*If it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, we have to at least consider the possibility that we have a small aquatic bird of the family anatidae on our hands.*"

The second conclusion which I drew after pondering the email is that mass hindsight generally involves a high degree of mass myopia. Retrospectively, it does not seem that the missteps and failures of the Bush/Cheney years elicited

nearly as much acrimony, recrimination or personal vilification -- not to mention reportage -- as the perceived sins of the Obama/Biden years. Then too, looking backward, one does not recall the personal attacks against George W. Bush being nearly as vile or as visceral as those against his successor. This is in no way meant to imply that W and his administration received a pass, for they certainly did not. W. certainly was pilloried by many for such things as getting us into Iraq without budgeting for its cost; for spending money like a drunken sailor; for turning the Clinton surplus into a vast deficit. Then too, his "Texas Good Ole Boy" persona and verbal gaffes provided plenty of fodder for pundits and late-night talk show hosts. One tends to forget these things, because mass hindsight *does* involve a high degree of mass myopia.

One huge difference between then and now is the increasingly noisy and hyper-partisan role played by our hydra-headed media. During the Bush years, those media-types holding the president's feet to the fire were in a minority. Canards, distortions and outright lies about W and his administration were simply not broadcast hour after hour, day after day. Today, during the Obama years, [MSNBC](#), [Media Matters for America](#), [The Huffington Post](#) and [The Daily Beast](#) are simply no match for [Fox](#), [Accuracy in Media](#), [Breitbart](#) and [Red State](#), the latter of which are the source of much of what passes for "facts." So much of what the American people "know" about President Obama -- his past, as well as his agenda, intentions and future goals -- are now gleaned from highly biased sources who peddle BS with all the skill -- and lack of conscience -- of medicine-show snake oil salesmen. As a result, it is increasingly the case that the definition of a "fact" is BS told with great frequency and volubility.

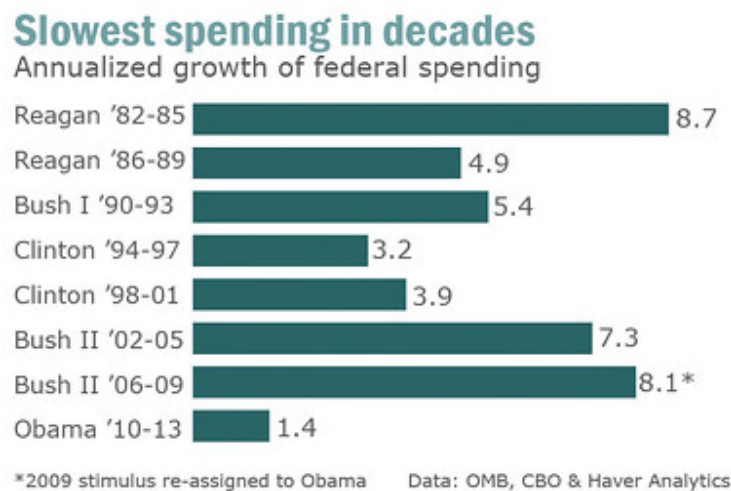
Case in point: federal spending during the Obama years.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* "Market Watch" column noted that government spending is rising at its slowest pace since the 1950s. In his [May 22 column](#), the WSJ's Columnist Rex Nutting wrote: *"Of all the falsehoods told about President Barack Obama, the biggest whopper is the one about his reckless spending spree. . . . Although there was a big stimulus bill under Obama, federal spending is rising at the slowest pace since Dwight Eisenhower brought the Korean War to an end in the 1950s. Even hapless Herbert Hoover managed to increase spending more than Obama has."*

Nutting then provided the following facts, according to official government statistics:

- In the **2009 fiscal year** — the last of George W. Bush's presidency — federal spending rose by 17.9% from \$2.98 trillion to \$3.52 trillion.
- In **fiscal 2010** — the first budget under Obama — spending fell 1.8% to \$3.46 trillion.
- In **fiscal 2011**, spending rose 4.3% to \$3.60 trillion.

- In **fiscal 2012**, spending is set to rise 0.7% to \$3.63 trillion, according to the Congressional Budget Office's estimate of the budget that was agreed to last August.
- Finally in **fiscal 2013** — the final budget of Obama's term — spending is scheduled to fall 1.3% to \$3.58 trillion.



Despite these figures -- and the fact that the last huge surge in federal spending took place in fiscal 2009, before Barack Obama took office -- hardly a minute goes by without Mitt Romney, the entertainers at Fox or the conservative blogosphere making comments like *"The debt has gone up dramatically under Barack Obama"; "Obama and the Democrats spend money like a drunken sailor;"* and *"Obama has run up more debt in 3 years than George W. Bush did in 8."*

Don't buy this; it is BS.

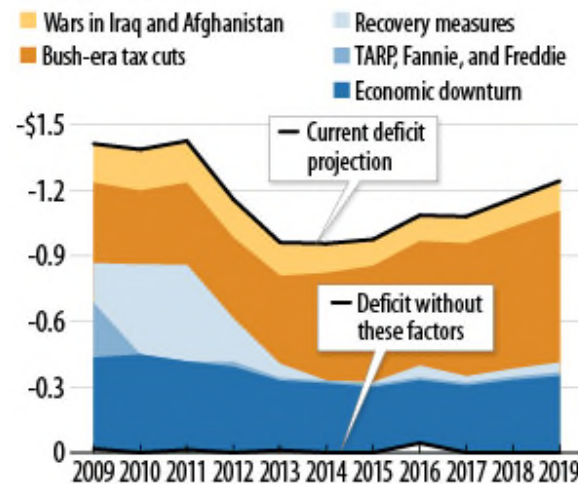
A couple of facts:

- When Obama took office, the national debt was about \$10.5 trillion. Today, it's about \$15.2 trillion. Simple subtraction gets you the answer preferred by most of Obama's opponents: \$4.7 trillion.
- But ask yourself: Which of Obama's policies added \$4.7 trillion to the debt? The stimulus? That was just a bit more than \$800 billion. TARP? That passed under George W. Bush, and most of it has been repaid.
- According to the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities ([CBPP](#)), "Virtually the *entire* deficit over the next ten years will be due to Bush policies and the economic downturn."

Working off of Congress Budget Office estimates, CBPP economists came up with the following chart:

Economic Downturn, Financial Rescues, and Legacy of Bush Policies Drive Record Deficits

Deficit, in trillions



Source: CBPP analysis based on Congressional Budget Office estimates.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities | cbpp.org

Will the welter of facts and statistics ever be able to withstand the prevarication, scare tactics and utter BS of those who truly hate this president, his administration and everyone with a "D" after their name?
One can only hope . . .

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June 02, 2012

BEWARE OF R.A.T.S.

Happy to report that this past Thursday -- May 31 -- saw two patches of intelligent sunlight peaking through an otherwise depressing haze. And what is more, both "patches" were the product of a single source -- a source many believed to have burnt out years ago.

To what do we refer?

First, to the federal appeals court in Boston, which struck down the Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA], [ruling](#) that the federal statute violates the constitutional rights of gay and lesbian married couples to equal treatment under the law. Declaring that "*tradition alone is not enough to justify disparate treatment of same-sex couples*," the three-judge panel unanimously concluded that DOMA ". . . failed to pass constitutional muster Under current Supreme Court authority, Congress' denial of federal benefits to same-sex couples lawfully married in Massachusetts has not been adequately supported by any permissible federal interest." Joining Judge Michael Boudin in the 28-page decision were the First Circuit's Chief Judge, Sandra Lynch, and Judge Juan Torruella. In their ruling, the judges noted, "*This is not merely a matter of poor fit of remedy to perceived problem [sic], but a lack of any demonstrated connection between DOMA's treatment of same-sex couples and its*



asserted goal of strengthening the bonds and benefits to society of heterosexual marriage . . . DOMA does not explain how denying benefits to same-sex couples will reinforce heterosexual marriage Moral disapproval alone cannot justify legislation discriminating on this basis."

The court's action sets the stage for a much-anticipated showdown at the U.S. Supreme Court in the near future. **(n.b.** *Lest anyone argue that Thursday's decision was the product of a troika of über-liberal judges, it should be noted that Judge Boudin was appointed to the bench by President George H.W. Bush in 1992, Judge Torruella by no less than Ronald Reagan in 1984, and Chief Judge Lynch by President Bill Clinton in 1995 as the replacement for Judge Stephen Bryer, who moved up to the United States Supreme Court.*)

The second "patch of intelligent light" broke through the depressing haze when a federal judge in Tallahassee ordered the state of Florida stop enforcing part of its recently enacted elections law; a statute which Judge Robert Hinkle characterized as putting "harsh and impractical" restrictions on voter registration groups. The section Judge Hinkle struck down required groups conducting voter registration drives to turn in registration forms with 48 hours of collecting them (previously it had been 10 days) or suffer a \$1,000-a-day fine. Attorneys for The League of Women Voters -- a party to the lawsuit -- said the requirement was so onerous that it had stopped holding voter registration drives in Florida for the first time in 72 years. In his ruling, Judge Hinkle -- who was appointed to the federal bench by President Clinton in 1996 -- said the law and state regulations implementing it ". . . impose burdensome record-keeping and reporting requirements that serve little if any purpose, thus rendering them unconstitutional."

Another part of the voter law which passed both Houses of the Republican-dominated Florida State Legislature by overwhelming majorities, required that groups running voter registration drives provide the state with the names, street and email addresses of every officer or volunteer who solicits and collects applications. According to the law, said registration agents are required to sign a form that acknowledges their understanding that it would be a felony -- subject to a five-year prison term -- to submit applications that include false information -- even if they don't know or have any reason to believe the information is false. In his ruling, Judge Hinkle wrote: "*Requiring a volunteer not only to sign such a statement, but to swear to it, could have no purpose other than to discourage voluntary participation in legitimate, indeed constitutionally protected, activities.*"

The Florida law, which is part of a wave of what critics called "voter suppression laws" backed by Republicans and enacted in 15 states within the past year, is now under review by both the Department of Justice and federal judges in Washington, D.C. It will be their job to test its compliance with both the [1965](#)

[Voting Rights Act](#) and the [1993 National Voter Registration Act](#). Even as this op-ed is being written, the Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections has advised the counties to stop the mandated purge of suspected non-citizens from the state's voter rolls. Florida Governor Rick Scott mandated the purge in response to what he and his advisors claim is a reasonable response to "an explosion" in voter fraud. This voter purge -- like the 48-hour requirement and registrar compliance laws -- is also undergoing careful legal scrutiny by the U.S. Department of Justice. As with many egregious pieces of legislation being enacted around the country, it is nothing more than a solution in search of a problem.

As noted above, both of these patches of intelligent sunlight emanate from the same source: the court . . . Which leads us to a brief discussion about the utter importance of the upcoming 2012 election, especially as it concerns "R.A.T.S." namely:

Roberts,

Alito,

Thomas and

Scalia

In theory -- and increasingly, in practice -- the one area where a president can exercise influence over the country long after his term of office has expired, is in his appointments to the federal bench. As an example, the Supreme Court that bedeviled President Franklin D. Roosevelt -- and declared much of his New Deal to be unconstitutional, especially in [Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States](#) and [United States v. Butler](#) -- contained not a *single* Roosevelt appointee; that court included one Taft nominee (Willis Van Devanter) two Wilsonians (Louis Brandeis and James C. McReynolds) two from Harding (George Sutherland and Pierce Butler), one from Coolidge (Harlan Fiske Stone) and three Hooverites (Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, Benjamin Cardozo and Owen Roberts). In other words, seven of nine members of a court exercising a life-and-death veto over critical New Deal legislation had been appointed by presidents whose political and judicial philosophy was the bipolar opposite of FDR's. By the same token,



FDR would go on to appoint 8 members of the Supreme Court -- more than any president save George Washington. Three of FDR's most notable appointees -- Hugo Black, Felix Frankfurter, and William O. Douglas -- would be among that body's most liberal jurors. Two, Douglas and Stanley Foreman Reed, would continue to serve as retired justices until 1980 -- fully 35 years after Roosevelt's death.

Talk about exercising influence beyond one's term of office -- or in this instance, the grave!

Today, America has one of the most -- if not *the most* conservative Supreme Courts in that institution's 223 year history. According to a 2008 academic paper by Professor William M. Landes and Judge Richard A. Posner entitled "[Rational Judicial Behavior: A Statistical Study](#)," of the 41 men and two women who served on the Supreme Court in the seventy years between 1937 and 2006, five of the ten most *conservative* are currently on the bench: Thomas (#1), Scalia (#3), Roberts (#4), Alito (#5) and Kennedy (#10). Conversely of the ten most *liberal* justices during that period, only one -- Ruth Bader Ginsberg (#9) is currently on the court. (The most liberal was Justice Elana Kagan's old boss, Justice Thurgood Marshall.)

For the past several years, most critical issues coming before SCOTUS (Supreme Court of the United States) have been decided by a 5-4 vote, with Roberts, Alito, Thomas and Scalia being reliably conservative, Ginsburg, Breyer, Stevens and Souter (replaced by Sotomayor and Kagan) reliably liberal and Kennedy the so-called "swing vote." Looking at the calendar, one might surmise that Justices Ginsburg (79 years old), Scalia and Kennedy (both 76), and Breyer (74) could well retire within the next 4 years. By comparison, those who will likely be on the bench for the next 10 to, say 30 years, are Thomas (64), Alito (62), Sotomayor (58) Roberts (57) and Kagan (52). In other words, the future philosophical balance of SCOTUS -- not to mention that of our multi-tiered federal judiciary -- will likely be in the hands of either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney starting January 20, 2013.

Will our courts be overseen for the next quarter century or more by men and women -- like R.A.T.S. -- who believe that the Constitution is a static document based on so-called "Framers' Intent," or by those who hold that it is both fluid and evolving?

The question is this: Do we wish to entrust issues and questions of personal liberty -- who we marry, whether we have control of our own bodies, what role religion plays in secular society, do some people have more rights than others, is

your vote more sacred than mine, etc. -- to those want the past to rule, or to those who understand the past as having a vote but not a veto?

It all comes down to a vote that will ultimately give one man the power to continue shaping American history long after he has left office.

Let the sun shine!

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June 08, 2012

HAVE SUM, WILL CAVIL

The late House Speaker Tip O'Neil's long and distinguished career famously was shaped by the belief that "All politics is local." The gentleman from Cambridge



understood politics to be as much an art form as a profession. He absolutely reveled in people and had a profound respect for – and understanding of – the process by which things got done. One wonders what Tip would think were he alive today. For in the past quarter century (O'Neil retired in '87 and died in '94), politics has become bitterly partisan and puerile; collegiality and compromise are words without meaning; amity now takes a back seat to anger; and to disagree all but inevitably means to be disagreeable. Instead of confirmation, we have confrontation. Nothing highlights the hostility now inherent in our political process more than three recent episodes – one in Las Vegas and two in South Florida.

On March 26, nearly 1,500 young Jewish professionals gathered at the Venetian Resort in Las Vegas for an annual event called "TribeFest." One session featured National Jewish Democratic Council CEO David Harris and his Republican Jewish Coalition counterpart Matt Brooks engaging in a civil discussion/debate on President Barack Obama's record on issues of interest to the Jewish community. Midway through the discussion, Sheldon Adelson, the Venetian Resort's multi-billionaire owner, took control of the microphone, and proceeded to trash and belittle the President, at one point saying Obama "should be in diapers." Despite repeated requests that he relinquish the microphone so the

discussion could continue, Adelson refused, angrily pointing out that the microphone, the room – indeed the entire resort and the block it is on – were his. Adelson, it should be noted, is one of the Republican Party’s single largest contributors, and provides a huge portion of the Republican Jewish Coalition’s annual budget.



On May 10, Susan Rice, America’s United Nations Ambassador came to Boca Raton’s Temple B’nai Torah to speak on U.S.-Israeli relations. Her speech, jointly sponsored by the Anti Defamation League (ADL), the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Community Relations Council of South Palm Beach County, was attended by about 500 people. Among them were several dozen, who waved Israeli flags and disrupted Ambassador Rice’s speech, proclaiming that she – and the president she serves – is guilty of “throwing Israel under the bus.” The protesters were escorted from the auditorium and asked to leave the premises. Within hours, a professionally-produced video entitled “Shame” appeared on YouTube. On it, a voice-of-doom narrator proclaims “The Obama campaign treats Jews like criminals . . .”

Finally, Temple Israel of Greater Miami invited – and then disinvited – Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz to be the featured speaker at the synagogue’s annual “Social Justice Forum” following services on May 25. When synagogue President Ben Kuehne informed temple members that Wasserman Schultz would be addressing “issues of interest to the Jewish community,” a vocal minority rebelled. Stanley Tate, one of Temple Israel’s longtime benefactors – who also chairs the Miami-Dade Romney campaign – publicly demanded the right of “rebuttal” and then resigned his synagogue membership. His complaint was that as chair of the Democratic National Committee, Wasserman Schultz should not be making what he believed would be a partisan speech without someone – preferably himself – rebut what she was going to say. In the end, President Kuehne “regrettably” cancelled Representative Wasserman Schultz’s speech, citing “potential security and safety concerns and the dignity of the temple, our members and guests ...” In his letter to the membership, Kuehne lamented “It is indeed unfortunate when heightened animosity both within and without our temple community inhibits the opportunity for programs that embrace the freedom of thought, expression and civility.” And as with Temple B’nai Torah in Boca Raton, Temple Israel has decided that in the future, no candidates for public office – or their supporters – will be permitted to speak until after the election.



This brazen stifling of civic discourse is deeply disturbing, to put it mildly. When people of vast financial means can blithely cavil, cajole, threaten and then literally wrest the microphone -- and all it stands for -- from the hands of those who have opposing points of view, democracy is diminished. When those who may indeed hold different positions, opinions or beliefs are treated as mortal enemies, as conscious agents of evil whose words must be forcefully suppressed, we are all in danger. When we can so easily pin labels like "Communist," "Socialist," "Nazi," "anti-Semite," or "Fascist" on those whose only "crime" is holding to a different thought, opinion or belief, we show ourselves to be desperately shallow, egregiously uncivil, and needlessly frightened.

Tip O'Neill must be spinning in his grave . . .

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June 17, 2012

EAT ME

By now, most folks are aware of New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's intention to ban the sale of large sodas in New York City. Bloomberg's proposed ban -- which must first be approved by the City Board of Health -- would prohibit NYC restaurants, theaters, sports venues and street cart vendors from selling sweetened drinks in cups over sixteen ounces that contain more than fifty calories. Not surprisingly, Hizzonor's announcement drew hearty cheers from the health-conscious and hellacious catcalls from the "Don't Tread on Me" crowd as well as the folks at Coca-Cola and McDonalds who, in addition to selling billions of gallons of Coke and other heavily sugared drinks is, without question, the globe's leading purveyor of grossly unhealthy cuisine.

"New Yorkers expect and deserve better than this. They can make their own choices about the beverages they purchase," Coca-Cola said in their official statement to the press. It also noted that *"Coca-Cola already puts calorie counts on the front of every bottle and can we sell."* Not to be outdone in indigence, McDonald's spokeswoman Heather Oldani huffed that *"Public health issues cannot be effectively addressed through a narrowly focused and misguided ban. This is a complex topic . . . one that requires a more collaborative and comprehensive approach."*



Putting calorie counts on the front of every bottle and can or on the overhead menu may make for good p.r. What it doesn't do,

however, is counter the mind-numbing amount of advertising that got billions of men, women and children into the mood for a Whopper, Fries and a Large Coke in the first place. Its in the same league as those incredibly wordy unreadable disclaimers that run for a second or two on television commercials -- or are intoned by an announcer speaking at Mach Three. A minute disclaimer may keep the advertiser on the side of the angels when it comes to Truth in Advertising; but truth to tell, when advertisers make the commercials so alluring -- and run them with such frequency -- nothing but the sales pitch hits home. Among my favorites are those for -- ironically, in view of this essay's subject matter -- weight loss products. The ad shows "before-and-after" photos of people who go from beached whale to body beautiful by simply taking a new, revolutionary, doctor-tested pill . . . no diet, no exercise, no lifestyle changes. And what is more, said pills are free (just pay shipping and handling) and guaranteed to work (results may vary) . . .

While Bloomberg's supporters sadly note that his proposed soft drink ban has enough exemptions and holes to drive a Mack truck through, his detractors angrily accuse him of seeking to further the so-called "Nanny State's" pernicious reach. *"How dare government tell people what we may or may not drink?"* they argue. *What's next?* they ask: *"Forbidding French Fries? Pizza? Burritos? Bacon Sundaes?"*



Indeed, what *is* next? Although it is quite possible that Bloomberg's ban will never see the light of day, he has already performed an invaluable public service in directing a megawatt spotlight on one of modern America's most vexatious problems: obesity. Facts and statistics about obesity in America are simply staggering. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) during the past twenty years, there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States. More than one-third (35.7%) and approximately 17% (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents age 2-19 are obese. (One is considered "Obese" when their Body Mass Index -- BMI -- is higher than 30, and "Overweight" when BMI is 25.0 -- 29.9) Anyone wishing to determine their BMI can go to [a site provided by the CDC](#). I just did mine and learned that my BMI is 21.1).

Several years ago, the CDC created a program called "Healthy People 2010." Its goal was "to lower obesity propensity to 15%" -- meaning no more than 15% of

any state population with BMIs over 30. Where in 2000 there wasn't a single state with an "obesity propensity," today, there are 12 states above this mark. [In 2010](#), Colorado, at 21% had the lowest percentage of people with BMIs over 30, followed by the District of Columbia (22.2%), Nevada (22.4%) Utah (22.5%), and Hawaii (22.7%). Conversely, Mississippi, at 34%, had the highest percentage of obese citizens, followed by West Virginia (32.5%), Alabama (32.2%), South Carolina (31.5%) and Kentucky (31.3%). Florida, by the way, was right in the middle -- 26.6%. According to the CDC, while there is no significant relationship between obesity and education among men, among women there is a trend -- those with college degrees are less likely to be obese or overweight compared to less educated women. The CDC also noted that in the years between 1988 and 1994, and again 2007-2008, the prevalence of obesity increased in adults at all income and education levels.

Not only does being overweight or obese pose a serious health issue -- diabetes, heart disease, cancer -- it is a source of concern in both the areas of national economy and national security. A recent study by the Society of Actuaries (SOA) looked at the increased economic costs of an overweight/obese America. [Their study](#) came up with the following figures:

- **\$127 billion:** Total cost of excess medical care caused by overweight and obesity.
- **\$49 billion:** Economic loss of productivity caused by excess mortality.
- **\$43 billion:** Economic loss of productivity caused by disability of active workers.
- **\$72 billion:** Economic loss of productivity caused by totally disabled workers.

SOA researchers found that when queried through an online survey, 83% said they would be willing to follow a healthy lifestyle, such as participating in a health and wellness program, if incentivized through their health plan. In all the *sturm und drang* over the [Affordable Care Act](#) few have noticed that it does cover obesity screening and counseling for both children and adults, and provides \$16 million to "Advance activities to improve nutrition and increase physical activity to promote healthy lifestyles and reduce obesity related conditions and costs." These activities are intended to be a part of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" initiative and help implement recommendations of the President's Childhood Obesity Task Force.

Overweight and obesity also presents a clear-and-present danger where National Security is concerned. Napoleon Bonaparte famously said that "An army travels on its stomach." Increasingly though, the military stomach is getting too big to drag. In 2008, when 684 military personnel were discharged

for transgressing "don't ask, don't tell," 4,555 were discharged for failing to meet military weight standards. Even relaxing their standard to a BMI of 26 (the low end of "overweight"), more than 9 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 are too heavy to enlist. And if, as many are currently suggesting, America were to reinstitute a universal military draft, we would hard pressed to fill the ranks with people who are physically fit and ready to serve.

Those who argue that proposals such as Mayor Bloomberg's violate the inalienable right to eat ourselves into oblivion forget what government -- from municipal to state to federal -- has accomplished over the past half-century to bring down the percentage of [those who smoke cigarettes](#). In 1965, 42.4% of the American public smoked. By 1980, that figure had been reduced to 33.2%. Today, less than 20% (19.3% to be precise) of the American public lights up. This dramatic decrease occurred despite the protests of an industry which still spends [\\$29 million a day](#), 365 days a year to promote its deadly product. By comparison, the fast food industry spends [\\$11.5 million a day](#) and Coca Cola

alone spends [\\$8 million a day](#), as compared to Microsoft and Apple, which spend, respectively, just \$4.4 million and a paltry \$1.9 million.



Long before Mayor Bloomberg's campaign to ban sugary drinks, there was an army of health conscious people trying to get Americans to live healthier lifestyles -- and not just by switching to no-calorie sodas to go along with their 840 calorie Baconaters. Shortly before his inauguration in January 1961, John F. Kennedy published ["The Soft American"](#) in *Sports Illustrated*. His article established the need for Americans to get in better shape; toward that end he created a "White House Committee on Health

and Fitness," and influenced a lot of young Americans to go out on 50 mile hikes. I remember how in the early '60s, the 8th and 9th grade at our junior high school demanded that the lone candy machine be replaced by one that sold fresh fruit. It was so popular that it had to be restocked a couple of times a day. Of course that was back in the day when McDonalds measured their burgers sold in the tens of thousands. Then again, there weren't any fast food establishments between the neighborhoods where we resided and the school we attended.

Perhaps one day we can use municipal zoning authority to keep these establishments from setting up shop within, say, two miles of any school . . .

I for one applaud Mayor Michael Bloomberg and hope that even if his ban on sodas doesn't pass muster, the very proposal will spark a nation-wide debate about our national waistline, cholesterol and BMI.

This is something we should all truly sink our teeth into.

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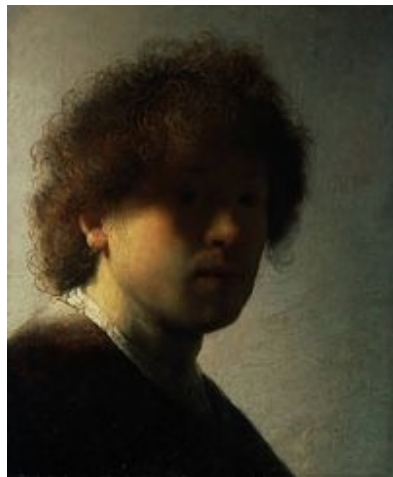
(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



June 24, 2012

CHIAROSCURO: THE ART OF REMBRANDT . . . AND ROMNEY?

Chiaroscuro -- coming from an Italian word literally meaning "light dark" -- is an artistic technique in which deep variations and subtle gradations of light and shade are employed to enhance character and create dramatic effect. A slightly less pedantic definition might be "The use of shadow and darkness to imply substance and light." The technique has long been used in painting and woodcutting, and is now used to good effect in both photography and cinematography. Da Vinci, Caravaggio and Rembrandt



are generally considered the masters of *chiaroscuro* in painting and woodcutting, and Cecil B. De Mille in cinema. Rembrandt used *chiaroscuro* to brilliant effect, especially in his many self-portraits. On the left we see Rembrandt's self image at age 22.

Note how the light in the painting is coming from a strong source on the left, beyond the edge of the painting. It falls across part of his neck, his cheek and his untidy hair, reflecting upon his nose, and brushes along his lips and the tip of his chin. A heavy shadow falls across the rest of his face. This sharp contrast between light and dark is what *chiaroscuro* is all about: using shadow and darkness to imply substance and light.

This selfsame definition -- employing shadow and darkness to imply substance and light -- can also be used to describe or characterize the political art of Mitt Romney. For like Rembrandt, Romney casts his subject matter in shadow -- if not utter darkness -- in the hopes that substance will be perceived. But where Rembrandt's goal is for the

connoisseur to believe he clearly sees and understands that which was never truly there, Romney's is to have the citizen believe he hears and understands that which was never truly said.

Romney's rhetorical *chiaroscuro* consists of misdirection, half-truths and the occasional outright lie. As an example, Romney has consistently told audiences that Barack Obama has apologized for America. In his book conveniently entitled "No Apologies," Romney writes:

"Never before in American history has its president gone before so many foreign audiences to apologize for so many American misdeeds, both real and imagined. It is his way of signaling to foreign countries and foreign leaders that their dislike for America is something he understands and that is, at least in part, understandable."

This is political *chiaroscuro*, plain and simple; Romney wants us to believe we actually heard President Obama "apologize for America." We didn't, because he didn't. And yet, despite the good folks at Politifact.com rating Romney's assertion a bald-faced "[Pants on Fire](#)" lie, he continues making that assertion. And to a certain extent it has worked; many people have told me they actually remember hearing the president apologize for America even while "bowing down to the King of Saudi Arabia" -- which he did not in fact do. Along the same foreign policy lines, Governor Romney has also asserted time and again that "When I become president, I will let Iran know that the United States means business." This bit of rhetorical, political *chiaroscuro* is, of course, meant to state -- without actually stating -- that so long as Barack Obama remains in office, Iran has the upper hand; that the president is too weak-willed to do anything but impose economic sanctions. "And what," we may well ask, "would you do differently Mr. Romney?" "Just elect me and you'll see," comes the reply.

Most frequently, the positions on Romney's palette are more shadow than substance. With regards to jobs, "I am a businessman, and thus know what needs to be done." With regards to deficits, "I am a businessman, and thus know what needs to be done." In sum, he rarely commits himself on any issue save taxes (lower), regulations (fewer) or social welfare programs (eliminate). For the most part, he criticizes President Obama for his handling of everything from Appropriations to Zimbabwe, thus suggesting that he will do precisely the opposite. Again, this is employing shadow and darkness to suggest substance and light.

Recently, Governor Romney, in perhaps his most egregious use of political *chiaroscuro*, told a group of religious conservatives in Quakertown, Pennsylvania that he would do "the opposite" of what President Obama has done on Israel. The words are pure shadow; they do not commit him to a single positive action regarding Israel, the Palestinians or the Middle East. The substance is implied; President Obama has thrown the Jewish State under the bus.

Let us for the moment, take Governor Romney at his word -- that he would do the precisely the opposite of what President Obama has done vis-à-vis Israel. What is the real implication, based not on Romney's rhetorical *chiaroscuro* but Obama's real record? As president:

- Barack Obama increased Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME), more than doubling the value of emergency military equipment that America stockpiles on Israeli soil. If we are to take Romney at his word, would he then decrease Israel's QME?
- President Obama personally intervened to save the lives of Israeli diplomats in Egypt, to which Israeli PM Netanyahu said "We owe him a special debt of gratitude." If we are to take Romney at his word, would he have let the Israeli diplomats fend for themselves?
- President Obama provided Israel with hundreds of millions of dollars in supplemental funding for missile defense programs like the Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrows systems. If we are to take Romney at his word, would he have said "no additional funding . . . no missile shield?"
- Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly, President Obama said the Palestinians should ditch their plans to petition the international body for statehood. If we are to take Romney at his word, would he then support unilateral Palestinian statehood?"
- President Obama spearheaded international efforts to impose what Iranian President Ahmadinejad termed "the most extensive and dastardly sanctions ever . . . the heaviest economic onslaught on a nation in history." As a result, Iran cannot access 70% of its foreign currency reserves, \$60 billion worth of foreign contracts have been cancelled or suspended and companies like Shell, Total, ENI, Toyota, Siemens and Lukoil have all pulled out of Iran. If we are to take Romney at his word, may we presume that he would have permitted Iran to continue making a fortune pumping and shipping oil?

Chiaroscuro can be both breathtaking and brilliant. When used as an artistic technique by a master like Rembrandt van Rijn, it lends brilliance, elucidation and light to that which is most tenebrous. When used as a political strategy by a manipulator like Mitt Romney, it can do little more than plunge adumbral shadows into inky darkness.

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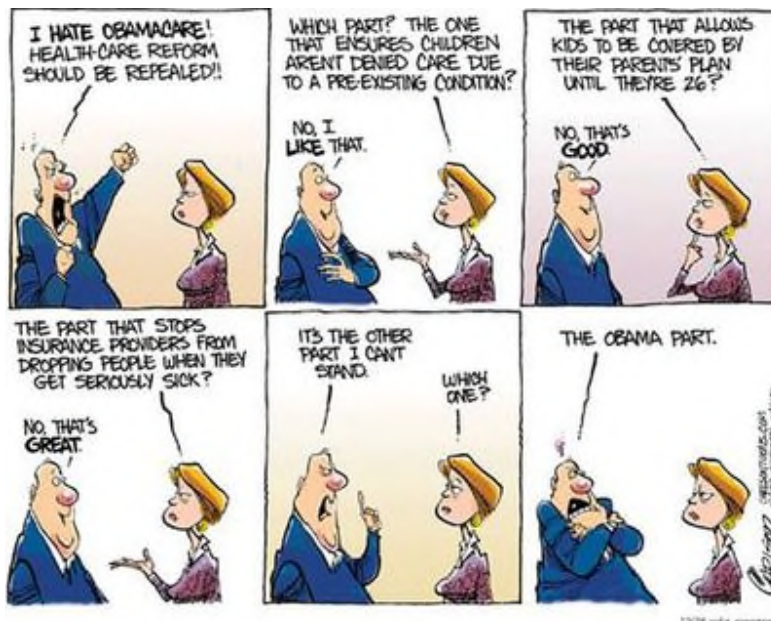


July 01, 2012

BUZZ WINDRIP IS ALIVE AND WELL

Depending on what you watch, read or listen to, the Supreme Court's landmark 5-4 decision upholding the constitutionality of Obamacare is either an overwhelming victory for freedom that will be the salvation of tens of millions, or a staggering defeat for individual liberty which signals the beginning of the end for America. That the majority decision was written by Chief Justice Roberts comes as a shock; it was largely assumed that he would vote against the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

Most -- though certainly not all -- Democrats are hailing the decision as a



clear-cut victory for both President Obama and the tens of millions of Americans who currently have no health insurance, are saddled with pre-existing conditions, or are in danger of being "maxed out" on their current policies. This swathe of America firmly believes

that health care is a right, not a privilege.

At the same time, nearly all Republicans are damning the high court's decision with some sounding a bit like President Andrew Jackson who allegedly responded to the court's decision in *Worcester v Georgia* (1832) by saying "[Chief Justice] John Marshall has made his decision; now let us see him enforce it." (In reality, Jackson never did). Unbelievably, there have already been calls for the taking up of arms against the implementation of Obamacare. Paleoconservative chatterboxes like Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage have flatly stated that the only reason Chief Justice Roberts found the ACA constitutional was that he was on medication which "introduces mental slowing" and "other cognitive problems."

Despite the court's decision -- which makes the ACA the law of the land -- polls show the American public widely split over the issue of health care: 44% want Obamacare repealed; 37% wish it to remain in place. It should be noted that included among the 44% are a sizeable number of progressives who never truly supported the Affordable Care Act because, in their estimation, it did not go nearly far enough. To their way of thinking, where single-payer, universal health care should have been the Affordable Care Act's focus, what America got instead was universal health insurance.

The public's view of Obamacare is rather skewed -- thanks in large part to the nearly quarter-billion dollars that groups like Crossroads has spent on attack ads. There are millions upon millions of Americans who still believe that Obamacare is socialist; that medical care will now be rationed, cost the taxpayers trillions of dollars, kill millions of jobs and give unlimited power to government bureaucrats who will decide who lives and who dies. And yet, despite this, a majority of the American public has a favorable view of various parts of the ACA, such as those dealing with preexisting conditions, permitting children to remain on their parents' policy until age 26, and removing lifetime caps.

Many view the court's decision as a personal victory for Chief Justice John Roberts and the Supreme Court (SCOTUS) itself. Former Labor Secretary [Robert Reich](#) noted that after so many 5-4 decisions in which conservatives held sway -- including, most infamously, 2000's *Bush v Gore* and *Citizens United v FEC* -- Roberts likely "saved the court from a growing reputation

for political partisanship." In the run-up to Thursday's decision, the lion's share of speculation surrounded Justice Anthony Kennedy -- the court's so-called "swing vote" -- not the Chief Justice. It was just naturally assumed that Kennedy's would be the decisive vote. Then too, there was near universal agreement that the decision would hinge on the court's interpretation of the Commerce Clause. Applying what one scholar termed "convoluted constitutional logic," Roberts and the court's four liberal justices reasoned that the penalty to be collected by the government for non-compliance with the law is the equivalent of a tax . . . and the federal government has the power to tax.

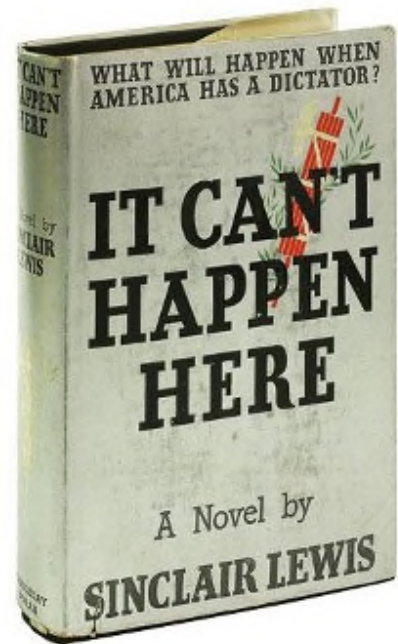
So in the end, it was Roberts, not Kennedy, and Congress' right to tax, not the Commerce Clause, which would tip the balance . . .

If America's political culture was peopled by remotely mature adults, Thursday's Supreme Court decision would have been met with a bit of cheering, a bit of groaning, and the understanding that this is now the law of the land. But our political culture is *not* peopled with mature adults. Rather, it is populated with playground bullies and petulant adolescents. For no sooner had word gone out about the court's 5-4 decision than Governor Romney stood at an outdoor podium and proclaimed that he would repeal Obamacare on his first day in office. (Someone should explain to him that presidents don't have the constitutional authority to simply repeal the law of the land -- unless they have a huge majority in the House and a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate). Romney, the spiritual father of Obamacare, has yet to say what he would replace it with. And small wonder, for he really doesn't have a clue.

One response to the Supreme Court's decision which is gaining supporters sends a horrifying chill up the spine comes from within the bowels of the Militia Movement. [Mike Vanderboegh](#), who calls himself one of the "midwives" of the Fast and Furious scandal (more about that in the coming weeks), is actually advocating armed insurrection. Vanderboegh is of the opinion that the government has no right to force anyone to purchase anything -- like health insurance -- let alone levy a fine (actually a tax) and then enforce its collection. [Vanderboegh's solution](#) is chilling to say the least:

"If we refuse to obey, we will be fined. If we refuse to pay the fine, we will in time be jailed. If we refuse to report meekly to jail, we will be sent for by armed men. And if we refuse their violent invitation at the doorsteps of our own homes we will be killed -- unless we kill them first. ... I am on record as advocating the right of defensive violence against a tyrannical regime."

Before anyone concludes that people like Mike Vanderboegh are on the absolute fringe of American society and are only supported by the seriously delusional, chew on this: Vanderboegh is a prime source and frequent guest on Fox News. Vanderboegh is not the only one pushing disobedience and insurrection. Many within the Republican ranks are turning the Supreme Court's decision into the 21st century version of "No taxation without representation!" . . . and worse.



Within hours of the SCOTUS's decision, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul announced that:

"Just because a couple people on the Supreme Court declare something to be 'constitutional' does not make it so. The whole thing remains unconstitutional." While the court may have erroneously come to the conclusion that the law is allowable, it certainly does nothing to make this mandate or government takeover of our health care right."

One fears for the future of politics in this country. Ironically, while in the process of researching this article, I have been rereading -- for perhaps the 12th time -- *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis. Published in 1935, Sinclair's dystopian satire envisioned in thrall to a homespun fascist dictator named Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip. Buzz is a regular guy, personable, plainspoken, "with something of the earthy sense of humor of a Mark Twain . . . a Will Rogers." Windrip cozies up to the electorate by stoking their disdain for fancy ideas, and encourages them to follow their hearts, not their minds. He appeals to rural white populism,

knownothingism, cultural resentment and "good old-fashioned American values." Windrip campaigns on he calls "New Freedom," which, it will turn out, is essentially a freedom *from* freedom. Once elected, all hell breaks loose, because Buzz, it turns out, is really a tool -- and doing the bidding of -- the corporate elite. By the time it begins to dawn on America what is really going on, it is too late; it *has* happened here.

I am not suggesting that Mitt Romney is Buzz Windrip; goodness knows, he lacks the folksy common touch personified by Lewis' everyman. However, there are hundreds -- if not thousands -- of Buzz Windrips running for various local, state and federal offices all over the country. Many, if not most, are preaching a "return," a "taking back America" from the hands of "effete intellectuals," "socialists," "atheists," "heretics" and "illegals." They are railing against the Federal Government, taxes, "socialized medicine" the "Nanny State," Food Stamps, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, abortion and a thousand-and-one other things which they believe are sins against God, truth, justice and the American way.

Aided by the unstinting largesse of mega billionaires like the Koch brothers, Sheldon Adelson, Harold Simmons, Warren Stephens and Kenny Troutt, Buzz Windrip is alive and well . . . and seeking to do one heck of a lot more than just repealing national health insurance.

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July 09, 2012

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO SHAME?

This past June 29, Breitbart.com, the über-conservative website ran a [lead article](#) with the screaming headline OBAMA CAMPAIGN CELEBRATES INDEPENDENCE DAY . . . WITH FUNDRAISER IN PARIS. In the piece's snarky opening paragraph, blogger Ben Shapiro wrote:

Apparently tiring of US soil as a source of campaign dollars, the Obama campaign is headed overseas -- with its celebrity friends in tow. The European Obama campaign starts next week in Paris on July 4 with a reception organized by various fundraising heavy-hitters. Independence Day fundraisers in Paris -- now that's a flag-waving campaign!

After attacking the president for what he termed his "European-style healthcare plan" which "Americans . . . see as a massive net negative sucking our coffers dry," blogger Shapiro concluded that "[Paris] . . . may be the only place Obama can still find cheering throngs."

Of course, it goes without saying that President and Mrs. Obama were absolutely *not* going to Paris for the 4th of July.

Within hours of Shapiro posting his article, the *Los Angeles Times* ran [a piece](#) on the president's Independence Day schedule, which had been easily gleaned from the White House website: *"On Wednesday, he will host the traditional Independence Day celebration for members of the military and their families. on the South Lawn of the White House. And anyone who had cared to check out the White House website for [July 4](#) could have read the president's remarks to the assembled picnic goers.*

Despite having been quickly shown for what it was -- a bald-faced lie -- Shapiro's story continued to have a life of its own. Thousands of Breitbart.com readers continued to treat it as the gospel, dumping all over the president for going to Paris, "the cradle of Socialism," in order to raise campaign funds . . . and on the Fourth of July! Moreover, the lie also got tweeted by the likes of [Karl Rove](#) and was afforded a place of honor on [Sean Hannity's message board](#), where his devotees trashed Mr. Obama for nearly a week more. Some, while admitting that "maybe" the president had not actually traveled to France, nonetheless accused him of "closing down Arlington and then the Vietnam Memorial to veterans on Memorial Day." what these folks had done was replace a discredited



lie with a new bald-faced -- and demonstrably untrue -- fib. For orthodox Obama haters, the truth rarely has the power to conquer a lie. As has been proven time and again, a certified copy of Barack Obama's birth certificate means nothing to those who persist in the belief that the man was born in Kenya . . . or Moscow or on Neptune.

Slick innuendo, mendacious half-truths and outright lies are absolutely endemic in modern high-stakes politics; they are the fuel that fires a million screaming headlines and lights up the lowest common denominator. And because this is the United States of America, even the biggest, nastiest whoppers fall under the protection of the First Amendment. Now to be certain, there *are* some generally accepted prohibitions on free speech, such as:

- Yelling "FIRE" in a crowded theatre;
- Sedition (advocating force as a way to change government);
- Hate speech;
- Defamation (slander and/or libel);
- False or misleading advertising;
- Profanity on public airwaves, and
- Gag orders or publication bans in contracts, court cases and legal settlements.

Nowadays in the world of politics, it would seem that the telling of virtually any fiction, fable, falsehood or fabrication is acceptable; if you can create it, you can

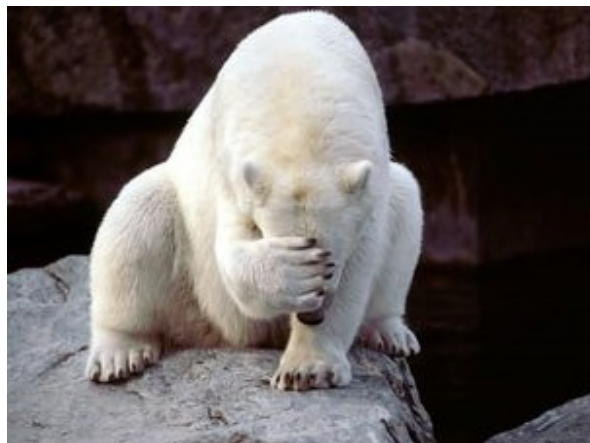
proclaim it. For every lie that is told there are ears that will hear and mouths that will repeat. It seems that today, because the rewards of victory are so immense that no prevarication is punished. And because there is so much lying and misrepresentation coming across the airwaves, in print and via electronic media, we have come to a point where nobody is believed . . . except the politicians *you* like.

Historically, humanity possessed two censors for keeping mendacity to a public minimum: morality and shame. For the person of even moderate faith, lying and bearing false witness have always been understood as immoral acts; just check the Biblical books of Exodus (20:13), Leviticus (19:11) and Deuteronomy (5:17). For much of recorded history, people's words and deeds were, in large measure, shaped by a desire to live moral lives -- to be moral beings. As such, spreading deliberate lies about others was understood to be both immoral and intolerable. I for one find it terribly ironic that in the modern political arena, we hear as many protestations of faith and morality coming from the campaign stump as parishioners might in a church, a synagogue or a mosque. Sadly, many of those flaunting their moral *bona fides* -- those who seek to blend religion and politics and to turn campaigns into crusades - are guilty of the sin of lying . . . over and over and over again. Apparently, morality is no longer such an efficacious censor.

But what about that second censor . . . shame? According to [Paul Ekman](#), author of [Telling Lies](#) and one of the most brilliant psychologists of the past 50 years:

Shame is closely related to guilt, but there is a key qualitative difference. No audience is needed for feelings of guilt; no one else need know, for the guilty person is his own judge. Not so for shame. The humiliation of shame requires disapproval or ridicule by others. If no one ever learns of a misdeed there will be no shame, but there still might be guilt. Of course, there may be both. The distinction between shame and guilt is very important, since these two emotions may tear a person in opposite directions. The wish to relieve guilt may motivate a confession, but the wish to avoid the humiliation of shame may prevent it.

In other words, we -- the great unwashed public -- are just as much to blame as the politicians, commentators and bloggers for all the untruths, misrepresentations and outright lies. Why? Because we have lost our ability to scream "SHAME!" at those who lie, to those whose deed is at odds with his creed



-- in short, to those who talk the moral talk, but walk the mendacious walk. We demand honesty from our leaders but countenance dishonesty from their challengers -- and visa versa.

According to Dr. Ekman, unless and until we the people reconnect with that other great censor -- shame -- those seeking our trust and our votes will continue feeding us a steady diet of defamation, deception and dishonesty -- without feeling a moment's guilt or shame.

"Shame," according to the great Salman Rusdie, "is like everything else; live with it for long enough and it becomes part of the furniture."

To my way of thinking it's high time that we redecorate!

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July 15, 2012

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

Although there is a great deal of wisdom in the expression "*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result,*" the simple fact is that [no one knows](#) to whom to attribute said wisdom. Searching the Internet, one finds the quote ascribed to a crew of worthies ranging from Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain and Albert Einstein to the author of the "Twelve Step Program" and novelist Rita Mae Brown. Whenever precise attribution eludes me, I fall back on Dorothy Parker's advice from [A Pig's Eye View of Literature](#):



*"If, with the literate, I am
Impelled to try an epigram,
I never seek to take the credit;
We all assume that Oscar said it."*

Now, if continually doing the same thing, but expecting different results is Franklin's - or Twain's or Einstein's or Oscar Wilde's -- notion of insanity, what should we call it when a group does the same thing over and over and over, each time meeting with negative results and knowingly expecting -- if not hoping for -- precisely the same results?

In two words: Congressional Republicans.

This past week, the 241 members of that conservative marching and chowder society -- joined by 5 defecting Democrats -- voted for the 33rd time (!) in 18 months to repeal President Obama's signature Affordable Health Care Act (ACA). Talk about an action begging for a definition! Since January 2011, when they first took back the House, Republicans have voted thirty-three times to repeal, defund or otherwise dramatically scale back what they derisively term "Obamacare." And each time they entered into the vote knowing full well that once their bill passed the House -- which it has 33 times -- there were precisely two chances that the Senate would ever concur: absolutely none and even less than that. Moreover if, somehow the stars misaligned to such a strange degree that the measure actually passed the Senate as well, Congressional Republicans knew full well that President Obama would veto it -- thus playing into their hands.

I for one wouldn't mind them voting 33 -- or even 133 -- times if they at least gave us an idea as to what they wanted to replace the ACA with. I do mind, because they don't have a plan, and instead of creating jobs and saving the economy, they are spending upwards of a million dollars a day (what it costs to run Congress) on sound and fury signifying nothing.

Apparently then, the House Republicans' mantra is "If at first you don't succeed, fail, fail, fail again and be damn glad about it." I don't know that Oscar Wilde -- or even H.P. Lovecraft for that matter -- could come up with a dead-on definition for such a pattern of activity. But if they could, would it be "Hypocrisy?" "Disingenuousness?" "Cynicism?" "Faux-naïveté?" Methinks the word has yet to be created, for these folks are, to employ a term rarely heard any more, *sui generis*.

Of course, Boehner, Cantor, McCarthy, McConnell and the rest don't expect the ACA to be overturned or defunded anytime soon . . . and that's just fine with them. So far as they are concerned, these votes are mere stage-turns and plot twists in a drama whose dénouement won't be reached until the first Tuesday in November. Illinois Republican (and Chief Deputy Whip) [Peter Roskam](#) underscored this reality when, just before last Wednesday's vote, he said "Here's the good news. The voters get the last word in November. Stay tuned."

Time and again, House and Senate Republicans argue that they are merely trying to enact the will of the American people. Time and again, Speaker Boehner and Minority Leader McConnell have proclaimed that "most Americans not only oppose this health care law -- they support fully repealing it." (*In matter of fact, the latest Washington Post poll shows that Americans are split right down the middle: 47%*

of those surveyed said they opposed the law and 47% said they supported it.) Then there is Majority Leader Cantor who, along with his Tea Party minions warns that the ACA, ". . . is making our economy worse, driving up costs, and making it harder for small businesses to hire." And now, in light of the recent Supreme Court decision, the GOP has taken to calling the ACA "[the largest tax increase](#) on the poor and the middle class in the history of this country." [Rush Limbaugh](#), in what can only be termed a bout of steroidal hyperbole, called the ACA "The biggest tax increase in the history of the world."

Wrong, wrong, **wrong!** Although the ACA definitely *does* include new taxes (much of it on couples jointly filing on incomes of over \$250,000 and healthcare providers themselves), it is by no means "the largest tax increase in the history of this country." According to the federal Joint [Committee on Taxation](#), a nonpartisan committee of Congress with a professional staff of economists, attorneys and accountants, ACA contains tax increase provisions that will, by 2019, amount to **.49% of Gross Domestic Product** (GDP). For those policy wonks who care, this figure doesn't even make the top ten tax increases over the past 70 years. According to an in-depth [Treasury Department study](#) conducted during the Bush Administration, the top ten tax increases look like this:

1. *Revenue Act of 1942: 5.04 percent of GDP;*
2. *Revenue Act of 1961: 2.2 percent of GDP;*
3. *Current Tax Payment Act of 1943: 1.13 percent of GDP;*
4. *Revenue and Expenditure Control Act of 1968: 1.09 percent of GDP;*
5. *Excess Profits Tax of 1950: .97 percent of GDP;*
6. *Revenue and Expenditure Control Act of 1968: 1.09 percent of GDP;*
7. *Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982: .8 percent of GDP;*
8. *Crude Oil Windfall Profit Tax Act of 1980: .5 percent of GDP;*
9. *Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993; .5 percent of GDP;*
10. *Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990; .49 percent of GDP.*

By this point in time, all but the most case-hardened of partisans can see that Congressional Republicans have opted to put politics well ahead of policy; the needs, wants, desires and marching orders of their financial backers over those of the unemployed and uninsured; and above all, victory in November over virtually any and everything else. While Republicans keep beating the drum of repeal, they, like millions of Americans, continue to benefit from those parts of the ACA which are already in effect -- like keeping children on their parents' policies until age 26 and not having to worry about pre-existing conditions.

All but lost in the tidal wave of rhetoric is a fascinating little factoid: if the ACA is *not* repealed, members of Congress and their staffs will forfeit their government-subsidized insurance coverage after they retire. Unbeknownst to

many, the ACA included an [amendment](#) sponsored by Iowa Republican Senator Charles Grassley that essentially insured that members of Congress live by the same rules as their constituents; it forced lawmakers and staff to get coverage through the insurance exchanges created by the healthcare law. (Heretofore, members of Congress and their staffs bought insurance through the Federal Employees Health Benefit Program -- FEHBP -- which allowed them to keep their policies after they retired.) Grassley said that without his amendment, Congress would be sending "a message to grassroots America . . . that health care reform is good enough for you, but not for us." In other words, in addition to placing politics above policy and the needs and wishes of corporate America over those of the common clay, Republicans have now voted 33 times to restore a benefit denied to all but members of the political elite.

If at first you don't succeed, fail, fail, fail again . . . and live to reap the rewards.

What would Oscar Wilde call that?

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July 21, 2012

A NOTE TO THE PEOPLE OF MINNESOTA'S 6TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

To the Good Folks of Woodbury, Blaine, Stillwater and St. Cloud:

Although I am writing this note from South Florida, am a native Californian and have probably spent less than 150 hours in the North Star State, your neighborhood -- the 6th Congressional District -- nonetheless plays a significant role in my family's history. The family matriarch, Anne Hyman Kagan, was born in your neck of the woods nearly 120



years ago. 1896 was a very good year for the 6th District, for in addition to grandma, F. Scott Fitzgerald was born a few weeks later in the very same neighborhood.

Grandma Anne, who bore an eerie resemblance to Helena Rubinstein was one of nature's naturals: funny, smart, successful, emancipated, artistic, imaginative, energetic and for her time, slightly bawdy. And, usual for her generation, she was a professional working woman for more than a half-century. One of my fondest memories of grandma took place at the Elm's Hotel in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, where she and Grandpa Doc summered every year -- and she would act as the unofficial director of whacky entertainment. One night she staged a "Come as Your Favorite Fruit" party for

all the hotel's guests; she came as a can of fruit cocktail. Quintessential Anne . . .

Grandma lived into her mid-to-late nineties and even today continues to exercise tremendous influence over her daughter (my mother Alice) her grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews and all those privileged to have known her. She was one of those people who are absolutely unforgettable . . . a character who was imbued with character. And although you folks never knew her -- she would spend most of her life in Chicago, Kansas City and Los Angeles -- you should be proud that she -- along with Scott Fitzgerald -- is your historic neighbor.

Fast forward a bunch of decades to the year 2012. Today, I guess your most famous neighbor would be someone who doesn't actually live in the 6th District: Representative Michele Bachmann. It goes without saying that most everyone in the United States -- if not the Western world -- is aware of Ms. Bachmann . . . and not necessarily for reasons that should make you proud. From the first moment she burst on to the national political scene she, unlike Grandma Anne or Scott Fitzgerald, has been an utter embarrassment. Bachmann, who unbelievably has only been in the House of Representatives for three terms (Yes, it *does* seem like an eternity) is best known for:

- Accusing Barack Obama of having "anti-American views";
- Alleging that "The Executive Director of Planned Parenthood in Illinois said they want to become the Lens Crafter of big abortion";
- Claiming that "There are hundreds and hundreds of scientists -- many of them holding Nobel Prizes -- who believe in Intelligent Design";
- Chairing the House Tea Party Caucus;
- Raising vast sums of money;
- Sponsoring the "[Light Bulb Freedom of Choice Act](#)" -- her sole legislative effort;
- Questioning the patriotic *bona fides* of her Democratic colleagues;
- Declaring the U.S. Census to be unconstitutional;
- Flatly stating that greenhouse gasses are "good for the environment"; and
- Averring that homosexuality can be "cured" with psychological counseling.

And, if all the above isn't embarrassing enough, Ms. Bachmann the person *you* have seen fit to represent your interests in Congress, now accuses Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Deputy Chief Aide, Huma Abedin -- among others -- of being complicit in a grand scheme to institute *sharia* law in America! She, along with four of her Tea Party colleagues (GOP Reps. Trent Franks of Arizona, Louie Gohmert of Texas, Thomas Rooney of Florida, and Lynn Westmoreland of Georgia) has fired off letters to various Federal agencies demanding an inquiry. And just yesterday -- despite ever increasing condemnations from her Republican colleagues -- Bachmann asserted on radio chatterbox Glenn Beck's program that Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN -- the first Muslim ever elected to Congress) "has a long record of being associated with the Muslim Brotherhood." Bachmann, of course, has yet to offer a shred of proof for any of these

slandorous accusations, because she has no proof. Once again, she has entered that grey conspiratorial empyrean so reminiscent of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Tell me: is this really the person you want representing you and your interests in Congress?

Uniquely, Bachmann's latest foray into Never Never Land has actually stiffened a few heretofore thixotropic conservative spines. In the past several days, Republican icons Ed Rollins (Bachmann's former campaign manager), Speaker John Boehner, and Senators John McCain, Lindsay Graham and Marco Rubio -- among others -- have pilloried Bachmann, characterizing her charges as "dangerous," "sinister," "extreme," and "downright vicious." To give Bachmann her due, she *has* performed one positive service: getting politicians from one end of the political spectrum to the other to finally agree on something . . . that the woman representing you in Congress sounds like an escapee from the Asylum of Charenton (although perhaps without the direction of the Marquis de Sade).

Until recently, not a soul on the Republican side of the aisle had either the courage or desire to put Michele Bachmann in her place. For despite her long and inglorious record of sounding like the village idiot, she was held in high esteem by her party's far right wing. And, even more to the point, the GOP has always felt they needed her for the simple reason that she is one of their most prodigious fundraisers. Consider that going in to her 2012 reelection against Democrat [Jim Graves](#) she has amassed a campaign war chest in excess of \$15 million -- more than any member of the House save Speaker John Boehner, and easily enough to run a highly competitive senate race in most states. Today things are different; where once Michele Bachmann seemed to be a leader with a future -- a female reincarnation of Paul Revere -- now she is looking more and more like the Lady Macbeth.

Friends in the 6th District, you have a great alternative in Democrat Jim Graves. He is a fellow who is truly the American Dream of Success. Through his "Graves Hospitality," he has created tens of thousands of jobs throughout your district. And what is more, looking at how you've voted over the past half dozen years, you've never really been that much in love with Michelle Bachmann in the first place. You may or may not recall that if it had not been for third party candidates in both 2006 and 2008, Bachmann would have lost; that in 2010, despite outspending her Democratic opponent nearly 3-to-1, she won by slightly less than 20,000 votes out of nearly 300,000 cast. In other words, you've never really been that sold on her. And this year, 2012, there is no third party candidate.

And so, dear friends of Minnesota's 6th District, I urge you to come out *en masse* this November, and defeat Michele Bachmann. Put us out of her narrow-minded, fact-challenged, self-righteous, fear-laced misery. Goodness knows, you deserve far, far

better. The state will thank you; the nation will thank you, and goodness knows Grandma Anne will be beside herself with glee.

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(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



July 30, 2012

COUNTERINTUITIVE

counterintuitive [kaʊntərɪn'tuɪtɪv], adjective: *counter to what intuition would have one expect . . .*

OK, now that we have defined the term, how about a handful of examples?

- A weight-loss regimen that requires one to consume three malteds a day.
- A set of travel directions that sends one north in order to get one south.
- Virtually any argument containing the words "slippery slope."
- Believing that the non-occurrence of "X" proves the certainty that "X" will occur.

The last two examples shall occupy our attention for the better part of this piece .

..

Ever since Barack Obama came to office, gun advocates have warned that one day -- and soon -- the administration will come and take everyone's guns away, thus leaving a defenseless citizenry at the mercy of a pernicious, rapacious



federal government. Never mind that during his first three-and-a-half years in office, any discussion of gun control has been somewhere between overly muted and practically non-existent. About the only gun-related action taken by this administration was a measure that both gun-owners and the National Rifle Association (NRA) cheered: on February 22, 2010 the president signed legislation making it legal for licensed gun owners to

bring weapons into national parks and on Amtrak trains. (Check out my Feb. 26, 2010 essay [*Of Glocks, Glaciers and Giant Sequoias*](#).)

After the gunning down of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in January 2011, President Obama said little about the need for gun control; he didn't even call for reinstituting the Assault Weapon Ban, which had expired in 2004. Instead, he talked up the need for greater civility in American public life. And now, even after last week's movie theater massacre in Aurora, Colorado, the president's rhetoric is anything but brash or anti-gun. Where one might assume that our "gun-hating President" would at least call for a ban on the sale of 100-round magazines for AK-47s, let alone severe restrictions on sales at gun shows or over the internet, all he did was issue a call for a "common sense approach" to sales of assault weapons and new restrictions barring mentally disabled people from purchasing weapons. "These steps shouldn't be controversial," the president said. "They should be common sense." Speaking before the National Urban League convention in New Orleans, the president added, *"I, like most Americans, believe that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual the right to bear arms. I think we recognize the traditions of gun ownership that passed on from generation to generation. That hunting and shooting are part of a cherished national heritage."*

Far from sounding like the ranting of a neurotic hoplophobe (one with a morbid fear of firearms), his words seem both measured and politic, if not a bit milquetoast. He concluded his speech by saying: *"But I also believe that a lot of gun owners would agree that AK-47s belong in the hands of soldiers, not in the hands of criminals. That they belong on the battlefield of war, not on the streets of our cities. I believe the majority of gun owners would agree we should do everything possible to prevent criminals and fugitives from purchasing weapons, and we should check someone's criminal record before they can check out a gun seller."* Again, nothing terribly objectionable or "We're coming to take your guns away" in what he said.

Here's where counterintuition comes into play.

Despite what the president said after the Aurora tragedy, and despite his track record during his first three-plus years in office, all that the NRA-nicks heard the president say was, in the words of more than [one headline](#) that **"Obama says people shouldn't be able to own guns!"**

As the prophet said, "They have ears but they do not hear, eyes, but they do not see . . ."

For about as long as anyone can remember, the NRA has employed the "slippery-slope" as its rationale for standing against any and every conversation containing the words "gun" and "control." To the leaders of this powerful

lobbying organization -- though not necessarily all of its rank-and-file members - even questioning the unfettered sale of 100-round magazines or the stockpiling of thousands upon thousands of rounds of ammunition (as in the case of the Aurora gunman) is but a step away from the confiscation of every pistol, rifle, and other bullet-shooting device in America.

Another living, breathing example of "counterintuitive."

People on both sides of the political aisle -- and leaders of the NRA -- argue that it is "too soon after Aurora" to have a serious conversation about guns America. This is utter balderdash. If not now -- when we have 12 dead and 58 wounded before us -- then when? The NRA keeps true to its slogan that "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." Hello? The slogan should be "Guns don't kill people; people with guns kill people." I admit that I've never been a gun fancier or hunter of game either great or small. There simply weren't too many opportunities for hunting in the neighborhood where I grew up, unless, of course you count the paparazzi armed with Leicas and Hasselblads stalking the beast known as *celebratus Tinseltownus*. Despite not having guns in my background, I do have a modicum of respect for the 2nd Amendment, although I honestly admit -- unlike many -- that I'm not really sure how "A well regulated Militia" translates into an unfettered right for civilians to own howitzers, bazookas and AK-47s.

To say -- as many on the pro-gun side of the aisle do -- that if only one person attending that Friday night movie had been strapped -- i.e. carrying a weapon -- there likely would have been no massacre, is specious. According to a student of mine at Florida International University -- a highly-decorated career military man we lovingly and respectfully call "The General" -- anyone returning fire would likely have caused the carnage to increase. Why? Because, as The General told me, "Trying to hit a specific target through the darkened haze of tear gas is highly problematic if not next to impossible." What most forget is that the crazed gunman threw a tear gas bomb into the theater before opening fire . . .

Without question, America is an extremely violent and well-armed country. The FBI estimates that there are more than 200 million guns in this country. And, if one adds in those owned by the military and law enforcement agencies it is likely one weapon for every man, woman and child in this country. As a partial result of all these guns, pistols, rifles and assault weapons, it is estimated that there will be more than 9,000 murders-by-firearm in this country over the next 12 months. By means of comparison, over the same period there will be an estimated 60 in Great Britain. And, even taking into account that Great Britain's population is 1/5 that of America, their 60 firearm murders would be the equivalent of 300 on our side of the pond.

What this country needs is a full-throated debate about the future of guns in America. At some point, politicians are going to have to stop being so all-fired fearful of the NRA. They are neither as monolithic nor as powerful as many think. Consider that according to the most recent polling:

- 74% of NRA members and 87% of non-NRA gun owners support criminal background checks for anyone purchasing a gun.
- 74% of NRA members think that concealed carry permits should be granted only to applicants who have completed gun safety training and 75% believe that such permits should be granted to people who have not committed violent misdemeanors, including assault.
- 71% of NRA members back the idea that people on terror watch lists should be barred from buying guns (duh), and
- 65% believe that gun owners should be required to alert police in the event of lost and stolen guns.

Of course, merely heaping on more restrictions will never keep deranged people from committing deranged acts of evil. It may, however, just make it a bit more difficult . . . or force them to use a knife or crossbow, which is up close and personal.

And the NRA argues for more guns and fewer restrictions while politicians meekly agree?

Talk about counterintuitive . . .

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NEXT YEAR IN TEL AVIV

Depending on one's source of what passes for news, Mitt Romney's recent trip to Israel and Poland was either a gaffe-filled disaster or the second coming of Woodrow Wilson.

Upon arriving in London, he quickly managed to offend everyone from Hillingdon to Havering by characterizing the city's security arrangements for the summer Olympic games "disconcerting." For that gaffe, the *Sun* labeled him "Mitt the Twit."

P.M. David Cameron, as diplomatic a gent as ever graduated Eton sniffed "*We are holding an Olympic Games in one of the busiest, most active, bustling cities in the world. Of course, it's easier if you hold an Olympic Games in the middle of nowhere.*" As such, the *Times of London* referred to Romney as "Nowhere Man."



Despite spending his first full day in London trying to dial back his dig, he ended up raising more eyebrows when he referred to looking out of the "back side" of 10 Downing Street to see the beach volleyball stadium. (For most Brits "back side" means one's arse . . . oops!)

Then, to top off his brief sojourn in Dickens' "hand-made city," he let slip that he had met with the head of MI6, Britain's overseas intelligence agency. (Sorry Mitt, but briefings with British spy chiefs are traditionally hush-hush affairs; guess you aren't a James Bond aficionado.)

From London, Romney traveled on to Israel, where he was joined by some of his wealthiest American Jewish backers, including gaming magnate Sheldon Adelson (It should be noted that Adelson occasionally appends the Roman numeral "III" to his name, signifying that he is the third wealthiest person on the planet). Arriving on Tish B'av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples, Romney visited with Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu and Israeli President Shimon Peres, made the mandatory stop at the [Western Wall](#), and held a fund-raising dinner at the ultra-posh King David Hotel. While in Israel, Romney accomplished the previously unthinkable: getting a Palestinian spokesman to say something positive about the Israelis. This unlikely scenario occurred after Romney ham-handedly suggested that the reason why Israel's per capita GDP is so much higher than that of the Palestinians is due largely to cultural differences -- thus suggesting that Palestinians are backwards and Jews have a knack for making money. (Not once did Romney acknowledge that perhaps -- just perhaps -- it had something to do with the difficulty of maintaining a fluid economy under terms of occupation/administration.)

Despite the inevitable backtrack ("That's not what I said"), Romney drew the ire of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who, through senior economic aid Saeb Erekat said, "It seems to me this man lacks information, knowledge, vision and understanding of this region and its people." Erekat concluded his angry riposte with, "He also lacks knowledge about the Israelis themselves. I have not heard any Israeli official speak about cultural superiority." In other words, say what you will, at least the Israelis respect and understand the culture of the Palestinians . . . even if Mitt Romney does not."



President Obama sought to upstage Romney -- and garner crucial votes in places like Florida -- by signing a defense security measure granting Israel an added \$70 million for Iron Dome. Flanked by U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer and Representative Howard Berman, and several prominent Jewish leaders, including Lee Rosenberg, chairman of AIPAC, the leading pro-Israel lobby, and Richard Stone, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the president reaffirmed "my unshakable commitment" to Israel's security. Coming as it did just hours before Romney's arrival in Jerusalem, Obama was attacked for baldly seeking political advantage. Despite proffering the inevitable denial, it was obvious to all that this was precisely what the White House was doing -- what any White House would be doing

under the circumstances. Hey, this is a bare-knuckled presidential election, not a game of Whist.

But what's good for the goose is good for the gander . . .

Prior to their man's arrival in Israel, William Krystol's Emergency Committee for Israel released [a thirty-second ad](#) -- which has already run a couple of hundred times here in South Florida -- with the slogan "Next year ... President Mitt Romney in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel." The ad's implication is clear: as President, Mitt Romney, unlike Barack Obama, will move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Mitt Romney -- unlike Barack Obama -- is a true friend of the Jewish State.

The Israeli's have a word for this: שטויות (pronounced *shut-yōt*) which, depending on one's intonation, can mean "nonsense," "rubbish," "crappola," or "utter b.s." Under the circumstances, I go with the latter. There is absolutely nothing new about proclaiming that if elected, one will move the American Embassy to Jerusalem. Everyone from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama has spoken the words. Yet no one -- from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama has kept the promise . . . and for good reason. To do so would make it virtually impossible for America to act as an "honest broker" in any future negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Any politician with an ounce of sense or experience (which may or may not include Mitt Romney) knows this to be true. And yet, everyone makes the promise because, well, a Jewish vote is a Jewish vote. In this particular case however, it may be that much of Romney's "I'm-a-much-better-friend-of-Israel-than-you-know-who" posture may be aimed more at Evangelical Christian Zionist voters than at the Jews. Despite what pundits, pollsters and chatterboxes would have us believe, there won't be a tectonic shift in the percentage of Jews moving from "D" to "R" in 2012. Sure, there may likely be fewer Jewish voters casting ballots for Barack Obama this go-round than in 2008, but not enough to change the course of history . . . or move the American Embassy to Jerusalem.

Ever since the days of Richard Nixon, the Tel Aviv/Jerusalem debate has managed to squirrel its way into presidential campaigns. Moreover, moving the embassy to Jerusalem has been an actual plank in the Republican Party platform in the past 5 presidential elections:

- *"A Republican administration will ensure that the U.S. Embassy is moved to Jerusalem by May 1999."* (1996)
- *"Immediately upon taking office, the next Republican president will begin the process of moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel's capital, Jerusalem."* (2000)
- *"Republicans continue to support moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel's capital, Jerusalem."* (2004)
- *"We support Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel and moving the American embassy to that undivided capital of Israel."* (2008)

- “My understanding is the policy of our nation has been a desire to move our embassy ultimately to the capital. That is something which I would agree with. But I would only want to do so and to select the timing in accordance with the government of Israel.” (Mitt Romney, [interview with CNN](#), July 29, 2012)

Somewhat by contrast, Democrats from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama have tended to support *the principle* -- if not the immediate reality -- of moving our embassy to Jerusalem. In 2008, when ABC's Charlie Gibson asked then-candidate Barack Obama whether he would move the embassy, he responded, “Charlie, you know I think we're going to work through this process before we make these kinds of decisions.”

On October 23, 1995, Congress overwhelmingly passed the *Jerusalem Embassy Act*, which called for moving our embassy no later than May 31, 1999. One unique amendment in the act -- introduced by then Kansas Senator Bob Dole -- granted the president the power to waive the law's implementation if need be in order to maintain the appropriate separation of powers as mandated by the U.S. Constitution. Since becoming law, presidents from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama have signed that waiver 22 times. President George W. Bush signed nearly a dozen such waivers during his time in office. I for one cannot recall a single Republican giving him a hard time for failing to move the American Embassy. (As of today, no country maintains an embassy in Jerusalem; Paraguay's, located in *Mevasseret Zion*, is about 10 km west of the city; the rest are in or around Tel Aviv.)

Nest year, the President of the United States will either be Barack Obama or whomsoever the Republicans wind up nominating in Tampa. (The way things are going with Romney, who knows? Perhaps Jeb Bush will be a last minute replacement). My crystal ball tells me it will be Barack Obama. It doesn't take a crystal ball to know where the American Embassy will be: next year -- like this year and the year after -- in Tel Aviv.

Barack Obama knows that. So do Mitt Romney, William Krystol, Sheldon Adelson III and anyone with an ounce of political sense.

And to all those who say differently, repeat after me:

שטויות

For those wishing a comment on two on the Polish leg of Romney's diplomatic debacle, please know that he did come out in favor of freedom and democracy, and did not crack a single ethnic joke. Perhaps the single-most important thing to come out of the entire journey was a comment made by campaign flak Rick Gorka who, exasperated at reporters throwing out questions about his boss's taxes, blurted out what may well turn out to be the slogan that embodies the Romney world-view:

"Kiss my A!"**

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August 12, 2012

THE RYAN FACTOR

So now it is official: Wisconsin Representative Paul Ryan is going to be Mitt Romney's running mate. R&R: the tonsorial twosome -- the best-coifed ticket since Washington and Adams; perhaps the most economically obtuse since Harding and Coolidge. In



introducing Ryan, best known for the eponymous budget plan which would turn Medicare into a voucher system and partially privatize Social Security, Romney made a slip of Freudian proportions, when he asked those assembled before him to " . . . join me in welcome [sic] the next president of the United States, Paul Ryan!" Made aware of his verbal gaffe, Romney got huge laughs

when he added, "Every now and then I'm known to make a mistake." Realizing that *this* statement could also be somewhat problematic, he quickly added, "I did *not* make a mistake with this guy. (In all fairness, four years ago, when *he* introduced his running mate, Barack Obama said "So let me introduce to you the next president -- the next vice president of the US of America, Joe Biden." Not to be outdone, Biden, who has a long and well-documented track record of verbal miscues, referred to his future boss as "Barack America.")

In naming Ryan even before he becomes the GOP's official nominee (which will likely come later this month), Romney is seeking to deflect attention away from his blunder-filled trek abroad, questions about his personal finances and the need to reconcile his new-found "seriously conservative" verbiage with his fairly recent past. Of course, in

bringing Ryan, the 42-year old Ayn Rand-loving House Budget Chair on board, Romney is also trying to shore up credibility with the Tea Party faction that is currently calling most of the political shots in what we us to call the "Party of Lincoln." This last point is crucial, for Tea Partiers have believed all along that Romney is a non-too closeted liberal. Up until 24-hours ago, about the only thing the former Massachusetts governor had going for him in the eyes of the Republican right is that his name is not Obama. To anoint Ryan, who, rightfully or not, Tea Partiers consider to be on the side of the family-values-smaller-government-is-better-deficit-destroying angels, gives Romney a bit of political cover.

Historically, vice presidential candidates have been chosen because of any of a number of reasons:

- **They provide credibility and coverage** in areas which the person at the top of the ticket may be lacking. (Think Biden in foreign policy or Mondale in Washington politics);
- **They have regional popularity** and might help bring in votes from crucial states. (Think Wilson's VP [Thomas Marshall](#) in the Midwest or LBJ in the South);
- **They represent a balance of image.** (Think [Garret Hobart's](#) jocosity to Wm. McKinley's seriousness or [John Nance Garner's](#) plainspoken everyman to FDR's eastern blueblood);
- **For reasons best left to speculation.** (Think Agnew, Palin and Quayle)

Of these four categories (and of course, there more), Ryan best fits into the first: Providing "credibility and coverage . . ." Goodness knows, his selection has nothing to do with regional popularity, for truth to tell, he has never run a state-wide race, and barely known outside of Wisconsin's 1st Congressional District. And when it comes to image or personality, he is virtually as boring and verbally flat-footed as Romney. His selection then, is mostly due to his conservative, pro-Tea Party, ultimate deficit hawk *bone fides*. But even these credentials are going to be called into question once the media and the Obama campaign finish putting in their two cents.

What is the public going to learn about Paul Ryan?

First -- though not necessarily foremost -- that Ryan, the man whose economic "roadmap" would:

- Give across-the-board tax cuts by reducing income tax rates;
- Eliminate income taxes on capital gains, dividends and interest;
- Abolish the corporate income tax, estate tax and alternative minimum tax;
- Privatize a portion of Social Security;
- Eliminate the tax exclusion for employer-sponsored health insurance and
- Privatize Medicare

He himself received Social Security benefits upon the death of his father, which he used to help pay for his college education. Many will no doubt see this as a glaring inconsistency. An insightful friend, Alan Wald, wrote somewhat tongue in cheek that "[Ryan] wants to gut Social Security Let him pay back all that survivor's . . . commie pinko money . . . he should have refused the money out of principle Until he returns the money, he has no right to proclaim that he has a solution."

Second, that Ryan, the man who many Republicans consider to be the intellectual leader of their party's drive to shrink government has, over the course of his Congressional career, consistently voted for [big bank bailouts](#), unfunded mandates and unnecessary wars. According to Democrat [Ron Zerban](#), who has mounted a serious challenge to Ryan in Wisconsin's 1st Congressional District (Ryan can run for reelection and V.P. at the same time), "Ryan is a root cause of many of the financial issues our country faces today," says Zerban. "From supporting two unfunded wars, to dumping millions of senior citizens into the Medicare Part D 'donut hole' while tying the hands of the government to negotiate prescription drug prices, and from fighting for subsidies for Big Oil that his family personally benefits from, to supporting the unfunded Bush tax cuts for his wealthiest campaign contributors, Paul Ryan's hypocrisy is astounding."

Third, that Ryan is just another career politician who has spent his entire post-college life working on Capitol Hill. Conservative chatterboxes who constantly deride President Obama for never having worked a single day in the world of business had better start treading lightly; neither has the gentleman from Janesville. Just how smart is it to select a veteran member of the House of Representatives . . . an institution even less popular than the I.R.S.?

Vice Presidential picks are supposed to help, not hinder national tickets. And while Paul Ryan may help Mitt Romney a bit with the Tea Party wing of the GOP, he could easily be a disaster with moderates and independents. In selecting Paul Ryan, Mitt Romney and his advisors -- who I sometimes think must be working on the sly for Barack Obama -- have all but guaranteed that the future of Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, and not the economy, will be the campaign's central issue. Unlike Mitt Romney, who has a history of changing positions on most every issue, Paul Ryan has, for the most part, been a model of consistency. And in politics, this isn't always a good thing; it gives one almost no room in which to maneuver, to make those nuanced tweaks which can soothe ruffled feathers and increase electability.

One thing that all vice presidential candidates should bring to the table is the certainty that they can take over the top spot should, God forbid, the need arise. One wonders about Paul Ryan. Unlike Joe Biden, Ryan has even less foreign policy experience than his boss. Unlike George H.W. Bush, Ryan has no experience outside the confines of Capitol Hill. And unlike Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey or Walter Mondale, Paul Ryan doesn't know the meaning of the word compromise.

Romney and Ryan may well be the best-looking ticket in American history. Then too, they will likely prove to be the stiffest, most narrowly-focused, pro-business, anti-middle class pairing since Taft and Sherman a century ago. One thing you do have to grant Paul Ryan: he has excited both hard-core conservatives and progressives -- the former because he's one of them, and the latter because he is the personification of what Bill Clinton recently termed "Bush policies on steroids."

May Paul Ryan do for Mitt Romney what Sarah Palin did for John McCain!

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August 19, 2012

WIEDER . . . SHON GENUG!

A little over three years ago, I published an op-ed piece entitled [*Shoyn Genug!*](#) -- Yiddish for "Enough Already!" In the essay, I excoriated a number of politicians and media figures for likening President Obama as well as various members of Congress to Adolf Hitler, and for comparing various policies, programs and proposals they opposed to the Holocaust. The purpose of that article -- as its title easily indicates -- was to cry out "*Enough Already*;" to call out those who blithely inject their speeches and statements with such historically chilling terms as "Hitler," "Gestapo," "storm-trooper," or "Holocaust."

That 2009 op-ed spoke of three serial Holocaust rhetoricians: Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Orly Taitz. That in 2012 one (Beck) is no longer on television and one (Taitz) could easily be the subject of a "Where Are They Now?" column is good; it does show a bit of progress. Of Limbaugh, regrettably, we must say *Ach, ist dass eselhengst immer noch bei uns* -- namely, "Alas that Jackass is still with us . . ."



And yet, despite all the times he's been called on the carpet for comparing Barack Obama to Adolf Hitler, or using Holocaust-tainted rhetoric, Limbaugh is unrepentant . . . and still earning more than \$730,000 a week, 52 weeks a year. Just the other day, Rush was back at it, talking about propaganda versus truth.

He began by talking about a CNN interview in which DNC Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz repeatedly mentioned how Paul Ryan's budget plan would "end Medicare as we know it." After referring to the DNC Chair as "Debbie 'Blabbermouth' Schultz," El Rushbo asked his radio audience, "*Propaganda versus truth – which wins?*" He then continued with "*Well, what did – what was Hitler more concerned with? Propaganda. Did Hitler succeed for a time? Yeah, he did.*" Then, going totally off the deep end, Rush got to the heart of the matter:

What was Clinton more concerned with – truth or propaganda? What's Obama more concerned with – truth or propaganda? Who would you say is winning? Is propaganda winning or truth winning? We, the virtuous ones in our society – we think truth wins. We have this investment in the truth. We think it's holy. We think that it is profound, and we think it's persuasive.

I guess when someone pays you \$146,153.84 a day, five days a week for spending a mere 15 hours behind a mike, you feel empowered to say anything you damn well please . . . and believe yourself to be traveling the moral high ground. And if it were only Rush Limbaugh -- who after all, has never been elected to anything -- who was making these idiotic comments, it would be far too many. But sadly, regrettably, outrageously, it is not; using Nazi and Holocaust comparisons has been a regular growth industry over the past three years. Included on the roster of rhetorical reprobates are:

- **Maine Governor Paul LePage** (R) who, in speaking of the Affordable Health Care Act's mandate to purchase insurance [said](#), "*We the people have been told there is no choice. You must buy health insurance or pay the new Gestapo -- the IRS.*" When given a chance to step back or, in contemporary parlance, claim that he had been misquoted (hard to do, since he said it on the radio), LePage was anything but apologetic: "*Maybe the IRS is not quite as bad – yet,*" [the tax-collecting agency is] "*headed in that direction*" and will end up killing people by rationing care. Either Governor LePage hasn't the slightest idea of how evil the Gestapo was, or he just doesn't care. No wonder they call 'em "**Mainiacs**!"
- **Florida Governor Rick Scott** (R), seeking to shield Mitt Romney from attacks surrounding Bain Capital -- and thus, to Scott's way of thinking capitalism itself, invoked Martin Neimöller's famous poem "[First They Came...](#)" Stating that he had a copy of Neimöller's poem on the wall in his office, Scott paraphrased the work, stating '*We've got to defend the freedom of the free market. If we don't defend the free market, they'll pick on somebody. Now they're picking on Bain Capital, then they'll pick on somebody else.*' To equate questions about Romney and Bain Capital with the increasingly desperate situation in the Third Reich would be silly . . . if it weren't so incredibly insensitive.
- **Florida Representative Allen West** (R), speaking about Congress's low polling numbers at a press conference late last year, said, '*If Joseph Goebbels was around,*

he'd be very proud of the Democrat Party because they have an incredible propaganda machine.' When challenged on his comment, West refused to backtrack, and instead, attacked the media: *'I'm talking about propaganda. Don't start taking my words and twisting it around. I'm talking about propaganda Once again, you guys will take whatever I say and you will spin it to try to demonize me or demagogue me. What I'm talking about is a person that was the minister of propaganda. And I'm talking about propaganda. So please. I'll be prepared to wake up tomorrow and you guys make up some crazy story. Whatever.'* And this is a man who would have Jewish voters believe he's the best friend Israel ever had . . .

- **Ohio Congressional Candidate and micro-celebrity opportunist Samuel "Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher** (R) released a campaign video in which he blamed both the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide on gun control. Mr. Wurzelbacher's video features footage of him on a shooting rage blasting fruits and vegetables with a shotgun. As the clip draws to a close, Mr. Wurzelbacher, gun in hand, proclaims, 'I love America.' The description of the video describes gun ownership as 'our last line of defense' from tyranny. (It also poses a rather existential question about Mr. Wurzelbacher's produce shooting hobby!)

The arguments I made back in early August 2009 are the precisely the same as I now make in Mid August 2012:

- Using Nazi or Holocaust-era terminology for political gain is more than insensitive or callous; it is monstrously bloodless, cold-hearted, and crass.
- The flippant use of such terms as "genocide," "mass murder," "extermination" and "Third Reich," in any discussion of contemporary American politics desecrates the memory of the millions upon millions of men, women and children who were exterminated. It also transmutes the very horrific reality of history's darkest, most barbarous period into nothing more than a rhetorical club with which to attack the people with whom one disagrees.

If I were in charge, I would make it mandatory for anyone using such vile rhetoric -- whether in political speeches, video or print ads or on radio talk shows -- to tour Auschwitz, watch all 9 1/2 hours of Claude Lanzmann's epic film [Shoah](#) and then spend a minimum of 12 hours at [Yad Vashem](#), the Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem. To my way of thinking, this is the prescription for disarming and disabusing *die historisch gefordert* -- the "historically challenged."

Rush: Barack Obama is *not* Adolf Hitler; he *has not* and *will not* kill tens of millions of people regardless of what you say or think.

Governor LePage: The I.R.S. is *not* the Gestapo; I.R.S. agents do not round up people in the middle of the night and then whisk them away to crematoria. They do make sure we pay taxes . . . that's about it.

Joe the Plumber: Your notion that the Holocaust was caused by gun control laws is beyond the pale. It also proves that you are a *schwachkopf* -- a "moron." Even if every Jew in Germany owned a Luger or a Mauser, it would not have stopped the Holocaust from happening. Or perhaps in your extensive study of history you never learned that the majority of Jews who were murdered came from Poland . . .

And so, in Mid-August of 2012, I say -- this time in German, rather than Yiddish pretty much the same thing I said in early August of 2009:

WIEDER . . . SHON GENUG!

Once again . . . ENOUGH ALREADY!

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(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



August 27, 2012

SIMPLY A-PAUL-ING

(Note: As I write this the RNC has announced that due to Tropical Storm Isaac, they are juggling and rescheduling many speeches and time-slots at their national convention in Tampa. At this point, no one knows for certain what's going to happen to the Ron Paul tribute . . .)

Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place:

Romney, Ryan and the Republicans, who are doing everything in their power to convince Jewish voters that they -- unlike President Obama and the Democrats -- are the best friends Israel's got, have scheduled a video tribute to Ron Paul at the convention in Tampa. Ron Paul! The mind simply reels.

"Why on earth," anyone with even an ounce of political savvy might well ask, "Why would the Republicans stage a tribute to Ron Paul? Isn't he the most anti-Israel, anti-Semitic member of Congress? Isn't he the guy who opposes all aid to Israel; dismisses Iran's nuclear program; wants to tear down the Federal Reserve and return



America to the gold standard; has a penchant for making homophobic and racist comments, and has, over the years, given countless shout-outs to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories?"

Yes, it's *that* Ron Paul. And the answer to the question of *Why?* is really quite simple: Romney's handlers have moved their man

so far to the right that now they have no choice but to keep him there. As such, he has to do such seemingly distasteful, counter-intuitive things as appeasing Representative Paul's adoring supporters, thus highlighting his -- Romney's -- supposedly warm relationship with the Texas libertarian. Once again, it would seem that Mitt's advisers are secretly working for the reelection of Barack Obama. Either that or they are just dumber than a bag of hair . . .

And yet, to date there has been nary a peep about this obvious act of political charlatanism coming out of the Obama camp. If I were permitted my two cents, I would strongly urge the Obama campaign to shine a high-intensity spotlight on Romney's tribute to Ron Paul; to demand that the "real" Mitt Romney stand up and explain how he can claim to be stronger *for* Israel (and *against* Iran) and better for the economy when he is paying tribute to a man who has written such hateful tripe as:

- "Whether [the 1993 World Trade Center bombing] was a setup by the Israeli Mossad, as a Jewish friend of mine suspects, or was truly a retaliation by the Islamic fundamentalists, matters little." (['The New York Bombing,' April '93](#))
- "If you look at the history, you will find that Hamas was encouraged and actually started by Israel because they wanted Hamas to counteract Yasir Arafat." ([Speech on House Floor, Jan. 9, 2009](#))
- "Israel's supporters in this country were the most blood thirsty for war against Iraq . . . and why, would someone please explain to me, are we supposed to be so grateful to Israel because it lets us fight its war?" ([Ron Paul's 'Political Report,' Feb. 1991](#))
- "Major Jewish organizations are complaining that Zionists did not get enough jobs in the Clinton administration. Plenty of Jews were appointed but just being Jewish doesn't count. These lobbyists want people 100% dedicated to Israel." (['The Ron Paul Survival Report,' Feb. 15, 1992](#))
- "Order was only restored in LA when it came time for the blacks to collect their welfare checks. The 'poor' lined up at the Post Office to get their handouts (since there were no deliveries) — and then complained about slow service." (['Report on L.A. Riots,' June '92](#))

I can hear the arguments of Romney/Paul supporters: "Hey, these statements are upwards of two decades old; they're ancient history and have nothing to do with the Ron Paul of 2012 . . . you're beating a dead horse. Besides, people do change!" By way of response, I would remind my Republican friends that in his final "exposé" the late cyber provocateur Andrew Breitbart released a 22-year old video of then Harvard Law Review president Barack Obama speaking at a peaceful racial equality rally led by the now deceased Professor Derrick Bell. The rally was in support of Professor Bell, who was angry over Harvard's failure

to offer tenure to black professors. In the hands of Andrew Breitbart, the long-forgotten video offered positive proof that Barack Obama was, is, and always shall be an angry black man and, like his "mentor," a Communist (which, to the best of my knowledge Professor Bell never was.) In the case of Paul . . . well, folks can change. In the case of Obama . . . once a radical, always a radical.

Like many of Breitbart's "scoops," this one turned out to be a non-starter . . . at least for mature adults.

Even the Republican Jewish Coalition barred Paul from a candidate's forum last year, citing his "[misguided and extreme](#)" comments and positions. Nonetheless, choosing to ignore Paul's anti-Israel, pro-conspiracy profile, Richard Grenell, a former Romney spokesman on foreign policy, told *Talking Points Memo* that "Ron Paul's commitment to limited government's involvement in our daily lives is the future of the Republican Party." Let us for the moment take Mr. Grenell at his word; that Republican's are honoring Ron Paul because they agree with his "commitment to limited government's involvement in our daily lives." Don't Mr. Grenell and his former boss know that the "limited government" Mr. Paul:

- Has repeatedly introduced the [Sanctity of Life Act](#), which would define life as beginning at the moment of conception (which is the antithesis of "limited government involvement");
- Is a cosponsor (along with Barney Frank) of [H.R. 5843](#), which would remove all federal penalties for the personal use of marijuana (which Romney is against);
- Opposes the 1964 Civil Rights Act, (which no one in their right mind would do) and
- Opposes all government funding of medical research, believing that " . . . all research in a free society should be done privately," (which gives Romney's friends in the pharmaceutical industry *spilkes*).

Since Romney, Ryan and the Republicans have decided to honor Dr. Paul at their national convention, we have no choice but to assume that either:

- They are unaware of these and many other Paul policy positions which, according to their platform they oppose, or
- They really don't care that there is a big gap between them and Ron Paul, because the only thing they believe in is winning.

One can only imagine the *sturm und drang* that would occur if the Democrats announced that they were giving a speaking slot at *their* national convention to, say, Minnesota Representative Keith Ellison, the first Muslim ever elected to

Congress. One can imagine Sheldon Adelson and Karl Rove underwriting a \$10 million ad buy denouncing Barack Obama and the entire Democratic establishment for sins against God and man, not to mention the State of Israel. Their ads would be published in every Jewish paper from Maine to California.

That is how the Republicans would respond . . . like gluttons at an all-you-can-eat bakery.

It strikes me that now is the time for Democrats to take a page from the Republican playbook and let Jewish voters know precisely who Romney and Ryan are honoring. Let them know that this man is anti-Israel, doesn't think Iran is a problem, and even thinks we were wrong to kill bin Laden.

Let them know that it's a-PAUL-ing . . .

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September 1, 2012

THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OBNOXIOUS FABRICATIONS

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the 18th century Irish playwright best known for *The School for Scandal*, was also a Whig member of the British House of Commons for more than a quarter century. And although the creator of such marvelous characters as Sir Peter and



Lady Teazle, Sir Benjamin Backbite and Lady Sneerwell has been gone for nearly two centuries (he died at age 64 in 1816) Sheridan's take on the politics of fabrication and outright lies is still second to none. I am sure that were he alive today he would aim one of his acid-tipped darts at such political prevaricators as Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan, Karl Rove and even Clint Eastwood.

Sheridan was famous for cloaking his lethal literary fist in a glove of fine velvet verbiage. An example:

Once, when debating the Home Secretary, Henry Dundas (The Viscount Melville), on the floor of the House of Commons, an exasperated Sheridan told his rival, "*The right honorable gentleman is indebted to his memory for his jests and to his imagination for his facts.*" (n.b. It should be noted in passing that Dundas was the last person impeached by the House of Lords.)

To be certain, telling half-truths and outright lies about ones political opponent is as American as mom, apple pie and the flag. Back in the presidential race of 1800 -- John Adams v Thomas Jefferson -- Jefferson's camp denounced Adams as favoring a monarchy, and claimed he had actually arranged a marriage with one of his sons and the daughter of the English king in order to bring back the British monarchy. The Jeffersonians further accused Adams of sending diplomats to England with orders to procure "pretty girls as mistresses" for the president and his running mate, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney.

Adams' supporters, on the other hand, accused Jefferson of being an atheist (he was in fact a deist) and of planning to set up a guillotine in the new national capital to execute his opponents and bring to the United States a reign of terror similar to that of the French Revolution. Moreover, Adams' Federalist U.S. attorneys arranged for the arrest of twenty-five Jefferson supporters. Fourteen of these men were indicted and ten eventually convicted.

By comparison, the current batch of Republican untruths is more than a tad flaccid and lacking in imagination. But nonetheless, the lies are there -- and being broadcast ten thousand times a day via ten thousand different media outlets. Hour by hour, minute by minute, people are being bombarded with commercials, interviews, pseudo news broadcasts, YouTube videos and Tweets, all accusing President Obama of:

- Spending the first months of his presidency on a worldwide "apology tour";
- Cutting more than \$700 billion from Medicare to help fund Obamacare;
- Not implementing the deficit-cutting measures recommended by the Simpson-Bowles commission;
- Stating that "business owners do not build their own businesses";
- Dropping the work requirement from welfare;
- Not creating a single job in nearly four years;
- Single-handedly causing the US credit rating downgrade;
- Being weak and indecisive on the issue of illegal aliens.
- Being anti-business;
- Weakening the American military;
- Being insufficiently tough when it comes to Iran and Syria and
- Throwing Israel "under the bus."

This is neither the time nor the essay to rebut all these obnoxious fabrications, although it could easily be done. It would be easy enough to point out that, among other things:

- After exhaustive research of every speech the president had given while abroad or before the United Nations, both the Annenberg Public Policy Center's FactCheck.org and the *Washington Post*'s Factchecker, concluded that he clearly *did not* engage in any "apology tour."

- That Vice Presidential candidate Paul Ryan, himself one of eight Republican members of the [Simpson-Bowles](#) Commission voted against its implementation.
- That far from being weak on immigration, the Obama administration has [deported more illegals](#) than the past three administrations combined.
- That the more than \$700 billion Romney and Ryan accuse Obama of taking out of Medicare, is actually coming from cuts in expenses, not benefits. Moreover, hospitals and the insurance industry have both signed off on these cuts which are, in reality [supported by both Romney and Ryan](#).
- That the president did *not* in any way, shape or form remove the work requirement from welfare. ([Politifact](#) scored this Romney untruth "Pants on Fire.")

I can hear conservative readers of this blog screaming, "Hey Stone, why are you only going after the things Republicans say . . . which happen to be TRUE . . . and not going after Obama and the Democrats . . . who are, after all, the REAL liars?" Rest assured, dear conservatives, I am just as opposed to lying by Democrats as Republicans. However, it is far, far easier to spot Republican prevarications, because they are so obvious and bald-face. And besides, this is a partisan progressive blog; there are tens of thousands of conservative, pro-Tea Party, anti-anything-Obama blogs out there to keep you satisfied for the rest of the century.



Strangely, I'm not all that furious about the lies being told over and over and over by Romney, Ryan and the Republicans; it's all part of our political heritage. In the 1828 contest between incumbent John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, the Adams camp revived the decades-old news that "Old Hickory" had married his wife, Rachael, before her first divorce had been finalized. Adams' partisans printed hundreds of thousands of handbills asking "*Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian land?*" (Sadly, Mrs. Jackson died just before her husband's inauguration; many claim this attack hastened her death.) For his part, Jackson charged that Adams, while serving as Minister to Russia, had surrendered an American servant girl to the appetites of the Czar. He also accused President Adams of using public funds to buy gambling devices for the presidential residence; it turned out that these were a chess set and a pool table. (Jackson would go on to a lopsided 56.0%-43.6% victory over the hapless J.Q. who, like his father, would go on to make a much better *former* president.

Despite our heritage of lies and fabrications in the pursuit of high office, until recently, facts frequently bested falsehoods. Sadly, this no longer appears to be the case -- even with a slew of fact-checking groups and organizations, each staffed by dozens upon dozens of wonks, geeks and other partisan, non-partisan or bi-partisan political junkies. For proof, one need look no further than a recent comment by Romney campaign

pollster Neil Newhouse who, when queried about the obvious falsity of several of his boss' statements said:

"Fact checkers come to this with their own sets of thoughts and beliefs, and we're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers."

In other words, if you don't like it when facts derail your fabrications, attack the fact check group in question and charge them with being nothing more than a bunch of partisan hacks. Certainly, the candidates and their campaign managers must bear a great degree of the blame when lies and fabrications are told. Then too, the media must take its share of blame as well; far too frequently, they present the lie as if it were news. At that point they are no longer journalists; they are complicit shells -- abettors of mendacity. To my way of thinking, in exchange for their FCC licenses -- which are truly licenses to print money -- the media owes the public something more than entertainment. How about ferreting out the truth while quarantining the lies?

I doubt that politicians seeking office will ever stop lying. Hell, so long as you tell your lie over and over and over and with greater and greater volume, the public will buy it. They'll believe anything.

Some might even believe that Mitt Romney has a core set of political principles . . .

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RECYCLING WOODY ALLEN

Now that both party's national conventions are history, a few random thoughts are appropriate:

Comparing the makeup of the delegates who assembled for the conventions in Tampa (R) and Charlotte (D), the former looked and felt more like the America that was -- overwhelmingly Anglo -- and the latter more like the America that



will be -- a salad bowl of human diversity. Demographers tell us that within the next several years, America, for only the second time in its history, will be a "minority-majority" country. (The first and only other time this occurred, was in the early 17th century, when the "minority-majority" was made up of, among others, the Algonquin, Apache, Chinook, Cree, Mohawk, Seminole and Navajo.)

As cameras panned the hall in Tampa, I was struck by two things: first, the relative homogeneity of the crowd and second, the number of blacks, Latinos and women sitting in close proximity to the stage. And yet, despite the fact that Anglos vastly outnumbered minorities, the vast majority of those speaking to the gathering were African Americans, Latinos or females. Obviously then, the Republican convention strategy was to apply a skillfully stylized makeup of inclusion on a visage which rarely smiles upon minorities, immigrants or women.

To be certain, the Democrats also had many African American, Latino and female speakers on their dais. However when the cameras panned *that* crowd, it showed a gathering even more diverse than the people addressing it. And where the most prominent signs in the Tampa hall were the placards identifying the various state delegations, the Charlotte arena was awash in signs reading "Arab-Americans for Obama," "Teachers for Obama," "Latinos for Obama," and "Students for Obama." And while Republican headgear was pretty much what one would expect from convention delegates -- straw boaters, cowboy hats and the occasional *yarmulke* and trucker's ball-cap -- Democrats -- in addition to the aforementioned haberdashery -- could also be seen wearing turbans, *rastacaps* . . . even the occasional *keffiyeh*.



When it came to the quality of speakers and the power of their oratory, the Democrats were the clear victors. In Tampa, keynote speaker Chris Christie got nearly 20 minutes into his script before even mentioning Mitt Romney. Christie's speech was far more about himself than about his party's nominee; indeed, many suggested that the New Jersey governor's primetime address was really the beginning of his own 2016 race for the White House. Strangely, Governor Romney's name was mentioned far less by the convention speakers than one might expect at a national convention. According to the *Huffington Post*'s [Lucia Graves](#), Democratic speakers said more laudatory things about President Obama on the *first day* of their convention than Republican speakers said about their candidate in their *entire convention*. Then too, Republican speakers trashed President Obama 411 times while Democrats only said 97 negative things about Governor Romney.

Romney's acceptance speech was, much like the man himself, technically fine, but lacking in the blood, sinew or passion of conviction. And as with the speech, Republican delegates responded with applause that was technically proper but also lacking in conviction. Then there was Clint Eastwood.

His "performance" was an object lesson in why it is so important to vet each and



every speaker -- even one who has captured no less than three Academy Awards. I for one felt sorry for Eastwood; devoid of proper lighting, camera angles and make-up, he looked, sounded and acted like an old man. (I remember him as a much younger man; back in December 1968, I played an extra in *Coogan's Bluff*. Clint was 38, I was 19. That's me in the serape with my back to the camera . . . lots of coal black hair. My friend Alan Wald can be seen directly under the outstretched arm.)

Save one snag, the Democratic National Convention was nearly flawless in its execution. I guess that's what comes from having so many Hollywood types in your camp. The one egregious faux-pas dealt with the exclusion of God and Jerusalem-as-Israel's-Capital planks in the party platform. There *are* Democrats who aren't nearly as pro-Israel as the president; likewise there *are* Democrats who believe that including God in a political platform is nothing more than useless window dressing. When the error was made public -- largely by conservative Republican commentators -- Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, acting more like a mule-team driver than a convention chair, ham-handedly gaveled them back in. The two salient lessons in this less-than-stellar episode are that one, party platforms don't win (or lose) elections, and that two, generally speaking, the only time one party's platform gets any significant publicity is when the other party is attacking it.

From a purely oratorical point of view a Republican lineup featuring Rice, Paul, Portman, Pawlenty and Romney -- among many others -- was no match for the likes of Patrick, Castro, Kerry, Clinton and Obama. If this were theater (which to a great extent it was), it would be tantamount to a cast trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts playing opposite a group schooled by Sunny Tufts. So far as content . . . well, it depends on who you talk to. Predictably, Romney's speech received far higher marks from Republican pundits and commentators than those who work for MSNBC, or *The Huffington Post*. Then again, for Democratic and progressive pundits, Obama's speech was second only to Bill Clinton's; for Republicans it was -- in a phrase used by at least half-a-dozen pundits -- "Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The thing that fascinated me the most about the negative critiques was that they seem to have been written even *before* the speech was delivered. In many instances, the disconnect between what the president said and what his detractors wrote was wider than a mile. It was almost as if they were recycling Woody Allen.

"How's that?" you ask.

Back in 1966, Woody Allen directed his first movie, an off-the-wall comedy called [*What's Up Tiger Lily?*](#) Allen took a Japanese spy picture (*Secret Police: Key of Keys*), then overdubbed it with a completely new script -- one which had absolutely nothing to do with the original film. Then, by skillfully rearranging scenes, he was able to turn what was originally a James Bond clone into a comedy about detective Phil Moskowitz's search for the world's best egg salad recipe. Although definitely not *Manhattan*, *Sleeper*, or *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (my favorite), *What's Up Tiger Lily* is definitely innovative and unquestionably a howl. What is definitely *not* a howl is overdubbing a totally new script onto President Obama's acceptance speech.

National political conventions are meant to serve as pre-election pep rallies for the party faithful and promos on things to come for the electorate. They are meant to be entertaining, energetic and occasionally even informative. Seen in this light, I would give the Democratic National Convention an A-, the Republicans a C+.

And to all my Republican friends, next time, instead of recycling Woody Allen, you may want to consider recycling Clint Eastwood . . .

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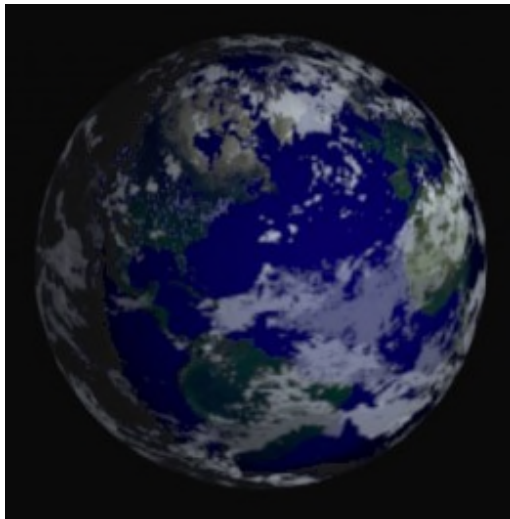
(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



September 16, 2012

THE WONDER OF IT ALL

Welcome to the New Year 5773. Who would have thought -- much less predicted -- that the world would be an even angrier, more dangerous place today than it was last Rosh Hashanah? Indeed, it would seem that the curse -- which may or may not be an ancient Chinese one -- about "May you live in interesting times," hovers about our age as a perpetual reminder of just how fragile and frightening this world can be. The optimism born of last year's Arab Spring, in which the Muslim world began the slow inexorable process of throwing off the shackles of oppression is, to a great extent, no more; the roses of yesterday have become ragweeds.



Today, as we gather to celebrate and proclaim **היום עולם הרת** -- "Today is the world's birthday" -- we are acutely aware of just how uncertain and intimidating this small planet can be.

(And before you ask, no, this does *not* mean that Jews believe the world is only 5,773 years old. The vast, vast majority of Jews hold fast with Darwin. Rather, **היום הרת עולם** is, more than anything else, a metaphor, a literary device in which we adorn this awesome and wonderful day.)

Day-by-day, hour-by-hour, even minute-by-minute, we are awash in news from every corner of the world. We are subjected to a constant onslaught of events, images and uncertainties ranging from the nuclear ambitions of Iran and what that portends for Israel and the Middle East, to angry mobs attacking Western embassies and businesses

in Cairo, Tripoli, Tunis, Sanaa, Khartoum and Beirut. Why just the other day, they -- whoever "they" are -- burned Kentucky Fried Chicken and Arby's restaurants in Beirut.

Closer to home, Europe is awash in economic uncertainty, which daily affects our economy and our stock market. And here at home, our interminable presidential campaign season is producing more commercials, more pointed fingers, more cash contributions and less credibility than a grade-school cafeteria food fight. Where once our political parties were separated by a porous membrane euphemistically called an "aisle," today that which separates them is an impregnable, unbreachable wall of hostility. And instead of addressing the nation's most pressing and fundamental challenges, one side seeks to turn back the clock to the America of Ozzie and Harriet, all the while accusing the other side of seeking to curb freedom through the expansion of government and the institutionalizing immorality by granting too much freedom. It just doesn't make much sense . . .

At a time when people are out of work and only millionaires and billionaires can give a positive answer to the question "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" we find ourselves immersed in the debates of yesteryear -- Evolution vs Creationism, abortion and collective bargaining to name but a few. Comity and civility has been thrown out the window. Nowadays, disagreement and disrespect are conjoined twins. While many still accept the fact that differences of opinion are both good and normal, many more "know" that those with whom they disagree are both wrong and evil. As a result of all the nastiness and internecine sniping, nothing gets done; our most pressing and fundamental challenges become all the more pressing and dire. And as a result, we all suffer.

Yes indeed, we certainly are living in "interesting" times. What a less than uplifting message for us as we attempt to celebrate our Jewish New Year!

However, all is far from bleak. This good world which God created for our use and enjoyment is still filled with awe-inspiring mysteries and creatures of unsurpassing majesty; of sights, sounds and colors that provide ample reflections of the grace and majesty that still guides an admittedly perplexing world.

The wonder of it all.

Let us spend a few moments shutting out that which is "interesting," and immersing ourselves in that which is inspiring.

Permit me to introduce you to Lawrence Anthony, a South African environmentalist, international conservationist, explorer and best-selling author, who passed March 7 at the age of 61. Born in South Africa and raised in Zimbabwe, Lawrence Anthony was the long-time conservationist at the Thula Thula game reserve in Zululand, South Africa

and the Founder of The Earth Organization, an international environmental group. Anthony was the author of three exceptional books, the last of which *The Last Rhinos*, is about his involvement in the rescue of the remaining White Rhinos in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In 2003, 8 days after the invasion of Iraq, Anthony managed to steal himself into war-torn Baghdad. Upon his arrival, Anthony went directly to the Baghdad Zoo -- by far the largest in the Middle East. What he found there was heartbreaking: out of the zoo's original 650 to 700 animals only 35 survived owing to the bombing, looting of the



animals for food, and starvation of the caged creatures who were without food and water. The animals that had survived tended to be the larger one: bears, hyenas, lions and tigers. In the chaos of the war, Anthony used mercenaries to help protect the zoo, and with the assistance of the few zoo keepers looked after the remaining animals, and fed the carnivores by buying donkeys on the streets of Baghdad. US Army soldiers, Iraqi civilians and various other volunteers including former Republican Guard soldiers came to assist. Eventually L. Paul Bremer, then head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, supported the zoo and American engineers helped to reopen it. When Anthony left Iraq, the animals were healthy, the cages were clean and the zoo had been preserved. The United States Army's Third Infantry Division gave Mr. Anthony a medal for his bravery. In 2007, Anthony published *Babylon's Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo*, the movie rights of which were acquired by a major Hollywood production company.

Anthony's greatest passion however, was elephants.

In 1999, he got a call offering him nine of the animals — three adult females, three young elephants, an adolescent bull and two babies. He was told they were wild and troublesome and would be shot if he did not take them. Agreeing, Anthony moved the nine creatures on to his 5,000-acre preserve. He was gradually able to win the elephants' trust. He wrote another book which detailed how he came to communicate with the elephants and to appreciate the way they communicated with one another. That book, *The Elephant*



Whisperer: My Life With the Herd in the African Wild, was published in 2009.

Lawrence Anthony died of a massive heart attack on March 7th of this year. Two days after his passing, wild elephants began showing up at his home at the nature preserve's farthest edge -- a place they had never been. The herd of elephants was led by the memory's two matriarchs. (*Memory*, by the way, is the proper term for an elephant collective, like a "pack of dogs," a "bevy of quail," a "swarm of ants," and, ironically, a "congress of salamanders," which when young, are called "newts.")

Led by the two matriarchs, separate memories -- herds -- began arriving in droves to say goodbye to their friend and rescuer. A total of 20 elephants, we are told "had patiently walked over 12 miles" to get to the Anthony home. Family members reported that the elephants remained outside their home for two days and two nights before beginning the long trek back to their home on the other side of the wildlife preserve.

I first learned of this remarkable man, his heroic exploits and the unbelievable scene with the elephants through an email I received from a friend. Living as we do in an age where anything and everything is suspect, I went to the fact-checking website "Snopes.com" to see if the story about the elephants in mourning was true; as of the other day, Snopes says its truth is "undetermined."

Nonsense.

Elephants have long been known to mourn their dead. In India, baby Elephants are often raised with a boy who will be their lifelong "mahout." The pair develop legendary bonds -- so much so that it is not uncommon for one to waste away without a will to live after the death of the other.

For me, the scene of Lawrence Anthony's elephants traveling to his home in order to mourn their dear friend is more than just true; it is the actualization of the verse from Psalms:

מִהֲרֹבֹּי יְהוָה מַעֲשָׂיוּ בָּלֵם בְּחִכְמָהּ מְלֵאָה עֲשִׂיתָ רִצְהָא קִינִיךְ

Namely, "How great are your works dear G-d; you have made each and every wisely; the entire world is filled with your wondrous creatures."

In a world filled with daily hostility and fear, with the pain of uncertainty, it is absolutely essential to pause and reflect on those parts of creation which can still hold us in reverent awe.

Indeed, there *are* millions of upon millions of people who hate, swindle and do utterly despicable things while proclaiming their great faith in God. And the more we concentrate on their words and actions, the harder it is to perceive God's benevolent hand at work in the world co* (my "he/she" pronoun for God) created for our enjoyment. But then, every once in a while, along comes a person like Lawrence

Anthony -- one who fully grasps that we are meant to be wise and energetic stewards of God's creation, not its rapacious despoilers. Contemplating the deeds and accomplishments of a person like Lawrence Anthony can help restore -- if but for a moment -- our faith in humanity; our belief that the best way to do well is to first do good -- and above all, to listen to the whispers of all living creatures.

Then too, something as miraculous, as awe-inspiring as the pilgrimage of the twenty elephants can help us truly sense the wondrous interconnectedness of all things.

You tell me: is there any better message or feeling with which to begin a new year?

L'shana tova . . .

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



September 24, 2012

FOR R R & TRP, SEPTEMBER IS THE CRUELLIST MONTH

I don't know if Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan or the folks that run the Republican Party ever studied or read *The Wasteland* -- T.S. Eliot's monumentally disjointed modernist poem. If they did then perhaps they remember the haunting words with which it opens:

April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land . . .

Then too, perhaps they also remember the promise one of the poem's many voices (or speakers) makes in line 30:

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

It seems to me that for Romney, Ryan and The Republican Party -- the "R R & TRP" of this week's title -- it is September, not April, which will likely turn out to be their "cruellest month." And for them, it will have nothing to do with lilacs, dead land or



"fear in a handful of dust." Rather, what will make September so incredibly cruel for them is a witch's brew of bad press, lackluster campaigning, pallid poll numbers, and impolitic misstatements

made by a standard-bearer who perhaps, when all is said and done, doesn't really want to be president all that much.

Yes indeed, September *has* been rather cruel to R R & TRP. It began with a slightly amateurish national convention in Tampa at which disdain for President Obama was far louder and more palpable than passion for Governor Romney; a convention whose rhetorical high point was Clint Eastwood speaking to an empty chair. For all their efforts, the Republican ticket received virtually none of the political "bounce" which national conventions traditionally proffer. And, to make matters a bit worse, Tampa was immediately followed by the Democrats' National Convention in Charleston, which by comparison, was a tour-de-force -- sort of like *Casablanca* versus *Any Which Way But Loose*.

Then, the Romney camp inexplicably decided to turn their response to attacks on American diplomatic installations in T.S. Eliot Cairo and Benghazi -- which took the life of 4 Americans including Ambassador Chris Stevens -- into a partisan political attack on President Obama. In a late-night communiqué issued even before the full extent of attacks were known, Romney said:

I'm outraged by the attacks on American diplomatic missions in Libya and Egypt and by the death of an American consulate worker in Benghazi. It's disgraceful that the Obama Administration's first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks.

When asked to comment on this impolitic comment, the president merely said "Governor Romney shoots first, aims later . . ."

Of course, the likely *coup de grâce* was provided by that brief YouTube video in which Romney, speaking off-the-cuff before a gathering of his fellow gazillionaires characterized nearly half the American public as lazy, good-for-nothing, tax-avoiding entitlement junkies. Speaking before his fellow Masters of the Universe at a \$50,000-a-plate fundraiser in Boca Raton, Florida, Romney declared that in essence these "moochers" -- who comprise 47% of the American public -- should be written off, because there's not a snowball's chance in Hell that they will ever vote for him.

This is not *fear in a handful of dust*, as Eliot's narrator would have it; this is utter elitist disdain in a scattering of syllables. It shows in stark relief that Romney and his fellow plutocrats -- none of whom challenged his comments -- have neither regard nor understanding for the lives, challenges, aspirations or difficulties of the mass of humanity. Ironically, in their haughty "to-the-manner-born" demeanor, they remind one of the idle Edwardian rich of whom the aristocratic Eliot -- a man born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri -- was so terribly enamored.

By now, just about everyone has either seen the video or heard the audio capture, and knows that Romney also claimed that had his late father George *been* a Mexican (as opposed to merely having been *born* in Mexico) he would be having a much easier time of things in this presidential election. And so, having stubbed a toe in the dust of economy and ethnicity, Romney proceeded on to foreign policy where, not surprisingly, he fell flat on his face. Speaking about the ongoing struggle for achieving peace in the Middle East, Romney [said](#):

I look at ... these thorny issues, and I say, 'There's just no way.' And so what you do is you say, 'You move things along the best way you can.' You hope for some degree of stability, but you recognize that this is going to remain an unsolved problem. We live with that in China and Taiwan. All right, we have a potentially volatile situation but we sort of live with it, and we kick the ball down the field and hope that ultimately, somehow, something will happen and resolve it."

And this is the man who claims he will be far better for Israel than Barack Obama.

The mind reels.

Predictably, as R R & TRP's "cruellest month" turns the corner and heads for October, the news is not good . . . especially on the polling front:

- According to the [latest Gallup Poll](#), President Obama is way ahead with Latinos, the nation's fastest-growing voting bloc. Gallup has Obama leading Romney by 66% to 26% among registered **Latinos**, who could be the voters who make the difference in November in four of the eight must-win battleground states: Colorado, Nevada, Florida and Virginia.
- According to the [latest Pew Research Center Poll](#), nationally, President Obama has a 19-point lead among **women** registered voters.
- A recent [NBC News/Wall Street Journal](#) poll found that zero percent of **African-Americans** support Mitt Romney.
- According to a new [American Jewish Committee survey](#), more than two-thirds -- 69 percent -- of Jewish voters in Florida say they will choose President Obama over Governor Romney, who will win 25 percent of the state's Jewish vote. (Obama won 76 percent of the Florida Jewish vote in 2008.)

Personally, I have been interviewed on this last issue several times over the past couple of weeks. I get calls from journalists asking "How do you respond to all those who say the Jewish vote is going to go to Romney?" In the main, I tell them that although the crystal ball I gaze into is no better, no clearer than anyone else's, my gut instinct -- plus a lot of experience -- tells me that Obama and the Democrats aren't going to suffer any game-changing drop-off; that somewhere between 70% and 75% of the Jewish vote will continue voting "D."

The further we get into R R and TRP's "cruellest month," the more convinced I am that this is so. For in addition to Romney's "shoot first aim second" approach to foreign policy, he has failed to delineate where his policy would be all that different from President Obama when it comes to Israel -- except to claim that he would "Do precisely the opposite" -- Whatever in the world that means. And despite all his bluster and posturing regarding the president's policy towards Iran, Romney recently admitted to [ABC's George Stephanopolus](#) that he "shares the same red line" on Iran as President Obama.

In speaking with various journalists, I remind them that although Israel is certainly of great importance to Jewish voters when we go to the polls, it is by no means the only issue; of vital concern as well are issues ranging from women's rights and education to healthcare, and the future of Social Security and the Supreme Court. We tend to have long memories for those who trample on the rights of the poor and downtrodden and are generally suspicious of those who pander to the forces of intolerance in order to gain a vote. We won't soon forget that House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and Republican Vice Presidential nominee Paul Ryan both addressed the 2012 "Values Voters Summit." The "summit's" organizers, which include Jerry Boykin, Executive V.P. of the Family Research Council and the American Family Association's Brian Fisher, have long and well-documented histories of gay bashing, anti-Muslim and intolerant statements, which include the disgusting linking of homosexuality to the Holocaust. And this is where Romney's running mate and the House Majority Leader choose to speak . . .

What a September. For R R & TRP, it has definitely been crueller than Eliot's April. In rereading *The Wasteland*, I came across a section that could easily have been written for R R & TRP . . . something they might do well to keep in mind if October and November aren't to be equally cruel:

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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MITT ROMNEY'S FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

The story is told of a feudal land baron who proffered a challenge to three of his overseers: whichever one gave the best answer to three questions would have a job for life; the other two would be fired at the end of the month. The baron's questions were:

1. What is the biggest thing in the world?
2. What is the fastest thing in the world?
3. What is the best thing in the world?

Two of the overseers received permission from the baron to go in on the same answers. Being guileful sycophants, the pair quickly agreed that in order to win, their answers had to provide the maximum in flattery. And so, they responded:

1. "The biggest thing in the world is the baron's heart."
2. "The fastest thing in the world is the baron's prize stallion."
3. "The best thing in the world is working for the baron."

The baron pondered their answers, frowned, and then said: "What kind of a simpleton do you take me for? I was looking for a bit of wisdom, not base flattery. Pack your things and be off the estate by the end of the month." Utterly deflated, the two slunk dejectedly out of the room.

This left the third man, a rather simple and artless soul. Fearful that he would lose his job -- and certain that he was nowhere near as smart as the other two -- he swallowed hard and stammered out his answer to the first question:

"The b-b-b-iggest th-th-thing in the world is . . . is . . . the w-w-world itself."

The baron smiled broadly and said but a single word: "Brilliant!"

And here we pause . . .

It follows that if the single biggest thing in the world is the world itself, then the single most important issue facing the planet is [the planet itself](#) .



. . . namely man-made global warming. I sincerely doubt that any reader of the K.F. Stone Weekly considers global warming to be a hoax or seriously questions the science behind it. The signs are both omnipresent and ominous: blistering heat, shorter winters, devastating crop losses, disappearing water sources, and rapidly shrinking polar ice caps to name but a few. Most of us understand that although history does record ages of greater and lesser terrestrial temperatures, this time, it is largely -- if not entirely -- our doing. Our addiction to burning fossil fuels

is the major culprit; each year the people of planet earth burn some 33.5 billion metric tons of CO₂, of which slightly more than 55% (18.4 billion metric tons) goes into the atmosphere, thus depleting our all-important ozone layer.

Climatologists and policymakers warn that unless the United States and other industrialized nations move to rein in emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases by 2020, most aspects of life -- from the food chain to the oceans to communicable disease -- could be altered, largely for the worse.

And yet, despite a welter of scientific and anecdotal evidence -- and innumerable well-conceived and doable steps we can take to deal with it -- there are still millions upon millions of people who consider global warming to be unproven at best, and some sort of liberal conspiratorial hoax at worst.

Among these -- if we are to take him at his word -- is Mitt Romney. To my way of thinking, of all the Faustian bargains the former Massachusetts governor has had to make in order to capture his party's nomination (healthcare, abortion, gun control, immigration to name but a few), none is so dangerous -- or damnably, dumbly obvious -- as his new-found disbelief in science. You know, there was a time not so terribly long ago when Romney -- like 99.9% of his Crimson (Harvard) classmates -- agreed with all the scientists who concluded that global warming was real, mostly man-made, and potentially catastrophic unless properly addressed.

Oh for the days when Romney thought and acted more like a college-educated adult and less like a loutish Luddite. When Romney was governor of Massachusetts, from

2003 to 2007, his staff included prominent environmentalists who developed a state climate action plan and a regional cap-and-trade system.

As recently as June 3, 2011, Romney said, "I think it's important for us to reduce our emissions of pollutants and greenhouse gases that may well be significant contributors to the climate change and global warming that you're seeing," Less than [5 months later](#) (October 28, 2011), Romney was whistling a different tune. Speaking at the Consol Energy Center (Consol is the largest producer of both natural gas and high-BTU coal in the Appalachian region), Romney said, "My view is that we don't know what's causing climate change on this planet."

Romney is running on a platform which focuses heavily on expanding the supply of fossil fuels. Romney's plan makes no mention of climate change and would end subsidies for cleaner sources of energy, such as wind and solar. In places like [Iowa](#), where close to 3,000 utility scale turbines employ more than 7,000 people, provide more than 25% of the state's electricity needs and has increased the assessed property valuation by \$2.3 billion, Romney's plan would be more than a mere step back; it would be devastating. Ironically, Romney initially unveiled this "no more wind power" energy plan in New Mexico, where he had to fight the wind as he showed flip charts of his policy. Further, the Romney/Ryan plan would open up oil and gas development off the Atlantic Coast, as well as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. And he proposed putting states in charge of regulating oil and gas development on federal lands.



In accepting his party's nomination, Romney actually turned global warming into a laugh-line, deriding President Obama for promising to heal the planet. Landing the nomination caused Romney to make a Faustian Bargain with the likes of Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe. Author of [The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future](#), Inhofe believes that " . . . only God can change the climate . . . " and [told one interviewer](#), "The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous."

This is the kind of 19th-century thinking that Romney has had to accept in order to gain the nomination. But what is a nomination worth if in the end you have so boxed yourself into a far-right corner as to be unelectable? Especially when that corner requires you to knowingly place the future of the planet in jeopardy?

Now this is not to say that President Obama is thoroughly green and the best thing to environmentalism since Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold or Roderick Nash. The Obama Administration *has* issued more oil leases than anyone might have imagined, and *has* wavered on the issue of off-shore drilling. But at least everyone from the president on

down is on the same page when it comes to global warming and the dire necessity of creating alternative sources of clean energy. And just [this past August 28](#), the president announced a new set of fuel economy standards that will require car companies to average 54.5 mpg across their fleets by 2025. Romney, by the way, has already said that if elected, he will cancel this order. "Too many federal regulations," he argues. "They are job killers." When it comes to future-thinking ideas, Obama and the Democrats leave Romney and the Republicans in the hard baked dust.

Which brings us back to our tale . . .

Gaining confidence from the baron's response to his first answer, the simple soul continued:

"The fastest thing in the world is an idea . . . it just happens."

"And your answer to the third question?" the baron queried.

"From where I stand," the man replied, "the best thing in the world is a good night's sleep!"

Who can disagree? When it comes to the biggest issue in the world -- the world itself -- good ideas put to work will help speed its repair, which in turn, should permit all of us a good night's sleep.

It sure beats making a deal with the devil . . .

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WHICH IS WORSE?

This past Friday, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) announced that the nation's unemployment rate had dipped to 7.8% -- the first time it had gone below 8% in four years. In its report, the Labor Department announced that employers had added nearly 115,000 jobs in the previous month. Buoyed by the news, the New York Stock Exchange rose some 66 points, reaching a five-year high of 13,641; likewise, the S&P 500 reached *its* five-year high, closing up 8 points at 1,469. Meanwhile, the NASDAQ closed at 3,136.19, a twelve-year high. (By way of



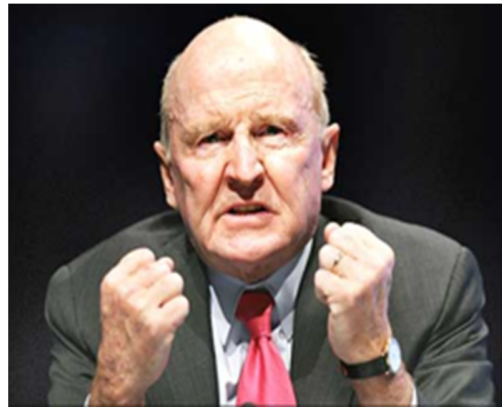
comparison on January 20, 2009, the day Barack Obama took the oath of office, the Dow Jones closed at 7,949; the S&P was at 805.22, and the NASDAQ 1,476.42 This past Friday's close represents -- respectively -- gains of 58.3% 54.8% and an astounding 112.4%.)

Predictably, both the Obama White House and the Democratic National Committee were upbeat, seeing the BLS report as a sign that although there is obviously much more progress to be made, the nation's economy *is* moving in the right direction. Again predictably, progressive economists and partisan pundits opined that the report would likely help compensate for what many saw as the president's lackluster performance at the first presidential debate. The upbeat

report, they suggested, might dampen whatever political bounce Romney acquired as a result of his debate performance.

(A sad side note: the fact that I -- along with just about every other pundit have used the term "performance" to describe last Wednesday's encounter between Obama and Romney, speaks volumes for how debased and unenlightening political discourse has become in this country. Most pundits reviewed this so-called debate in the same manner that Janet Maslin or Richard Corliss would review the latest film; paying vastly more attention to mien than to message. Well, as the old Hollywood expression goes, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach; and for those who aren't even capable of teaching, they become critics . . .)

Just as predictably, the Republican political establishment saw virtually nothing positive or redeeming in the latest jobs report. Governor Romney issued a statement which said in part, "This is not what a real recovery looks like." To his credit, the former Massachusetts governor did not join the burgeoning conspirators' chorale, which accused both the White House and the Bureau of Labor Statistics of engaging in a pernicious conspiracy of numbers doctoring -- of issuing a phony report. Jack Welch, the former chief executive officer of General Electric breathed life into this latest conspiracy when he went on Twitter to accuse the president's team of lowering the unemployment rate to 7.8% for the sole purpose of giving him a boost. "Unbelievable jobs numbers . . . These Chicago guys will do anything . . . can't debate so change numbers," Welch Tweeted. The formerly sober-sided Welch's charge was then picked up by, among others South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham and Florida Representative Allen ("There are at least 80 card-carrying Communists in Congress") West. Making the rounds of the Sunday morning talk shows, Newt Gingrich opined that the American people are "losing respect for Washington" and simply don't believe the economy is improving, no matter what a jobs report says.



That no self-respecting Republican has said anything positive or hopeful about the latest jobs figures is understandable; it is, after all, in the very nature of politics to only say good things about your own team. However, to contend that these figures are nothing more than the product of a grossly unethical, immoral, and illegal conspiracy -- that's a horse of a different color. For here, we are racing headlong around a surreal track of treachery -- the same track whose mile

markers include among others, "Birtherism," "Death Panels," "Acorn," "Fast and Furious," "the Cloward-Piven Strategy," and, at one time, "Vince Foster."

To be certain a segment of the American public has been uncovering -- and occasionally believing in -- [pernicious conspiracies](#) ever since the days of the Salem Witch Trials. Many believed both the American Revolution and the War of 1812 to be a conspiracy promulgated by the either the Masons or Bavarian Illuminati (some thought they were one and the same); many believed that the Panic of 1837 was caused by a cabal of Irish Catholics who were digging a tunnel under the Atlantic in order to connect the Vatican to America's East Coast; early twentieth century foes of the Federal Reserve claimed that *it* was the brainchild of a none-too secret society made up of, among others, the Schiffs, Warbergs, Rothschilds and Rosenwalds. Closer to our own time, there are people who firmly believe that the assassination of JFK, the lunar landing, the so-called "Philadelphia Experiment," the "Men in Black," and 9/11 are all part and parcel of far-flung government conspiracies. Why just the other day someone told me that Osama bin Laden is still alive and well and being paid by Barack Obama to keep a low profile!

The truth of the matter is, pulling off a successful government conspiracy is next to impossible. As in the case of last week's labor statistics, there are simply too many bureaucrats who -- in the words of G. Gordon Liddy" -- " . . . and incompetent and can't keep their mouths shut" in order for a conspiracy to succeed. Moreover, the BLS is made up of perhaps the wonkiest, least partisan of all civil servants in the entire Federal Government. There are hundreds of safeguards in place which make it virtually impossible to "cook" the figures. Then too, if the Obama White House *really* wanted to make the jobs picture look better, they likely would have done it *before*, not *after* the first debate . . .

Why do people believe in highly improbable conspiracies? Part of it deals with what *Scientific American* writer Michael Shermer calls *paternicity* (the tendency to find meaningful patterns in random noise) and *agency* (the bent to believe the world is controlled by invisible intentional agents). According to Shermer, "Conspiracy theories connect the dots of random events into meaningful patterns and then infuse those patterns with intentional agency."

OK, so there will always be people who believe in conspiracies. Or, as novelist Benjamin Disraeli wrote in a long-forgotten 1844 novel entitled *Coningsby*, "*The world is governed by very different personages to what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes.*" (As a side note, this quote would be used by the forger of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to "prove" the international Jewish conspiracy to enslave the world . . .)

While perhaps we can understand -- if not completely forgive -- the petty and the paranoid for seeing the world through the lens of conspiracy, what about those who promote conspiracy for political or monetary profit? To my way of thinking, they are traitors to reason, poisoners of the intellectual well.

I don't know if Allen West believes much of what he says -- that there are those 80 card-carrying Communists in Congress or that the president is enriching African Americans at the taxpayers expense. I would make a small wager that West doesn't believe much of what he says, but propounds these notions in order to garner greater name recognition and votes. Then too, I don't know if [Georgia Representative Dr. Paul Broun, M.D.](#) really, truly believes that Evolution, the Big Bang Theory and Embryology are ". . . lies straight out of hell," or that the world, which he claims was created in six days, is no more than 9,000 years old. Perhaps he does, and that certainly is his right -- as much as I find his positions to be first-class head-scratchers.

In the end, the question is:

Which is worse: To believe in things which are inherently at odds with the past 200 years of human progress and scientific discovery, or to say things you really don't believe in order to garner publicity and win votes?

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QUICK QUICK: TELL US WHAT TO THINK

As every mega multi-tasker knows, a bit of daily down-time is an absolute necessity. For the most part, my down-time occurs in one of two places: 24-hour Fitness, where I get in a rigorous 2-hour workout a couple of times a week and the local dog park where our *hunte*, Fred Astaire Stone, is a local celebrity. Being



that "Mr. Austerlich" (Astaire's real name) is mostly greyhound (only God knows what the rest is), he is highly supple, and runs like an effortless gale. Whenever Fred puts it in high gear leaving the rest of the pack in the dust, I am reminded of the old Johnny Tillotson song "Poetry in Motion" -- " . . . a wave out on the ocean could never move that way . . . "

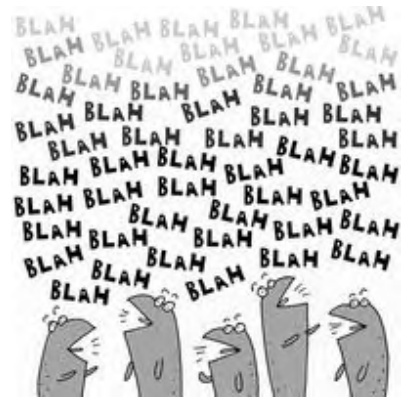
Fred is on speaking terms with just about every dog in the park. His "father" (moi), on the other hand, knows the canines better than their owners - - *i.e.* the fellow with the stinky cigar is "Maxie's Dad," the gal with the curly red hair "Sandy's Mom," etc. I don't engage in too many conversations at the dog park. It's not that I'm a snob or standoffish; far from it. Rather, it's my time spend a hour or so unwinding, becoming reasonably invisible reading (at the moment I'm plowing through Dreiser's [The Genius](#)), observing, and above all, listening. One thing I've observed is how much people have in common with their dogs -- both physically and emotionally. Overweight people tend to have overweight dogs; obstreperous folks tend to have yapping hounds; young marrieds frequently have puppies, etc.

One rule I've tried to set for myself -- at both the gym and the park -- is not to become involved in political discussions. Goodness knows, between delivering university lectures and campaign speeches, and writing weekly essays, articles and op-ed pieces, I spend enough waking hours dealing with the subject; my time at the gym or park is supposed to be somewhat of a busman's holiday. I say *supposed to be*, because it doesn't always work out that way. Especially as election day gets closer and closer. Occasionally, people at the park -- knowing who I am and what I do for a living -- will ask me things like "Who do you think won the debate last night?" or "Do you think Obamacare is Socialist?" or "How can you support Obama considering how much he hates Israel?" Generally, instead of answering the question, I will put down my book or Kindle, and ask the questioner, "Who do *you* think won the debate?" or "Do *you* think Obamacare is Socialist," or "What makes *you* think that the president hates Israel? At this point, one of two things will generally happen: either, the conversation fizzles out, or the person will respond with something that sounds like a canned talking point from campaign ads or TV/radio talking heads. (To be certain, this is true for both Republicans and Democrats.) It makes me wonder how many people actually think for themselves anymore. Lest anyone think that this last sentence betrays a haughtiness or sense of superiority on my part, let me assure one and all that it is not -- repeat -- not in my nature to be an intellectual snob.

Rather, I'm just calling 'em as I see 'em.

As I mentioned above, one of the things I do engage in while at the park is listening -- playing the role of "fly on the wall." And of course, much of what I'm listening in on are conversations about current events: the presidential election, Romney and Ryan, Obama and Biden, the economy, the Middle East . . . you name it. Frequently, I hear people making seemingly authoritative statements based on little more than what they've heard others say. Often, they employ expressions that are likely not their own. As an example, a group sitting together will all agree that President Obama has "thrown Israel under the bus" -- a verbatim quote taken from Romney himself. Or "Biden's a clown," or "The president hates big business," or "Obama wants to turn the United States into a Socialist country." If someone will challenge the statement or ask "And how the President thrown Israel under the bus?" or "What has he done to show that he hates big business?" the answer will invariably involve boilerplate rhetoric.

On the other side of the same coin, I hear people flatly stating things like "Romney will create millions of jobs -- he's a businessman with a long track



record of doing just that," or "Romney will be much tougher on Iran than Obama," or "Under Romney, the Syrians had better watch out!" But again, when challenged, they really don't know how to back up these statements with facts . . . for in many cases, there are no facts.

No one likes to come off seeming or sounding like they don't know what they're talking about -- especially when it comes to politics and world affairs. And yet, so much of what passes for "knowledge" these days is based on what paid partisans broadcast over cable or on the internet. Take the presidential and vice presidential debates. Eight or ten hours before the evening's debate begins, everyone from Rush Limbaugh, Gretchen Carlson and Bill O'Reilly to Ed Schultz, Alex Wagner and the Reverend Al Sharpton begin telling their listeners or viewers what to expect. And then, once the debate has concluded, they -- along with their like-minded colleagues -- will spend the next 36 hours telling their listeners or viewers who won and why, what they saw and heard, and how it all bodes for the future. And of course within hours of a debate's conclusion, both campaigns -- along with their anonymous financial surrogates -- are airing interminable commercials showing that their candidate was the obvious victor, the other guy an out-and-out liar.

This election is simply too important, too critical for others to tell us what to think.

What do *you* think?

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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ARLEN SPECTER: ONE TOUGH HOMBRE

This past Sunday, former Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter passed away at the age of 82. He was the longest-serving senator in that state's history. The following essay is based mostly on his entry in my 2010 book ["The Jews of Capitol Hill: A Compendium of Jewish Members of Congress."](#) (Rowman & Littlefield)

Over the course of a 45-year political career – in which he went from Democrat to Republican and then, after nearly 30 years in the United States Senate back to Democrat – people described Arlen Specter in a lot of different ways:

- "A dangerous wildcard"
- "A loner"
- "A penchant for shallow publicity"
- "Abrasive"
- "Aggressive"
- "An unrepentant creedal heretic"
- "Arrogant"
- "Blunt"
- "Brilliant"
- "Brilliantly perceptive"
- "Brutal"
- "Contrarian"
- "Highly respected"
- "Indefatigable"
- "Persuasive"
- "Prosecutorial"
- "Quixotic"
- "Tenacious"
- "Well prepared" and simply,

- “One tough hombre”

President Barack Obama made the “one tough hombre” comment at his April 29, 2009 press conference in the White House Diplomatic Reception Room upon welcoming Senator Specter into the Democratic Party. The president showed a keen understanding of the Pennsylvania senator’s political history declaring, “I don’t expect Arlen to be a rubber stamp. . .”

Arlen Specter spent a lifetime being anything but a “rubber stamp” – whether it be in his hometown, his adopted state, or the United States Senate. Although he lived for nearly six decades in Philadelphia, till the very end one could still hear the unmistakable flat Midwestern tone of his native Kansas. A longtime moderate Republican during an era when the GOP became increasingly more conservative in outlook, he remained unabashedly liberal in matters of social policy. Although



decidedly pro-choice and in favor of stem-cell research he was anathema to most politically active women.

Harry Specter, Arlen Specter’s father, was born in 1892 in Batchkurina, a village about 160 miles from Kiev. The Specters – Harry, his parents, his seven brothers and one sister – were the only Jewish family in Batchkurina, “a convenient target for the villagers’ slurs and the Cossacks’ sport.” In 1910 at age 18, Harry walked “across the entire European continent, alone, uneducated, and destitute” to sail to America, where his brother Joseph lived in New York City. Meeting up with Joe, the brothers soon moved to Philadelphia, where Harry worked for a tailor and eventually was able to purchase a Model-T, in which he traveled West “to learn English and see America.”

Senator Arlen Specter found his father’s village on a 1982 trip to the Soviet Union. None of the villagers, including the mayor, said they had heard of the Specter family. Even the oldest person in the village had no knowledge until, as the senator would later write, “It dawned on me to tell him that my father’s family had been the only Jewish family in the village. The man looked up and said, ‘Oh! Avram the Jew.’ Avram was my grandfather’s name, but I had not mentioned it. That’s what it was like being a Jew in Russia. My grandfather had died in the famine of 1922, sixty years earlier, but this man still remembered Avram the Jew.”

In 1916, Harry Specter found himself in St. Joseph, Missouri, where he met a shopkeeper named Freida Shanin. Harry began keeping company with Freida’s eldest daughter, 16-year old Lillie. They soon became engaged. Following military service with the 355th Infantry Company in France (in which he was wounded), Harry and

Lillie were married. They would have four children: Morton (born 1920 in St. Joseph), Hilda (born 1921 in Philadelphia), Shirley (born 1927 in St. Joseph) and Arlen, who was born on February 12, 1930 in Wichita. Part of the reason for their moving around was in the nature of how Harry made his living: "He drove a truck in the Scranton coal fields, sold blankets to farmers in the winter in Nebraska, and peddled cantaloupes door-to-door in small Midwestern towns in the summer."

In his 2000 autobiography *A Passion for Truth: From Finding JFK's Single Bullet to Questioning Anita Hill to Impeaching Clinton*, Specter noted that at his birth, his parents announced that they were going to name him "Abraham" after Lillie's paternal grandfather "Avram." Lillie's sister Rose – who was living in Wichita at the time – protested, "Oh, you're not going to do that to this poor little baby." She then suggested they name him "Arlen" after Richard Arlen, her favorite movie star. As a child, Arlen's nickname was "Boozy Boy." As the senator explained in his autobiography, "A close family friend had given his son . . . born sixteen months before me the nickname 'Sonny Boy' after the Al Jolson song of that title, and my father adopted the variation 'Boozy Boy' for me."

Shortly after the birth of their fourth child, the Specter family moved to Russell, Kansas, the same tiny farming community in which future senator – and 1996 Republican presidential nominee Robert Dole was born and raised. When Arlen was age 4, Harry took him to meet the Wichita sheriff, "who asked me what I would like to see or do in his office. I replied I'd like to hold the pistol I saw in his holster. No, he said, but he would make me a deputy sheriff, and he pinned his badge to my overalls for a picture. My proud father sent the photo to 'Ripley's Believe It or Not.' On June 18, 1934, Ripley's carried my picture with the caption that I was the youngest deputy sheriff in history. Over the years I saw my father take that clipping from his wallet again and again to proudly show it to his friends, until it literally disintegrated in his hands from the folding and handling."

Following his high school graduation in 1947, Arlen Specter entered the University of Oklahoma, because "there were no Jewish fraternities at the University of Kansas." He joined *Pi Lambda Phi*. However, in the Spring of 1948 Specter writes, "we Pi Lams were reminded we were Jewish when a huge swastika was painted on our front sidewalk." In the Fall of that year he transferred to the University of Pennsylvania; his decision was made even easier, because his family was now living in Philadelphia. While at a dance during his sophomore year at Penn, Specter met a local high school student named Joan Lois Levy; they were married in 1953. Joan has had a varied career. According to a 1998 White House press release at the time of her appointment to the National Council on the Arts:

Ms. Joan Specter, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has balanced successful careers in both business and public service. Initially, she founded three cooking schools, became a Food

Columnist and Radio Consumer Reporter. She then started and built a wholesale frozen pie company, with distributors in thirty states that supplied pies to a major restaurant chain. Ms. Specter also served as Philadelphia City Councilwoman At-Large for sixteen years. While with the City Council, she was on the Finance Committee, initiated a major program on "Art In City Hall", and was a major supporter of turning South Broad Street into the "Avenue of the Arts". Ms. Specter was also deeply involved in community health and education issues. Ms. Specter serves on the boards of the Jefferson Bank, Chestnut Hill College, and the Medical College of Pennsylvania. She is a former member of the Philadelphia Cultural Fund and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

The Specters would have two sons: Shanin and Steven. Shanin, who was born in 1957, is a highly regarded malpractice attorney with the Philadelphia firm Kline and Specter. Steve, born in 1960, has both an M.D. and a Ph.D. in nutrition. At his death, Specter had 4 granddaughters: Hatti, Lilli, Perri and Silvi.

Arlen Specter graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, *Phi Beta Kappa* in 1951; he wrote his senior thesis on U.S.-Soviet relations. He then spent the next two years (1951-53) in the United States Air Force. Returning from military service, he attended Yale Law School, where he edited the law journal. Graduating with his LL.B. in 1956, he moved back to Philadelphia, where he spent three years in private practice with Barnes, Dechert, Price, Myers and Rhoads, a top firm. In 1959, he was appointed an assistant in the office of the Democratic District Attorney, Victor Hugo Blanc. At his initial interview, Blanc's assistant wanted to know "why a guy who had been *Phi Beta Kappa* at Penn and had helped edit the law journal at Yale wanted to leave a top firm and become an assistant DA. My academic background was a rarity at the Philadelphia DA's office." All he could do was explain that he felt the call to public service. During his four years in the DA's office, he made a name for himself as a tough prosecutor, winning numerous convictions against corrupt Teamsters Union officials. On March 1, 1961, D.A. Vic Blanc was elevated to the bench and replaced with James C. Crumlish.

Following the Kennedy assassination on November 22, 1963, Specter resigned from the district attorney's office and moved to Washington, D.C., in order to take a position as an assistant counsel to the Warren Commission, the fact-finding body charged with investigating the president's murder. When the Commission concluded that a single bullet had killed President Kennedy and wounded Texas Governor John Connally, Specter suddenly found himself the subject of both celebrity and notoriety. He had been the "chief architect and staunch defender of the commission's . . . so-called single bullet theory." Interviewed by *U.S. News & World Report*, Specter said, "the evidence is overwhelming that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin of President Kennedy." Specter's role in the Warren Commission investigation was immortalized in filmmaker Oliver Stone's blockbuster movie *Kennedy*. In that film, Stone identified Specter by name and called him a liar in reference to the "Single Bullet Conclusion." Specter came close to suing Stone for libel. After consulting "an ace Philadelphia litigator" about

suing Stone, Specter decided against it. "The trial," he explained in 2000, "would have involved the whole Warren Commission story, which would have been fine with me. But I had too much on my plate at the time Besides, I didn't need a movie company. In the end I let it go."

Following his stint with the Warren Commission, Specter returned to Philadelphia, where he sought the Democratic nomination for district attorney. Rebuffed by the Democratic machine that had controlled Philadelphia politics for a generation or more, Specter accepted the Republicans' offer to become *their* candidate for the office. Running as a reform candidate with the backing of both the liberal Americans for Democratic Action and moderate Republicans like Governor William W. Scranton (1917-) and Senator Hugh Scott (1900-1994), Specter pulled off an upset victory over his former boss James C. Crumlish (1920-1972). With his better than 36,000-vote victory, Specter became the first Republican to capture a citywide Philadelphia election in more than a dozen years. What made his victory all the more remarkable was that throughout the campaign, Arlen Specter was saying *kaddish* thrice daily for his father, who had suddenly passed away while he and Lillie were visiting Israel. He was 73. Receiving a call at 5:30 A.M. on Monday, November 2, Arlen and his sister Hilda were in Israel for their father's funeral within 24 hours. Harry Specter was buried in the Holon Cemetery. Lillie returned with her children to the United States and settled with Shirley and her family in Phoenix. Diagnosed with stomach cancer in her early seventies, she underwent a "painful but potentially lifesaving operation," from which she made "a reasonable recovery." She then moved with Shirley and her family to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where she passed away in 1974 at age 73. She is buried in the Specter family plot in "a suburban Philadelphia Jewish cemetery," thousands and thousands of miles away from Harry, to whom she had been married for 45 years.

Arlen Specter would spend eight years as district attorney, overseeing more than 250,000 cases. He was a different kind of D.A. than the people of Philadelphia were accustomed to; he was truculent, pugnacious, and unafraid to take on anyone and everyone from the mayor to the police commissioner. Following his first year in office, he ran for mayor, losing to incumbent, James H. Tate by just 10,954 votes out of some 700,000 cast. It was the city's closest mayoral contest in more than thirty years. In looking back on that race, Specter would conclude that he lost because "they (i.e. the people of Philadelphia) wanted me to remain their district attorney." Interestingly, Specter believed he lost some of the Jewish vote from people "who worried that any shortcomings on my part would tar Jews at large."

Returning to his duties as D.A., Specter gained added notoriety by adopting "an unorthodox method of defusing explosive tensions among rival teenage street gangs by hiring two warring gang leaders to work in a 'consulting capacity in his office.'" He also helped restore death-penalty statutes in Pennsylvania and prosecuted innumerable

cases involving consumer fraud. He was easily reelected for a second four-year term in 1969. Specter was fast becoming the darling of the Republican Party.

In the early 1970s, smarting from the tangled web of Watergate, Republicans began losing elections in droves. Despite his personal popularity with the people of Philadelphia, Specter became a victim of this anti-Republican trend, and was defeated for reelection in 1973. Following his defeat, he returned to private practice, quickly becoming one of Philadelphia's highest-paid attorneys. Over the next several years, he would run unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for the United States Senate (1976), losing to Representative H(enry) John Heinz III, and two years later, for Pennsylvania Governor, losing the nomination to then U.S. Attorney (and future United States Attorney General) Richard Thornburgh.

In 1980, when Senator Richard S. Schweiker (1926-) announced his retirement, Specter quickly jumped into the race. This time he emerged victorious, easily defeating former Pittsburgh Mayor Peter F. Flaherty (1924-2005). Specter ran on a traditional Republican platform of lower taxes and reduced federal regulation. Some found it remarkable that a man would leave a \$250,000-a-year law practice to take a seat in the United States Senate, which in 1980 paid \$60,662.50. Specter's explanation was characteristically straightforward: "You can do a lot more in the U.S. Senate than you can in a Philadelphia skyscraper charging \$300 an hour."

Once in the Senate, Specter devoted a tremendous amount of time seeing to the needs of his constituents. As a Jewish Republican elected from a largely non-Jewish, industrial state, he had but little choice. Ever the unorthodox, battling district attorney, Specter soon gained a reputation for being one of the Senate's most combative members. As chair of the Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Specter held hearings on his "big four" subjects: kids, sex, drugs, and violence. During the hearings, Specter paraded before the cameras such unusual witnesses as "former porno star Linda Lovelace, the children's television host Captain Kangaroo and some of the jurors who had sat in judgment on John Hinckley, the man convicted of attempting to assassinate President Ronald Reagan." One Specter biographer noted, "The media loved it, but some of Specter's colleagues in the Senate clearly did not. Many observers wondered just what Linda Lovelace, Captain Kangaroo and a bunch of former jurors had to do with juvenile justice.

When Specter sought to hold hearings on the whereabouts of Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi "Angel of Death," Judiciary Committee chair Strom Thurmond refused to offer official committee sanction. Specter persisted, hounding Thurmond until the aged North Carolinian finally relented. Specter held two hearings before Thurmond pulled the plug. When the Pennsylvania Senator could not get Thurmond's permission for a third set of hearings, he defied Senate custom and held them anyway. Through actions

such as these, Specter became one of the least-liked members of the Senate. Undaunted, he continued to hew to an independent line.

During the Reagan years (1980-88), Specter achieved the dubious distinction of voting against the administration more often – upwards of 40 percent – than any other Senate Republican. As a fiscal conservative, he called for cuts in the defense budget and a radical overhaul of such politically sensitive subsidies as farm price supports for tobacco, sugar, and peanuts. As a social and foreign policy liberal, Specter voted against prayer in the public schools, aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, and cuts in funding for abortion. Although his voting record did not sit well with either the White House or his senate colleagues, the people of Pennsylvania found much to like; Specter was reelected for a second term in 1986, easily defeating 7th District Representative Robert William (Bob) Edgar.

During his second six-year term, Specter remained in the public spotlight through positions on both the Judiciary Committee and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. An intrepid interrogator, Specter's pointed questions during the Iran-Contra hearings led him to conclude that the American intelligence establishment needed a major overhaul. The single piece of legislation to result from these hearings was a Specter proposal creating an independent CIA inspector general. The bill also provided for "presidential disclosure of covert activities, jail sentences for officials who lie to congressional committees, and a division of the powers of the director of the CIA into two positions: one heading the CIA, the other acting as a presidential adviser."

It was from his position on the Judiciary Committee that Specter first came to the attention of a national audience. In 1987, he was one of the key players in the committee's hearings on President Reagan's nomination of conservative judge Robert H. Bork for a seat on the United States Supreme Court. Following several rounds of pointed, incisive questions, Specter, resisting tremendous pressure from both the White House and his Republican colleagues came out against the Bork nomination. In a statement to the press, Senator Specter explained, "I reluctantly decided to vote against him because I had substantial doubts about what he would do with fundamental minority rights, about equal protection of the law, and freedom of speech." (In 2012, Bork serves as a legal advisor for presidential candidate Mitt Romney.)

If the Bork hearings brought the Senator's name before the public, the confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas made it a household word. During the hearings, Specter challenged Anita Hill, a University of Oklahoma Law School professor (and former student of, ironically, Robert Bork), about her alleged affair with the Supreme Court nominee. His hard-bitten questioning of the demure Professor caused a cloudburst of invective from some of the most prominent women in America. Notwithstanding his liberal positions on women's issues, Specter became a pariah to American feminists. As a partial result, Specter's margin of victory in his 1992 reelection was an anemic 49%-

46% against an unknown, first-time candidate, millionaire Lynn Yaekel, the Director of Women's Studies at Drexel University's College of Medicine.

With the extreme rightward turn of the Republican Party in the post-Reagan/Bush years, Specter once again went on the offensive. In 1994, he created the Big Tent Political Action Committee, based on his view that "the 'Far Right' represents a danger to the [Republican] party and to America." Outlining the Big Tent's philosophy, Specter wrote"

"We believe that the conscience of the individual, not the power of the state, should be paramount on questions such as a woman's right to choose, pray in schools, the teaching of creationism, and other issues recently imposed into the governmental arena. We reject litmus tests, intolerance, bigotry, anti-Semitism and extremism and reaffirm our Party's deep commitment to tolerance, civil rights and the equal protection of the law. . . . We are also working to eliminate the anti-choice plank from the 1996 Republican platform because this issue of conscience has done more to divide our party than to unite it."

In essence, this became a major plank in Specter's platform in his abortive 1995 run for the White House. Unable to find a sympathetic audience within the ranks of Republican regulars and frustrated by an inability to raise significant funds, Specter dropped out of the race before the first caucus or primary. Asked whether his being Jewish had anything to do with the negligible, even hostile, reception his candidacy has received, Specter said simply, "No, not at all."

Specter's 1998 race for reelection was as easy and lopsided as 1992 had been difficult and nerve-racking. Specter defeated longtime state Representative William R. Lloyd by nearly 800,000 votes. Within days of reelection, Specter published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* exhorting his Republican colleagues to reconsider their campaign to impeach President Clinton. Rather than pursuing impeachment, Specter reasoned, the Senate should work out a deal with the President: encourage him to resign from office in exchange for keeping his pension, his freedom and his license to practice law. Specter further argued that if the President refused to resign, he would thereby be liable to criminal prosecution once he left office. Although Specter's article was widely discussed in the media, the White House chose not to issue a response.

In 2004, Specter barely survived a primary challenge from then-Representative Pat Toomey. Specter's margin of victory was a scant 17, 146 votes out of more than 1.4 million cast. Toomey (1961-), a representative from the Lehigh Valley received a significant portion of his funding from the conservative "Club For Growth," which advocated "limited government, lower taxes, less government spending, free trade, and economic freedom." The group also invented and popularized the term RINO – a pejorative acronym for "Republican in Name Only" – of which Arlen Specter, they claimed, was a prime example. RINO or no, Specter had more than \$15 million plus the

backing – and campaign appearances – of President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and conservative Senator Rick Santorum. After narrowly defeating Toomey, Specter then went on to defeat Montgomery county-based Representative Joe Hoeffel (1950-) by nearly 600,000 votes in the general election. In cruising to his 53%-42% victory, Specter outspent Hoeffel \$20.3 million to \$4.5 million. On April 15, 2009, Toomey announced that he would once again challenge Arlen Specter in the Republican primary. Less than two weeks later, Specter announced his change of party affiliation.

In 2005, despite protests from many of his Republican colleagues who tried in vain to deny him the post, Arlen Specter became chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. At first, Specter “warned” the White House “not to nominate judges who would overturn *Roe v. Wade*,” the decision that legalized abortion. At this point abortion foes protested his appointment, and then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist “pointedly refrained from endorsing him.” Then, the Bush White House weighed in on Specter’s behalf, along with all Judiciary Committee Republicans. In the end, Specter issued a statement which said, “I have not and would not use a litmus test to deny confirmation to pro-life nominees.” Specter would then go on to successfully marshal through two of George W. Bush’s Supreme Court nominees: conservatives John Roberts and Samuel Alito.

He has also brought a legalistic approach to foreign policy issues. When Congress was debating military action in post-9/11 Iraq, Specter expressed doubts about “whether Congress can delegate such authority to the president,” but nonetheless voted for the resolution. In 2007, he called for President Bush to “share” the decision-making power in Iraq, and “respectfully suggested to the president that he is not the sole decider.” He also supported engagement with Syria, and defended Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi after she went to Damascus in April 2007. Later that year Specter himself went to Damascus along with Rhode Island Representative Patrick Kennedy and “offered to assist in negotiations between Syria and Israel.”

Over many years, Arlen Specter dealt with serious medical issues: in January 1979, he was told he had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), “Lou Gerhig’s disease,” by “a preeminent neurosurgeon.” Months later it turned out to be untrue. In June 1993, Specter began feeling “slight pains running down the sides of my head and a tightness in my shirt collars.” An MRI showed a “tumor the size of a golf ball” embedded between his brain and skull. The doctor told him it was malignant and that he had three to six weeks to live. Specter took the MRI film to another doctor who told him it was “unclear whether the tumor was benign or malignant.” An operation was performed during which the surgeon “used a power saw to cut a 2” by 2” incision into my skull.” The doctor then removed the cut-out skull, removed the tumor, put the displaced portion of the skull back into its original position, and then sewed it up. A post-surgical pathological examination on a frozen section of the tumor – a meningioma – showed that it was benign.

Then, in 2005, Specter was diagnosed with stage IV-B Hodgkin's lymphoma, for which he underwent two separate chemotherapy protocols; in 2005 and again in 2008. Amazingly, despite losing hair, weight and energy, Specter did not miss a single session of the United States Senate. In 2008 Specter wrote and published a book on the subject entitled *Never Give In: Battling Cancer – and Politicians in the Senate*. As a result of his various medical issues, Specter, along with Iowa Democrat Tom Harkin, guided the process of doubling the budget for the National Institutes of Health over five years from 1999 to 2004. Understandably, Specter was a major backer of increased federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. During the 2008 presidential election, Senator Specter criticized his fellow Republicans for "not reflecting fellow Republican nominee John McCain's support for such research" in the party platform. For the majority of Republicans, the use of these excess embryonic stem cells was inconsistent with a "pro-life" point of view.

With the election of Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 and an overwhelmingly Democratic House and Senate, Arlen Specter's lack of Republican orthodoxy became "even more apparent." Specter voted for Eric Holder for Attorney General and against Timothy Geithner for Treasury Secretary. He was but one of three Republicans – along with Maine Senators Susan Collins and Olympia Snow – to vote for the president's \$787 billion stimulus bill. At the time of the vote Specter said, "I believe that my duty is to follow my conscience and vote what I think is in the best interest of the country. And the political risks will have to abide."

When Pennsylvania polls began showing Specter barely winning 30% of the vote in a hypothetical primary matchup with Pat Toomey, he began investigating what options he truly had. After rejecting the idea of running as an independent, Specter – the longest-serving senator in Pennsylvania history – decided to switch parties and, after close to a half-century, return to the Democratic fold. At first, it appeared that he would be permitted to maintain his Senate seniority, meaning that he would be number 2 on Judiciary, Appropriations and Veterans' Affairs. However, the Senate Democratic Caucus refused to honor his seniority. Ironically, he was consigned to the junior-most seat on the Judiciary Committee – a panel he had once chaired.

Arlen Specter's 30-year senate career came to an end on May 18, 2010, when, despite many major endorsements -- including Barack Obama -- and overwhelming name recognition, he was defeated in the Democratic primary by two-term Representative Joe Sestak. Sestak, the highest-ranking military official ever elected to Congress (he was a Navy Admiral with a Harvard PhD) won the primary by a 53.8%-46.2% margin. In the November general election, Sestak was defeated by Representative Toomey by a margin of 51%-49%.

Following Specter's death this past Sunday, President Obama ordered U.S. flags to be lowered to half-staff at public and military bases in Washington D.C. and the rest of the

country. At the time of his death, one writer opined that Specter -- the longest-serving senator in Pennsylvania's history -- ". . . may have done more for the state than anyone else, with the possible exception of Benjamin Franklin. Services for Senator Specter were held Har Zion Temple in Narbeth, a Philadelphia suburb. Eulogizing his former senate colleague, Vice President Joe Biden said, "I've never seen as much undaunted courage as Arlen had -- both physically and politically. He believed he could change the world, if he just worked hard enough at it . . ."

Early in his senate career, Specter bristled when he heard North Carolina Senator Fritz Hollings refer to Ohioan *Howard Metzenbaum* as "the Senator from *B'nai Brith*" during floor debate. Specter was surprised that Metzenbaum did not comment. Speaking on the record, Specter said that Hollings' comments were "terribly out of line." Then-Majority Leader Howard Baker asked Specter to join with Hollings and Metzenbaum in agreeing to delete the colloquy from the *Congressional Record*. As Specter later explained, "Very reluctantly I agreed to strike the exchange, but only on the condition that the *Congressional Record* note there had been a deletion without any indication of what it was."

It was the act of a man who was both "aggressive" and "tenacious," "blunt" and "one tough hombre."

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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THE CLOSEST THING TO IMMORTALITY

During his three plus terms as President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed a grand total of 193 judges to the federal bench. This figure was more than twice the number of the previous record of 79, held by Calvin Coolidge. I did a bit of research into the breakdown of the 193 and learned that between 1933 and 1944, FDR appointed:

- 8 Justices to the Supreme Court;
- 51 Judges to the United States Court of Appeals;
- 134 Judges to the United States District Courts, and
- Elevated one Associate Supreme Court Justice (Harlan Fiske Stone) to Chief Justice.

In doing my research, I was amazed to learn that eight of these jurists served on the bench until the 1980s. Among them were:

- Supreme Court Justice Stanley Forman Reed (1884-1980), who was appointed 1938, served as a Senior Justice until April 2, 1980;
- Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas (1898-1980), who was appointed in 1939, served as a Senior Justice until January 19, 1980;
- Third District Judge Albert Branson Maris (1893-1989), who received his appointment in 1938, served as a Senior Judge until February 7, 1989;
- Federal District Judge Marion Speed Boyd (1900-1988), who took his seat in September 1940, stayed on as Senior Judge until January 9, 1988.
- Federal District Judge Stephen Sanders Chandler, Jr. (1899-1988), who took his seat in May 1943, stayed on as Senior Judge until April 27, 1989.

- Federal District Judge William Joseph Campbell (1905-1988), who took his seat in May 1943, stayed on as Senior Judge until October 19, 1988.
- Federal District Judge Charles Edward Wyzanski, Jr. (1906-1986), who took his seat in December 1941, stayed on as Senior Judge until September 3, 1986.

Moreover, an additional 33 Roosevelt appointees continued serving as Senior Judges into the 1970s.

In other words, one in five of FDR's appointees, who took their seats during the days of Brandeis, Frankfurter and Cardozo, were still exercising judicial influence up until the time of Berger, Blackmun and Rehnquist. And of these, eight were still serving in senior capacities contemporaneously with Kennedy, Scalia, and O'Connor -- nearly a half-century after FDR's death.

Talk about immortality!

Today's Supreme Court is, without question, the most conservative since the anti-New Deal court of the early FDR years. According to [an exhaustive study](#) by University of Chicago legal scholars [William M. Landes](#) and [Richard A. Posner](#), five of the ten most conservative Supreme Court justices of the past 70 years -- with Clarence Thomas being ranked "most conservative" -- are currently occupying seats on the high court. Moreover, of the five (Thomas, Alito, Roberts, Scalia, and Kennedy) the first three are, from a point of judicial tenure, barely middle age; Thomas is 65, Alito, 62 and Roberts only 57. By comparison, two of the four liberal justices -- Ginsburg and Breyer -- are, respectively 79 and 74, and likely to be the next to announce their retirements.

If the history noted at the beginning of this piece is any indicator, whoever replaces Ginsburg and Breyer could easily still be wielding a gavel in 2050 . . . or beyond. And depending on who occupies the Oval Office beginning this coming January, the SCOTUS would likely be locked onto either a deeply conservative or reasonably progressive path for the next two generations or more. Considering the many critical issues that will likely be heading to the Court in the near and proximal future -- everything from abortion and public tax dollars for private education to voter i.d. laws and the reevaluation of *Citizens United v FEC* -- the long-term makeup of that court is going to be absolutely crucial.

Over the past several weeks, I have stressed this issue in a number of lectures and speeches; of how, through judicial appointments, a president can continue to exercise tremendous influence long after he has left office. On several occasions, people have come up to me and voiced the thought that in times of joblessness and economic malaise, they simply cannot be overly concerned with who a president will nominate for the bench. I tell them, as diplomatically as possible, that I couldn't disagree with them more; that who the president will appoint to the Supreme Court -- or the District

Court or Federal Court of Appeals -- in the next four years, will, to a great extent, determine what kind of country we are going to have for the next 50 years or more.

If we are to take President Obama and Governor Romney at their word on issues ranging from abortion and immigration to collective bargaining rights and the role of religion in American civil life (and I see no reason not to) then, it seems to me, the choice is clear: Barack Obama.

I for one will feel far more comfortable knowing that Barack Obama's judicial appointments will still be on the bench when I turn 100. That is the kind of immortality we can live with.

Let Mitt Romney earn *his* immortality through his church.

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



November 4, 2012

AN URGENT MESSAGE FROM MOTHER NATURE AND FATHER TIME

Our Dearest Children:

First and foremost, please accept our deep concern and even deeper sympathies for all the havoc wreaked by Hurricane Sandy. We too mourn the loss of life and are aghast at the extraordinary destruction and devastation it has caused to so many millions of you.



But please try to understand that this meteorological cataclysm -- which many have chosen to call a "Once-in-a-Hundred-Years-Storm" - is not a lone act of caprice or insensitivity on our part. Rather, Hurricane Sandy, like the rising seas, the record low levels of sea ice in the Arctic, the record warm temperatures in the Atlantic, severe droughts in the Midwest and almost constant fires in Texas -- is part of a climactic concatenation which, we regret to say, is as much your doing as ours. To quote some of our younger, more cynical

children:

"HELLO . . . ANYONE HOME?"

Father Time and I have never been able to quite fathom how so many of you can deny that all these events have something to do with how you've been mistreating the planet. By now, everyone should know that pumping billions upon billions of tons of

carbon and other noxious gasses into the atmosphere every day has changed the delicate balance which we -- Mother Nature and Father Time -- have been overseeing for billions upon billions of years. Unbelievably, despite a welter of evidence provided by something like 98% of the world's atmospheric scientists that global warming *is* real, largely man-made and incredibly perilous, many -- and this includes much of a political party -- simply deny, defy and vilify. And for what? Votes which will elect people who are bought and paid for by the barons of oil, coal and other polluting sources of energy? Hurricane Sandy, we regret to inform you, is *not* a "Once-in-a-Hundred-Year Storm": it is a picture of what is to come -- if it is not already here. And believe us: mega wealth can't offer a shred of protection against rising temperatures and rising seas, against melting icecaps and receding coastlines.

A couple of days ago, the [*New York Times*](#)' Timothy Egan noted that "A catastrophic storm has no feelings, no fury, no compassion and certainly no political position." While a catastrophic storm -- or a drought, or raging river -- may possess none of these, we -- Mother Nature and Father Time -- certainly do. Unbeknownst to much of humanity, we *do* have feelings, fury and compassion. When you suffer, we suffer; when you feel like screaming to the wind ENOUGH! so do we. (So far as possessing a political position or agenda . . . we'll leave that bit of lunacy to radio talk show hosts.)



At this point, you are no doubt wanting to demand "But if you *do* have feelings, if you *are* capable of both fury *and* compassion, why do you create so many natural disasters in the first place?" It is a good question, and while we certainly understand the fear and utter frustration behind it, part of the answer resides within your very question: these are *natural disasters*. We have been creating floods, famines, freezes, droughts, dustbowls, typhoons and a thousand other events for literally billions of years. Like it or not, that's part of what nature is and does. But then too, we have also been responsible for blue skies and rainbows, for friendly breezes, fecund rain forests and Giant Redwoods.

Neither Mother Nature nor I fault you for your relative inability to grasp the enormity of time and the cyclical nature of . . . well, nature. No matter how many times you read or repeat the words "*What has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done . . .*" they don't seem to sink in. And as we just stated, for this we do not fault you. What *we* cannot grasp however, is your inability to comprehend the very reality you have created for yourselves -- a gravely damaged planet. The facts, the evidence for how you have mistreated Mother Nature is obvious -- and becoming increasingly more so with each passing year. And yet, so many of you either deny its

reality or turn it in to a partisan political football to be punted yet again to the opposite end of the field.

Both Father Time and I believe that you are smart enough -- at least from a technological sense -- and creative enough to begin the process of reversal before we give up on you and let you destroy yourselves once and for all. We worry, however, that you may not possess the wisdom or the will to turn things around before its too late. Political bitchiness aside, perhaps the problem is that you no longer appreciate the fact that singular achievements can and do take decades -- and sometimes generations -- to accomplish. They require tens and hundreds of thousands -- if not millions -- of people working towards the same goal. You seem to have lost this ability. Perhaps it is the speed at which you now live; if something cannot be accomplished in a year, a month, a day or a nanosecond -- or *four years* -- you throw up your hands and walk away in frustrated disgust.

Believe us when we say that in the present circumstance, such a response can be fatal.

However, Father Time and I do see a couple of streaks of sunlight flitting across an otherwise caliginous sky. First, the manner in which all of you are pulling together to help one another is most heartening. If you are ever going to reverse the planet's warming, it will only come about by everyone working together; by coming to the realization that communal action trumps rugged individualism ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Next, we see a faint glimmer of political bipartisanship in the mutual respect and admiration shown by President Obama and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. (*Father Time and I wonder if in embracing the president, Christie may not have sealed his political fate -- somewhat like, ironically, another governor with the same initials: Charlie Crist. Only time -- your time, not ours -- will tell.*) Lastly, we delighted that a number of public officials who have previously voiced doubts about the reality of global warming are now beginning to sound less like people who reject science and more like members of the 21st century. Strangely though, Governor Romney -- who previously found the evidence supporting man-made global warming to be an obvious no-brainer, now voices his doubts. As Mother Nature said the other night, "What some people won't say or do in order to keep their backers happy!"

And so, in conclusion, dear children, please know that we are just as distressed as you at what has transpired over the past several days. We pray that you will finally, finally understand what you have done to this planet and take whatever serious, purposive steps are necessary to reverse the tide of folly. The knowledge is there; the technology is available. What it will take to succeed is a vision of the bigger picture, the understanding that time is of the essence, and the recognition that a goal of this magnitude will take several decades to achieve. And do remember that ultimately, *we* - Mother Nature and Father Time -- *we* will have the final say.

We'll do our part if you will just do yours.

Be good to yourselves,

Mother Nature **Father Time**

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PATRIOTISM: IT'S MORE THAN SHOPPING OR WAVING A FLAG

It should come as no surprise that in America -- a country whose very economy and cultural identity are inextricably wed to consumption -- that most of our national holidays have devolved into little more than days off filled with special sales and deep discounts. And what



is even more disconcerting is the trivialization of nearly all of this nation's most revered icons: Washington, Lincoln, Uncle Sam, Christopher Columbus -- even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. -- have, over the past two generations, degenerated into professional pitchmen -- frenetic *farkoifers* (Yiddish for "hawkers" or "salesmen") of everything from pizzas and blue

jeans to mattresses and used cars. And when our leaders publicly aver that shopping is about the most patriotic thing an American can do -- George W. Bush certainly did -- one wonders whatever became of remembering, honoring and teaching the ideals, vision and heroic deeds of our national icons.

Which brings us to Veteran's Day.

Time was, each Veteran's Day would see hundreds of thousands of ex-soldiers, sailors and marines donning old ill-fitting uniforms and marching in downtown parades, past fellow citizens who would line the route, offering heartfelt thanks

for their selfless acts of bravery and patriotism. How many of us currently live in cities or towns that support such patriotic pageantry? Today, we gladly stage well-attended parades whenever our hometown team wins a Superbowl, World Series or NBA championship. But when it comes to veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq? We close our banks, libraries and public schools and hit the mall for some good old-fashion purchasing. Where once Veteran's Day meant the waving of flags, today it is far more often the swiping of plastic.

While shopping, consuming and the swiping of plastic are undoubtedly good for the national economy -- and ultimately the national jobs picture -- they are no substitute for good old fashioned hand-over-the-heart, tear-in-the-eye patriotism. Simply stated, patriotism is far more than shopping . . . or waving rhetorical flags as so many of our politicians like to do when the camera lights are on. Patriotism, it seems to me is the daily devotion and dedication to the ideals which made this country unique in all the annals of history; ideals of inclusion and communal action, of justice, mercy and an insatiable thirst for the truth; of daring ourselves to turn far-fetched dreams into stunning reality.

And this, mind you, is coming from a dyed-in-the-wool 1960s anti-war, anti-draft protester . . . one whom many of his most conservative readers firmly believe is *still* some sort of irrepressible "Commie stooge." Sorry to deflate your flag-waving balloon, but I, like you, am a patriot . . . in both heart and deed.



As a practicing rabbi for more than 30 years, I have performed somewhere in the neighborhood of 2,500 funerals. Of these, likely 500 involved a veteran of World War II. Over the years, I have heard literally hundreds of veterans recount literally thousands of stories about what they went through during that battle to save humanity from history's most diabolic evil. Frequently, I come away marveling at the strength, the resourcefulness and resilience of the human spirit. I am always amazed at just how terribly young these men -- and occasionally women -- were when they were out saving the world from Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo. Whenever I perform the funeral of a World War II veteran -- whenever I look at the flag-draped coffin and tell the stories I have been given the honor to relate, I find myself standing in awe . . . and frequently conclude my remarks by urging those sitting in the pews to ". . . *never pass up the opportunity to say 'Thank*

You' to an aged veteran . . . never forget, that if it were not for young men like Iro (or Ben, Harvey, Henry, Ernie or millions of others) we likely would not be here today. Never forget that humanity's greatest battle for freedom was won by children and the youngest of adults. NEVER forget to say 'Thank you . . .'"

Which brings me to George Katzman -- one of those for whom mere thanks are just not enough.

To those who know and interact with him today, George Katzman is a spry, articulate, intellectually youthful gentleman of -- I believe -- 92 years. Many at Florida International University know him as the much-beloved, decades-long adjunct professor of "Great Decisions" -- the annual course sponsored by the [Foreign Policy Association](#). (I am honored to be the young fellow who took over the course from him about 5 or 6 years ago.) "The Professor" still wears his World War II dog tags and still speaks about his grueling experiences in Europe; of storming Normandy Beach; of fighting his way across France; of being one of the soldiers who -- literally -- [shot the lock off the gates of Dachau](#) and liberated the



30,000 prisoners there. When he shares these haunting recollections, it involves neither a whit of braggadocio nor a hint of self-aggrandizement; rather, it is his intention to teach. For Professor Katzman -- George -- like the steadily dwindling number of his comrades-in-arms who still walk this planet -- does not consider himself a heroic warrior; rather, he is a thorough-going man of peace -- a man who,

in his own words, " . . . simply did a job that had to be done."

And this, dear reader, is the very definition of a patriot.

On this Veteran's Day, in addition to acknowledging the selfless bravery of -- and offering humble words of thanks to -- Professor Katzman and all his comrades-in-arms, I would like to urge our newly reelected president to create new pathways to patriotism -- pathways which have nothing to do with pizza, plastic or p.r. huckstering. I would urge this nation to institute a program of national service whereby ever able-bodied 18-year old would spend two years in service to the country. It could be defending America through service in the military, bolstering national security through the rebuilding of roads, bridges, dams and levees, or becoming community organizers -- just like our 44th president. To my way of thinking, this could be a win-win-win situation.

It would help to rebuild our dangerously eroding infrastructure;

It would add seriousness-of-purpose to an entire generation of young Americans;

It would bring people from our diverse ethnicities, geographic regions, religions and socio-economic groupings together in common cause, thereby permitting them to meet, work -- and in some cases live with -- people who they would otherwise never have any contact with. (Do remember that for many Americans of an earlier time, it was the universal *military* draft which, in so many cases, first introduced Southern "crackers" to New England "blue-bloods," the children of urban immigrants to the children of 4th and 5th generation farmers, Jehovah's Witnesses to Jews, etc.)

There are undoubtedly those who will see this as a proposal in which collectivism trumps individuality and liberty is sacrificed on the altar of the common weal. Guess again: this is the very living, breathing definition of patriotism; putting the ideals, vision and energy of this nation's most revered icons -- some universally famous, some understandably anonymous -- to work for the betterment of all.

Yes indeed, patriotism is far, far more than shopping or waving a flag.

Thank you Professor Katzman: you are a true patriot: a fierce, selfless warrior who is also a man of utter peace.

We salute you . . .

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WARREN RUDMAN: BLUNT, EGOTISTICAL, UNFLAPPABLE AND PUGNACIOUS

(Word has just come in that former New Hampshire Senator Warren Rudman passed away. In many ways, he was the least typical Washington "insider" I ever met; plain-spoken, independent and guided by what always struck me as an unerring moral compass. What follows is adapted from my pages 350-355 of my 2011 book The Jews of Capitol Hill.)

Warren Rudman entered the United States Senate a few weeks before fellow Republican Ronald Reagan was to be sworn in as America's fortieth President. Rudman served two six-year terms and could easily have won reelection in 1992. Instead, he decided to call it quits, departing the Senate just as George H.W. Bush



was about to leave the White House. During those twelve years of Republican rule, Rudman could be found at the epicenter of most of that era's most dramatic, divisive, and contentious issues – and was often at odds with the administration.

During his first term in the Senate, the New Hampshire Republican successfully took on the powerful American Medical Association, “co-fathered” the much maligned Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction act [which he himself called “A bad idea whose time has come”], and co-chaired the Senate's investigation of the messy “Iran-Contra” scandal. [N.B.: *This political scandal, which came to light in*

1987, was the result of earlier events during the Reagan Administration in which members of the executive branch sold weapons to Iran, and then illegally used the proceeds to continue funding the Sandinista rebels – “Contras” – in Nicaragua. Much of the documentation regarding the scandal was found to have been destroyed or withheld by the administration. President Reagan, who initially denied on national television that the alleged activities never occurred, eventually took full responsibility, admitting that “What began as a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated, in its implementation, into trading arms for hostages.”]

During his second term, Rudman played a pivotal role in the Ethics Committee investigation of the so-called “Keating Five,” in which the Senate had to go through the delicate procedure of policing its own. [N.B.: *This financial scandal involved five United States Senators – Alan Cranston, Dennis DeConcini, John Glenn, Donald Riegel and John McCain – who were accused of improperly aiding Charles B. Keating, chair of the failed Lincoln Savings and Loan Association, which was target of a federal investigation. Of the five accused senators, only Glenn and McCain were subsequently reelected.*]

Throughout these two highly charged, widely publicized episodes, Rudman retained the respect of both his Senate colleagues and the voters of New Hampshire. During his twelve-year Senate career, Warren Rudman maintained a reputation for being blunt, egotistical, independent, unflappable and pugnacious.

And despite being one of his party's acknowledged “stars” – columnist Marianne Means called him the “unexpected star of that huge GOP freshman class swept into office with President Reagan” – Warren Rudman never truly became a creature of Washington society. As he once explained, “To go to a White House dinner and to sit next to someone who I don't know and who is there because they are a friend of Mrs. Bush, or a famous movie star or someone who gave eight trillion dollars to the Republican Party is not my idea of fun.”

As a politician, Warren Rudman was always difficult to pigeonhole. A fiscal conservative and defense hawk like most of his Republican colleagues, Rudman was nonetheless far more progressive than his fellows on social issues. He was both pro-choice and pro-environment; one of Capitol Hill's staunchest defenders of the embattled Legal Services Administration; and a caustic critic of the then-emerging Christian Right. Once, when a reporter asked his views on the Christian Right's social agenda, he responded: “Do you have fifteen seconds? That's all it will take. I'm deeply committed to the right to choose, to the separation of church and state and to personal liberty. The conservative social agenda threatens them all.”

Not surprisingly, Rudman saw great consistency in this seeming political mélange: “The liberals consider me a conservative, and the conservatives consider me a liberal. I consider myself a moderate.” Summing up his notion of conservatism, Rudman wrote: “. . . providing legal services to the poor [is] profoundly conservative Government should not intrude in anything as personal as the decision to have a child, it should not be championing prayer or religion, and family values should come from families and religious institutions, not from politically inspired, Washington-based moralists.”

Rudman was not the original family name. Like countless immigrants who came to America in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, Abraham Rudman, the future Senator's grandfather, received his surname at Ellis Island. As his grandson explained, “We never knew what it had been before that. He [Abraham] was not a man to look back.” Like millions of other Jewish immigrants, Abraham Rudman, a native of Odessa, settled on New York's Lower East Side. Unimpressed with New York's endless “sidewalks and tenements,” Abe asked a friend where he could find mountains, lakes, and trees. The friend suggested that he should get on a Boston-bound train and take it all the way to the end of the line – to Maine. Taking the long-forgotten friend's advice, Rudman ventured up to the Pinetree State, where he wound up living with a Jewish family named Wolman on a farm just north of Bangor. Shortly after his arrival at the Wolman's farm, Abe sent to Odessa for his distant cousin Dora, who soon became his wife. Before long, Mrs. Rudman was speaking English and reading classical literature. Eventually, both Abe and Dora “spoke English like true Down-Easters.”

After a time, the Rudmans purchased a hand-operated bottling machine and started bottling ginger ale in their home. Over time they secured the franchise to bottle Moxie – one of the nation's first mass-produced soft drinks – and moved their expanding enterprise – “The Rudman Bottling Company”] – first to Portland, and then to Boston.

Abe and Dora Rudman had five remarkable children. In his autobiography, *Combat*, Senator Rudman discussed his aunts and uncles: “Of Abe and Dora's five children, the oldest, my uncle Ben, went to the University of Maine and Tufts Medical School. The second, Morris, graduated from Harvard and Harvard Law. My uncle Sid went to Harvard. My aunt Rita went to Wellesley. My father [Edward, born in 1897] went to work.” By the time Edward Rudman joined his father's business, Abe's interests had expanded into “restaurants and similar ventures.”

Striking out on his own, Edward Rudman ventured back up to Portland, where he began building houses and developing a passion for antiques. In the mid-

1920s, Edward Rudman started a small company that made reproductions of antique furniture; he called it "Old Colony Furniture." When his younger brother Sid graduated from Harvard in 1928, Ed made him his partner. Together, they ran Old Colony for the next forty years. In 1929, Edward Rudman married Theresa [Tess] Levenson from the Bronx. On May 18, 1930, their first child, Warren Bruce Rudman, was born in Boston. He was quickly followed by daughters Carol and Jean.

It is quite likely that Warren Rudman's sense of honesty and integrity came from his father. In the mid-1930s, the elder Rudman decided to move Old Colony from Boston up to Nashua, New Hampshire. Borrowing \$100,000 from a "Yankee banker" named George Thurber, Rudman purchased an old sawmill near the Nashua River and started converting it into a factory. Two weeks before the factory was scheduled to begin operations, New Hampshire was hit with the worst flood in its history; Edward Rudman went bankrupt. He went back to George Thurber. As Warren Rudman writes, "[He] said he was wiped out but if the banker would lend him more money, he'd rebuild and pay back every dime. Thurber approved the loan, and when that wasn't enough, added his own personal loan. In time father paid him off, and Old Colony went on to achieve an international reputation for quality."

Old Colony remained in business until 1964. One of Edward Rudman's grandsons, Alan Dale, began collecting his grandfather's reproductions in 1987. By 2000, he was selling "custom mahogany" by Old Colony and "a handful of other worthy makers who upheld similarly high standards." In 2008, Dale's online business, *CustomMahogany.com*, is located in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Laytonsville, Maryland.

Warren Rudman and his sisters grew up in Nashua, where he still resides. Growing up in relative affluence, Warren became "a bit of a hell-raiser, at least by [my] father's standards." His interests tended more toward fishing and baseball than toward school. He was also "handy with [my] fists . . . thanks to schoolyard encounters with anti-Semitism." [New Hampshire was the last of the 13 colonies to grant political equality to Jews.] Sensing that his son needed to learn discipline, Edward sent him off to Valley Forge Military School in Wayne, Pennsylvania. The younger Rudman excelled at Valley Forge, becoming both a champion debater and a fine boxer.

In 1948, Warren Rudman entered Syracuse University "where I continued to box, race stock cars on weekends, served in the ROTC, and became engaged to a tall, brilliant young woman named Shirley Wahl, whom I met on the debate team." Warren married Shirley shortly after his graduation in 1952, and then shipped out for Korea as a second lieutenant in the United States Army.

Rudman graduated “with a wad of transcripts and a blank piece of paper.” Syracuse refused to issue his diploma until he paid \$18 for a school yearbook. Rudman refused to pay, claiming that the school catalogue had listed no such requirement. Shortly before leaving for Korea, Rudman wrote his *alma mater* requesting his diploma. Syracuse again refused until he paid the \$18.

Rudman spent the next two years in the infantry, serving in Korea as a member of the third platoon of K Company, Third Battalion, 38th Regiment of the Second Division. While there he saw action in three of that conflict’s bloodiest battles: the Kumsong salient, Heartbreak Ridge, and Bloody Ridge.

Mustered out a captain in 1954 with the Bronze Star, three Battle Stars, and a Presidential Citation, Rudman once again petitioned Syracuse for his diploma; once again they demanded he pay the \$18. Twenty-six years later, upon his election to the United States Senate, Rudman received a letter from Syracuse explaining that “there had obviously been a mix-up,” and that the diploma was in the mail. Senator Rudman not only refused to accept it; he repeatedly turned down their later offer of an honorary degree. As Rudman explained, “[Syracuse] wouldn't give me the one I earned. I certainly don't want the one I didn't earn.”

Following his return from the war, Rudman went to work for Old Colony. In 1956 he entered the night law school at Boston College, making the 90-mile round trip three or four days a week after a full day's work. Graduating in 1960, Rudman continued working for his father while building up a legal practice with Morris Stein, an old family friend. It was only when his father and uncle sold Old Colony in 1964 that Warren Rudman [by then thirty-four and the father of three children – Laura, Alan, and Deborah] began practicing law full-time. Over the next several years, he built up a lucrative practice, working with the Nashua firm of Stein, Rudman and Gormley. During these years, Warren and Shirley Rudman also learned to fly – a passion that has remained a constant in the Senator's life.

In 1967, Walter Peterson Jr. [1922-], the then-Republican Speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives, asked Rudman, whom he had known since childhood, to be his finance chairman in the upcoming gubernatorial campaign. With Rudman’s help, Peterson defeated Meldrim Thompson [1912-2001], Chair of the Orford [Grafton County] School Board. Once elected, Governor Peterson appointed Rudman his chief of staff. In 1970, Peterson named Rudman state attorney general. Rudman quickly went about the task of assembling what he deemed “a first-rate staff.” The new attorney general handpicked a young Harvard Law graduate to be his assistant. His name was David Souter who, through Rudman's tireless efforts, would one day sit on the United States Supreme Court.

In his six years as attorney general [1970-76], Warren Rudman “created a consumer protection division, fought successfully against the legalization of gambling. . .[and] joined Francis X. Bellotti, the attorney general of Massachusetts, in filing suit in federal district court seeking to postpone construction of the Seabrook nuclear power plant.” In 1975, Rudman was elected president of the National Association of Attorneys General.

As an ex-officio member of the New Hampshire Ballot Law Commission, Rudman became embroiled in a controversy involving the 1974 reelection of United States Senator John A. Durkin. Rudman and his commission colleagues declared Republican Congressman Louis C. Wyman [1917-2002] the winner by just two votes. Wyman served in the upper chamber for precisely four days before the Senate declared the seat vacant. Durkin [1936-], a Democrat, then secured the right to a new election, which he won. When President Gerald Ford nominated Rudman to chair the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1976, Durkin used his influence to delay confirmation. Rudman eventually withdrew his name for consideration. It looked as if Durkin had successfully exacted his revenge; however, if he had permitted Rudman's confirmation, it is unlikely that Rudman would ever have become a United States Senator.

In 1980, after practicing law for four years with the Manchester firm of Phinney, Bass and Green, Warren B. Rudman entered an eleven-candidate Republican primary race for the United States Senate. Topping the field with 20%, Rudman named the second-place finisher, John Sununu [1939-], his campaign manager. Greatly aided by Ronald Reagan's sweeping victory over President Jimmy Carter, Rudman defeated his old nemesis Durkin 52%-48%, thereby becoming the first Jew ever elected to Congress from New Hampshire. [In 2006, *Paul Hodes* became the second New Hampshire Jew elected to Congress. After two terms, he gave up his seat in order to run for the United States Senate; he was defeated by New Hampshire's Republican Attorney General, Kelly Ayotte.]

Entering the Senate as a member of the majority, Senator Rudman quickly went to work learning the ropes. His first successful piece of legislation, co-authored with Connecticut Senator Lowell Weicker, Jr., was passed less than six months from the day he first took the oath of office. Called, the “Small Business Innovation Research Act of 1981” – which the editorial writers on the *Washington Star* termed “one of the most ingenious acts of the 97th Congress” – this “invention” granted research and development firms as much as \$400 million a year without adding a cent to the federal budget. The bill simply required that federal agencies with an R & D budget in excess of \$100 million set aside 1 percent for small business. In arguing for the bill's enactment, Rudman noted that small businesses produced up to twenty-four times more innovation per R &

Dollar than larger ones. Armed with a welter of facts and data, Rudman was able to attract no fewer than seventy-nine co-sponsors for his bill, running the political gamut from Senator Edward Kennedy on the left to Senator Jesse Helms on the right.

In 1982, Senator Rudman went to war against the American Medical Association. The issue raising Rudman's dander was a measure that would effectively wipe out the Federal Trade Commission's power to pursue violations of antitrust and consumer protection laws by health professionals. As one of the few members of Congress [and the only Senator] who refused financial support from political action committees [PACs], Rudman was in a unique position. He successfully inserted less-sweeping language into the proposed bill, thereby preserving the FTC's ability to go after doctors when they were in violation of antitrust standards.

Speaking on the Senate floor, Rudman sarcastically noted, "For the first time in 20 years, doctors are making house calls. They made house calls in the Dirksen Building, [and] in the Russell Building I do not get excited by my own rhetoric. I get excited when I see someone attempting to perform a frontal lobotomy on the free-enterprise system, which is precisely what is going on here."

Rudman's ameliorative language was passed by a vote of 59-37. Suddenly the junior Senator from New Hampshire was big news.

A vocal hawk on defense matters, Rudman nonetheless stunned the Pentagon by convincing the Senate to kill off the \$1.5 billion VIPER – a shoulder-fired antitank weapon – which he proved was both ineffective and cost-prohibitive. Moreover, Rudman got Congress to agree to a highly unusual step: forcing the military to competitively test various weapons systems, including those made by foreign manufacturers. This took a great degree of political courage, considering that the technical components for the VIPER were manufactured in Nashua, Rudman's hometown. Rudman also got the Senate to scrap the ill-fated "Sergeant York" gun, which he said should have been called the "Sergeant Bilko." For his efforts, Rudman won the respect of his Senate colleagues – and the enmity of the military brass.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected on a platform which promised to balance the budget, dramatically increase military spending, and lower taxes. The theory behind the platform was given the name "supply-side economics." The Fourth Estate called it "Reaganomics." George Bush called it "voodoo economics." Rudman, charmed by Reagan's ability to state his case, voted in favor of the president's 1981 budget proposal. Although he prayed that all the figures were

correct and that Reaganomics would work, Rudman feared that it was all an illusion.

To his regret, Rudman's fears about increasing spending while lowering taxes were by no means chimerical; far from reducing the deficit, Reagan's plan doubled it within five years. Rudman was outraged. As the Senator told his colleagues, "After five years under a Republican president and a Republican Senate, we managed to double the national debt. I mean, who's kidding who?" In his memoirs, Rudman blamed both Budget Director David Stockman for "budgetary deception and political cynicism that numbs the mind," and the president himself for "inhabit[ing] his own reality." Something radical had to be done. America was fast becoming the world's leading debtor nation.

In 1985, Rudman came to national prominence when he, Texas Senator Phil Gramm [1942-], and South Carolina's Ernest "Fritz" Hollings [1922-] introduced the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act. Called everything from "the political version of hemlock" to "just about the dumbest piece of legislation I have seen," the measure mandated a balanced budget by 1991. It included a "doomsday device" which mandated automatic across-the-board spending cuts if needed to meet deficit-reduction goals. Gramm and Rudman made an effective team: "While Gramm provided much of the oratorical firepower behind the proposal, the more established Rudman gave it an aura of respectability."

Rudman truly believed that the bill's doomsday machinery would never have to be used. As he wrote in *Combat*, "We saw the legislation as a forcing mechanism. We thought the threat of automatic cuts would force Congress and the White House to compromise on a responsible budget." Automatic cuts would be, among other things, a shameful admission of political incompetence. The bill mandated that the Government Accounting Office, a creature of the executive branch of government, act as referee.

Debate over the proposal was intense. At one point a Pentagon official went so far as to charge that Gramm-Rudman delivered "a message of comfort to the Soviet Union." Rudman was apoplectic: "The Russians ought to be dancing in the street when they see this country spending itself into bankruptcy," he responded. "They can defeat us without firing a shot."

Gramm-Rudman passed both houses of Congress, and was signed into law by President Reagan on December 18, 1985. Rudman came away from the signing ceremony with the sinking feeling that Reagan was far more enamored of tax cuts than balanced budgets.

On February 7, 1986, a federal court found Gramm-Rudman unconstitutional. The court held that it violated the separation of powers doctrine by “investing the power to determine how the automatic spending cuts were to be carried out with the comptroller general, who is appointed by the president but who can be fired by Congress.” Later that year, the Supreme Court, in a seven-to-two vote, upheld the lower court's decision.

Senators Gramm and Rudman then drafted what was called “Gramm-Rudman II.” In this version, the Government Accounting Office [GAO] would still decide whether automatic cuts were called for, but its recommendations would go to the House and Senate Budget Committees. In turn, these committees would then initiate legislation ordering the President to begin the process of sequestration. The problem with Gramm-Rudman II was obvious: the automatic cuts were no longer automatic. “Our backup plan returned the hard budget decisions to the same Congress that had failed to make them before.”

In summing up the battle over the deficit, Rudman wrote, “Gramm-Rudman was defeated by politics as usual. The way it was undermined stands today as a textbook example of how politicians trick the American people into thinking they're acting on a problem when in fact they're ducking it.”

Prior to becoming involved with the deficit fight, Warren Rudman gave serious consideration to ending his Senate career after one six-year term. With the passage of Gramm-Rudman, he decided to run again, easily defeating former one-term Massachusetts Governor Endicott Peabody [1920-1997], whom the Democrats had enlisted at the last minute just to have someone – anyone – on the ballot.

In his second term, Rudman became a member of the minority. As ranking Republican of the Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Rudman co-chaired – along with Hawaii's Senator Daniel Inouye – the Iran-Contra hearings. These nationally televised hearings investigated the Reagan administration's sale of arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages and its diversion of some of the profits to the Nicaraguan Contras.

What bothered Rudman the most about Iran-Contra was “the implications this had to our presidency and our Constitution: that someone can cook up an intelligence scheme, feed it to the president, brief him incorrectly, then lie to the secretary of state and the attorney general, and then try to cover up what they did.” Rudman's posture lent a much-needed bipartisan tone to the hearings. Although he believed in his heart of hearts that Reagan was not legally culpable,

he wrote that “clearly it was the president who had created the climate in which Iran-Contra could happen.”

The question on everyone's mind was whether or not President Reagan had had full knowledge – or worse, given consent – to the highly complex plan. Although Rudman had himself been a supporter of the Contras, he nonetheless became the most outspoken Republican critic of the administration's handling of the affair. When Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North [resplendent in Marine uniform and full complement of medals] testified before the committee, Rudman sternly criticized him, saying, “The American people have the constitutional right to be wrong.”

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Rudman was roundly criticized by his state's largest newspaper, the *Manchester Union Leader*, for his role in the hearings. The pugnacious Rudman fired back, “I want someone from the Right politically to stand up and say, ‘I think it was good to sell arms to the Iranians.’ Let them stand up and say that. If they don't believe it, they should keep their mouths shut.” The *Union Leader's* condemnation notwithstanding, Rudman's mail proved that the overwhelming majority supported his tough stance.

Toward the end of his second term, Rudman, as ranking Republican on the Select Committee on Ethics, co-chaired hearings on the so-called Keating Five. As noted above, the hearings dealt with five Senators [Republican McCain of Arizona and Democrats Cranston of California, Glenn of Ohio, DeConcini of Arizona, and Riegel of Michigan] charged with conflict of interest stemming from their dealings with failed savings and loan executive Charles Keating.

Standing in judgment over one's colleagues is one of the least desirable jobs in Washington – one which Rudman looked upon with great reservations. Nonetheless, he urged that the panel not “rush to judgment.” Senators McCain and Glenn were quickly cleared of all charges. DeConcini and Riegel received slaps on the wrist and then retired from the Senate. Cranston, who already had announced his retirement and was suffering from prostate cancer, was given the heaviest reprimand.

Warren Rudman was also instrumental in helping to facilitate the confirmation of his old friend David Souter for a seat on the United States Supreme Court. Souter [1939-], "that quintessential, taciturn New Hampshire Yankee," was characterized by the press as an "oddball," a "hermit," and "dangerously out of touch with the lives of ordinary people." It was even hinted that Souter, a lifelong bachelor, was gay. Rudman personally escorted Souter from Senate office to Senate office, and then helped prepare his friend for the confirmation hearings. What at first looked like a feeding frenzy turned out to be a facile procedure; Souter was confirmed by a vote of 90 to 9.

Warren Rudman left the Senate after two terms. Desirous of returning to the practice of law where he could once again make a good living, Rudman had become disenchanted with the direction of the "new" Republican Party. "I could see the Republican Party gradually being taken over by 'movement' conservatives and self-commissioned Christian soldiers whose social agenda I found repugnant The spirit of civility and compromise was drying up."

As a lame duck Senator, Rudman was supposed to be a delegate to the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston. Reviewing the convention's agenda - "Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan and all the rest" - Rudman decided instead to go on a fact-finding mission to Croatia. "I thought that with my views I might be safer in Zagreb than in Houston."

Upon leaving the Senate, Warren Rudman returned to the practice of law with the Washington office of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, and, in tandem with former Massachusetts Senator Paul Tsongas [1941-1997] and former Commerce Secretary Pete Peterson [1926-], founded the Concord Coalition. The Coalition "works for a balanced budget by organizing informed citizens to bring grassroots pressure on political leaders." Rudman also served as Chairman of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board [1997-2001], and sits on the boards of such corporations as Raytheon, Allied Waste Industries, and Boston Scientific. In both 2000 and 2008, Rudman has been one of presidential candidate John McCain's most prominent advisors.

In the last few years of his life Rudman divided his time between Washington and Hollis, New Hampshire, a suburb of both Nashua and Boston. In February 2004, son Alan was found dead in his home in Bridgton, Maine. The younger Rudman, 47 at the time of his death, had played varsity football at Dartmouth College, from which he graduated in 1979. Four years later he received his *juris doctor* from Boston College. Daughter Laura [Robie] lives in Amherst, Massachusetts; her sister Debra [Gilmore] resides in Wayland, Massachusetts.

Summing up his political career, Rudman wrote, "I was a senator first, serving the country's interests as I saw it, and Jewish second. The irony was that most people outside Washington didn't know I was Jewish."

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

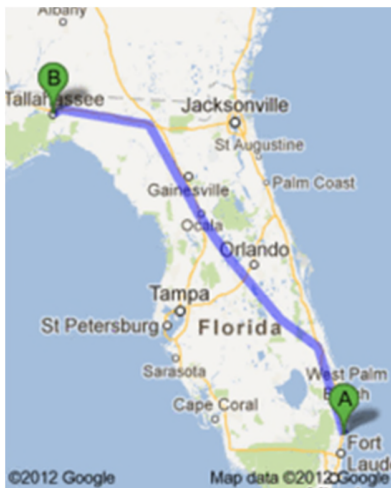
(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



November 25, 2012

SHARIA LAW -- BLUEGRASS STYLE

In the main, South Florida -- with the exception of the defeated and unlamented Rep. Alan West -- is a reasonably sane chunk of political real



estate. We can be counted on to provide reliable majorities for progressive Democrats and, for the most part, to shun extremists from either side of the aisle. While geographically, the distance between Boca Raton to the state capital, Tallahassee, is just a hair under 450 miles, politically, it is measured in decades. Here in Broward and Palm Beach we tend to be insulated -- if not isolated -- from much of the lunacy which affects our beloved Sunshine State -- and a goodly chunk of the nation as well.

As a result of our relative political equanimity, we tend to get blown away by some of the more incredulously "Talibanistic" things various legislators propose and occasionally even enact. Less than 3 weeks ago, Florida voters were faced with no fewer than 11 proposed hard-right amendments to the state constitution. These proposed amendments -- 8 of which the voters

narrowly rejected -- would have done everything from allowing more state funding of religious schools and severely restricting abortion rights, to banning the required purchase of health insurance and the ouster of three Democrat-appointed Supreme Court justices. Once voters began reading between the lines of these legislatively-drawn amendments, our isolation and insulation began to erode. Soon, revulsion set in. And were it not for the fact that in order to be passed a constitutional amendment requires 60% of the vote, we could have been saddled with some pretty outlandish new laws.

One thing this past election cycle pointed out -- in enormous 36-point font - - is that there are some really crazy people out there -- and not just in Florida. We learned that there are people who have no problem giving voice to such inanities as:

- "Rape is God's will."
- "Legitimate rape does not lead to pregnancy."
- "Osama bin Laden is alive and well."
- "Hurricane Sandy proves that there is no such thing as global warming."
- "If he is reelected, President Obama will confiscate all guns," and
- "If he is elected, Alan Grayson will remove Bibles from people's homes."

Strikingly, few responsible Republican leaders -- including its titular head, Mitt Romney, chose to distance themselves from these remarks. They likely felt that taking people like Todd Aiken, Richard Mourdock, Allen West or Todd Long to task would alienate voters on the right; something they were loathe to do. Well, it gives me endless joy to report that all those giving voice to these inane fables were defeated, and now must go out and find jobs in the real world. There *is* hope for the future.

At the same time, there are still more crazy people doing crazy things than one might care to imagine.

As of today, 49 out of 50 states (Vermont being the lone exception) have submitted petitions to WhiteHouse.gov, calling on the president to allow states to secede from the United States, peacefully. Texas, which has attracted more than 116,000 signatures and is currently selling "SECEDE!" bumper stickers (one for \$2.00/three for \$5.00) is leading the charge. Interestingly, Texas is one of seven states (Alaska, Florida, Nevada, South Dakota, Washington and Wyoming being the others) without a state income tax. Let 'em secede; the first thing they'll have to do is institute a tax, which won't win them too many fiscal plaudits . . .

In addition to the secession nonsense, there is an unbelievable law on the books in Kentucky; one which is about as "Talibanistic" as you can get. Enacted in 2006, this homeland security law actually requires the state's citizens to acknowledge the security provided by God Almighty -- or risk 12 months in prison.

The law, which is the brainchild of 41st District Representative Tom Riner, states,

"The safety and security of the Commonwealth cannot be achieved apart from reliance upon Almighty God as set forth in the public speeches and proclamations of American Presidents, including Abraham Lincoln's historic March 30, 1863, presidential proclamation urging Americans to pray and fast during one of the most dangerous hours in American history, and the text of President John F. Kennedy's November 22, 1963, national security speech which concluded: "For as was written long ago: 'Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.'"

The law requires that plaques celebrating the power of the Almighty God be installed outside the state Homeland Security building-and carries a criminal penalty of up to 12 months in jail if one fails to comply. The plaque's inscription begins with the assertion, *"The safety and security of the Commonwealth cannot be achieved apart from reliance upon Almighty God."* Unbelievably, the Kentucky Supreme Court has refused to review its constitutionality, despite its clear and obvious violation of the First Amendment's separation of church and state.

Rep. Riner, who is an ordained Baptist minister, told Fox News that "The safety and security of the state cannot be achieved apart from recognizing our dependence upon God."

Also in 2006, Riner, who is a Democrat, had "In God We Trust" written in large letters above the daises of his state's House and Senate chambers. He was also instrumental in passing a measure to erect a monument with the Ten Commandments in front of the State Capitol. And he sponsored the legislation that permitted the Ten Commandments to be displayed in other public buildings, as long as they appeared with "other historical documents." Over the past several years, legal challenges to Riner-sponsored legislation have cost the state and various municipal agencies more than \$160,000 in legal fees; they still owe more than \$400,000 for a 2005 case ([*ACLU v McCreary County*](#)) in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Ten Commandments could not be displayed in public buildings.

From what I understand, the Taliban also demand that people believe in their God . . . or else. And while it is true that the punishment for not believing in God in the proper manner much less harsh in the Bluegrass State than in, say, Afghanistan (a year in prison versus stoning), it is nonetheless suffused with the same noxious fume of theocratic intolerance.

I for one find it incredible that at the same time in which state after state is seeking to follow Kentucky's example and legislate "proper religiosity," there are more than 33 bills in 20 state legislatures (including those of Kentucky and Florida) debarring state courts from using Sharia or international law in making its decisions . . . as if there were any such problem. To me, this is the living, breathing definition of inconsistency at best, damnable hypocrisy at worst.

What was that about secession . . .?

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



December 02, 2012

A TIME TO RUN AND A TIME TO STAND

[The Canterville Ghost](#), Oscar Wilde's earliest short story, tells the tale of an American family, the Otises, who purchase an old English country house -- Canterville Chase -- which they are told, is haunted . . . and indeed, it is. Nothing the ghost does scares *them*, though the family's twin boys, (known as



"Stars and Stripes") who enjoy heckling him, do manage to scare the *ghost* when they erect a fake apparition for him to find. In describing Mrs. Otis, Wilde, dipping his pen into the epigrammist's inkwell, writes,

"She had a magnificent constitution, and a really wonderful amount of animal spirits. Indeed, in many respects she was quite English, and was an excellent example of the fact that we have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language . . ."

Indeed, there *are* many differences in our shared language -- in matters of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary and idiomatic expression. A couple of examples:

- Words ending in *or* in American English end in *our* in the British version, such as color, colour, humor, humour, flavor, flavour etc.

- To a Brit, Saturday and Sunday are the *weekEND*, while to an American it is the *WEEKend*.
- When a Brit refers to someone as "mean," it connotes a person who is tightfisted, not generous; to an American, it connotes one who is angry or bad-tempered.
- In America one drives a truck; in England, it is a lorry.
- Where a Brit would speak of something occurring "*at* the weekend," an American would use the preposition "*on* . . ." And most pertinent to this week's essay,
- Where in America political candidates *run* for office, in the UK, they *stand*.

The difference between *running* and *standing* for office is much more than a peculiarity of grammar; it represents a world of difference in both campaigning and governance. When one "runs," he or she is never in the same place from one moment to the next; as such, one tends to be cagey, evasive, and sophistical. On the other hand, when one "stands," he or she is, relatively speaking, in the same spot or place today as yesterday and hopefully tomorrow; the tendency here is to be coherent, consistent, and comprehensible. At the same time, there is a huge difference in the length time one spends "running" as opposed to "standing." In America we have devolved to the point where the entire nation is in *perpetual campaign mode*. It is absolutely mind-boggling that less than a month after the conclusion of the 2012 presidential election -- which for some began nearly six years ago -- we are already speculating on -- and giving major air time to -- who the major party candidates will be in 2016. On the Republican side, Florida Senator Marco Rubio has already visited Iowa; Governors Jindal and Christie have taken pains to make themselves more politically attractive by distancing themselves from Mitt Romney; as for the Democrats, Secretary of State Clinton has already been anointed the Democrat to beat. In other words, we run so hard and for so long that we've forgotten the importance of standing -- of putting an end to campaign season and getting down to the nitty-gritty of governing.

In trying to make heads-or-tails of two issues currently capturing a great amount of media time -- the so-called "Fiscal Cliff" and the trials and tribulations of U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice -- it is good to keep in mind the *perpetua expeditionem modus* -- the "perpetual campaign mode" -- referenced above. *If* we were in the final days of an election cycle, perhaps we could understand why Democrats and Republicans are more concerned with who can score political points -- and who can receive political blame -- for either conquering or falling off that so-called "Fiscal Cliff." (I employ the adjective "so-called" because to me, it is far more of a declivity than a cliff; far more fodder for political posturing than the harbinger of a fiscal apocalypse.) But we are *not* in the waning days of a campaign cycle; we are supposed to be at the very beginning of a *governance* cycle; a time when the

sharp elbows are supposed to have been packed away. This is supposed to be the time when one camp recognizes the other camp's victory and mandate, thereby granting it its props -- its right to avow that the programs and positions it ran on should be the basis for policy.

But no; we are still running. President Obama puts an offer on the table; it includes \$1.6 trillion in tax hikes for the wealthy, about \$450 billion in cuts to Medicare and \$50 billion in stimulus spending. He knows full well that Boehner, Cantor, McConnell and the rest of the GOP leadership won't accept it; that's the way the game is played. What he *does* expect is for them to make a counter-proposal . . . which they have not. Both sides accuse the other of not being "serious," of playing politics with the nation's fiscal future. It seems that fixing the problem has become secondary to affixing blame for the fiasco which may well ensue. Instead of standing and governing, they are running and playing politics.

Then there is the issue of Ambassador Rice. Republican Senators McCain, Graham, Ayotte, Corker and Collins have all declared that in order to support Rice for Secretary of State (a post for which she has yet to be nominated) they will need more information about the terrorist attack on our consulate in Benghazi, Libya. They accuse her of "playing partisan politics" and "deliberately misleading" the American people during her appearances on Sunday morning talk shows as to what actually happened in Libya. The fact that she -- like every other cabinet-level spokesperson in American history -- was limited to using only that which had been declassified is well understood by those attacking her. But from their comments, you would think what Ambassador Rice has ventured into a place where no administration functionary has ever gone. Truth to tell, they had no problem when another cabinet-level woman named Rice (Condoleezza) mislead the House, Senate and American public about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. These senators also know full well that the many as yet unanswered questions the tragedy in Benghazi aren't susceptible to simple overnight answers. And yet, they continue to pillory Ambassador Rice; not because it is in the best interest of the country or our foreign policy, but strictly out of a sense of political gamesmanship. Some have even opined that they are doing everything in their power to make sure that Susan Rice won't be nominated for Secretary of State in the hopes that President Obama will turn to Massachusetts Senator John Kerry -- thereby opening up his seat and making it available for the return of Scott Brown. And of course, making President Obama and the Democrats look bad is at the top of the agenda. This is nothing more than creating issues for 2014 . . .

When oh when does the campaign end and the governing begin?

Towards the end of chapter V of *The Canterville Ghost*, the apparition tells young Miss Otis what, in its estimation, would be ideal:

To have no yesterday, and no to-morrow. To forget time, to forget life, to be at peace.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he tells her,

You can help me.

Back in the real world, what would be ideal is to let governance take precedence over politics. By standing -- not running -- for just a little while into the future, perhaps we can help one another . . . and the country we love.

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(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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EXIT STAGE RIGHT

Last week's essay, [*A Time to Run and a Time to Stand*](#), argued that one of the most nettlesome and systemic problems facing America is that our politicians are far more consumed with running for office than governing the nation. Proof of this political devolution abounds; from all the posturing on the "Fiscal Cliff" situation and the Michigan Legislature's move to enact "Right-to-Work" legislation, to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's breaking historic ground by actually [filibustering his own bill](#).

Is it any wonder that so many pundits and political observers aver that the 2012 election changed nothing -- that we are in store for "more of the same?"

I for one strongly disagree.

In doing a "post-game wrap-up" of the 2012 election, it seems clear -- at least to me -- that changes *are* visibly occurring, and most notably on the political right:

- Tea Party favorites Allen West (FL), Joe Walsh (IL), Frank Guinta (NH) Bobby Shilling (IL) and Todd Aiken (MO) are all out looking for new jobs.
- House Speaker John Boehner removed Tea Party favorites David Schweikert (R-AZ), Tim Huelskamp (R-KS), Walter Jones (NC) and Justin Amash (R-MI) from their plum committee assignments (Schweikert and Jones from Financial Services, Huelskamp and Amash from Budget).
- The future of [FreedomWorks](#) -- one of the largest and most influential Tea Party groups in the country, is uncertain now that its leader, former House Majority Leader Dick Armey has angrily departed his post.

- Fox News programming chief Bill Shine has "benched" conservative gasbags Carl Rove and Dick Morris. From now on Fox producers will first have to ask for approval before either can appear on camera.
- South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint, founder of the Senate Conservatives



Fund and easily one of the upper chambers most right-wing -- and apparently least liked -- members, announced that he was resigning his seat in order to take over as president of the [Heritage Foundation](#). (As an aside, just yesterday, DeMint's new employer claimed that once fully implemented, Obamacare will cause medical bills for our pets to go through the ceiling!)

Despite a plethora of public well-wishes and "atta-boys" from his about to become former senate colleagues, DeMint's departure is hardly being mourned on the Hill. ("He's the biggest douchebag in Washington," is how one congressional aide

explained it to the *Rolling Stone's* Matt Taibbi, "and this is the douchebag capital of the world.") Never what one would term an "active legislator," DeMint spent the lion's share of his time on Capitol Hill trying to elect like-minded hard-right Republicans to the upper chamber. His "batting average" was less than .300. Many of his colleagues hold him responsible for costing them control of the senate; over the past two election cycles DeMint threw his support and campaign dollars behind such extreme candidates as Delaware's Christine "I dabbled in witchcraft" O'Donnell, Nevada's Sharon "The 9/11 Hijackers came in through Canada" Angle, Missouri's Todd "Legitimate rape victims rarely get pregnant" Aiken and Indiana's Richard "A pregnancy stemming from rape is God's will" Mourdock. DeMint himself has evinced some pretty unique beliefs such as "An unmarried woman who is having sex with her boyfriend shouldn't be in the classroom," and "The bigger government gets, the smaller God gets." Despite his many extreme positions and even more extreme statements, DeMint occupied one of the safest seats in the United States Senate, which says a lot about South Carolina. Seems to me that the while the Palmetto State is probably too small to be an independent country, it is undoubtedly too large to be a mental institution . . .

In accepting the Heritage Foundation presidency, DeMint signals that if the Tea Party is going to have any success in shaping America's future, it will have to come from outside the two-party system. This past election is causing the Republican establishment to rethink and reassess what it's going to take to once again be competitive on the national level. From various actions taken over the past couple of weeks, it seems obvious that the GOP leadership has concluded that Tea Party extremism is not the way to go; that while bowing and scraping to

their party's reactionary wing may win them eternal life, it won't win back the White House or the Senate.

Unless and until the GOP establishment can groom new, less reactionary leadership, it will be a party with neither a compass nor a rudder. And while Democrats may crow with delight at this turn of events -- the implosion of the "loyal opposition" -- some second thoughts are in order. Ours is meant to be a two-party system. Much of our progress as a nation is the product of two parties reaching compromises -- of creating programs and policies which both sides can accept even when not totally in love. Simply stated, one cannot bargain or compromise with oneself; one needs opposition.

Even as Senator DeMint is exiting stage right -- and getting a 500% salary bump in the process -- former Florida Governor Charlie Crist is entering stage left. Crist, who was elected governor in 2006 as a Republican, ran unsuccessfully for the senate in 2010 as an independent, has become a Democrat in the last days of 2012. Crist signed the papers changing his party affiliation during a Christmas reception at the White House. President Obama -- for whom Governor Crist campaigned tirelessly -- greeted the news with a fist bump.



Crist stated that his reasons for switching parties included the Republican's move to the far right on a host of issues. Sensing that the change signals Crist's desire to run against current Florida Governor Jim Scott in 2014 -- a reasonable assumption to be sure -- Republicans are already mounting a campaign of vilification against the nation's newest high-profile Democrat. This tactic might actually backfire; it shows that state Republicans are concerned about what a Crist candidacy might mean for Scott's reelection chances. And while many Democrats are wary of Crist's change of party -- remembering that not too long ago he was a fairly conservative Republican -- and see him as a political opportunist, he may well be the party's best chance for defeating the widely unpopular Scott.

(On a personal note, I first met Charlie Crist about a decade ago when he was still a state senator. I was on the senate floor, having been invited to give the day's opening invocation. Following the prayer, Senator Crist came up, thanked me, asked for my card, and said he hoped we would meet again. Two days later I received a very nice handwritten note from him. I remember thinking "I may not agree with the man, but he certainly knows how to build bridges.")

I wish both Senator DeMint and Governor Crist well in their new endeavors. May the former enjoy becoming a millionaire and stay as far away from electoral politics as is humanly possible. And may the latter be a happy productive Democrat for years to come.

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IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

The horrific mass-murder of twenty little boys and girls and six adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut has once again thrown the nation -- if not much of the planet -- into a state of agonized disbelief. Once



again, we are forced to confront an act of unrelenting evil; a moral transgression which shocks us into demanding answers for questions we cannot even properly frame. Pundits and preachers, politicians and psychologists are all attempting to explain the inexplicable; to try

and make a germ of sense out of the grossly senseless. We are like onlookers creeping past a multi-car pileup; despite being shocked, dazed and disgusted, we cannot divert our eyes; we are drawn to the carnage as moths to a lethal lamp.

Once again, we find ourselves in the midst of a frenzied, multi-faceted deliberation. We want to know everything about the young man who, armed with his mother's weapons, was responsible for all the death -- as if understanding what made him tick will prevent a future act of carnage. Sorry to say, but it won't. Forensic psychologists, like seismologists -- the folks who study earthquakes -- cannot predict what will be; they can only seek to analyze or explain what has already occurred. Inevitably, a major part of the deliberation is political; what restrictions or safeguards can the system impose so as to keep guns out of the hands of crazy people? Already we are hearing calls for the re-imposition of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (which ended its 10-year run in September 2004); the banning of large capacity ammunition feeding devices, and

severely cutting back on the kinds of public places where people are permitted to carry weapons. Predictably, such proposals -- and at the moment that's all they are . . . proposals -- are drawing rhetorical fire from the National Rifle Association whose mantra continues to be "Guns don't kill people . . . people kill people." For years, the powerful pro-gun lobby has employed a combination of cajolery, campaign cash and slippery-slope argumentation to keep Congress in check. "Any law regulating firearms," they have long argued, "goes against the 2nd Amendment. It is but a short step from limiting large capacity magazines to the confiscation of all guns." (Interestingly, the NRA shut down its Facebook page shortly after news of the Newtown massacre hit the airwaves. They have 30 days to restore it or face losing all their stored data . . .)

The president, acting in the dual capacity as "Conscience of the Nation" and "Mourner-in-Chief" has made it clear that once and for all, he is going to do something about gun violence. Precisely what, remains to be seen. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, co-chair of [Mayors Against Illegal Guns](#), made the rounds of the Sunday news shows demanding that the president act to reduce gun violence in America: "If this moment passes into memory without action from Washington, it will be a stain upon our nation of protecting the innocent, including our children." Democratic Senators Dianne Feinstein and Dick Durbin promised that they would introduce and pass new Federal Assault Weapons Ban legislation within days. At the same time, former Arkansas Governor and GOP presidential candidate Mike Huckabee suggested that the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary was somehow tied to the lack of religious expression in public school: "*We've escorted [God] right out of our culture and marched him off the public square,*" Huckabee said, "*And then we express our surprise that a culture without him actually reflects what it has become.*"

All of this dialogue and deliberation is good -- and utterly predictable. As a nation we have gone through the process after each mass killing. We begin in earnest, resolve to do something to stem gun violence and then let the issue fade from view . . . until the next time. Well, this is the next time, and this time it involves little children. The question is whether *this* time the massacre has been so heinous, so horrifying that finally, finally, we will do more than engage in debate and deliberation? My gut instinct tells me the answer is "Yes, finally we will try and do something meaningful to stem the tide of gun violence in America."

Legislation, whether on a national, state or local level, can only go so far. Let's face it; no matter what we do, there are still more than 300 million guns, pistols, rifles, shot-guns, assault weapons, bazookas, rocket launchers, etc. in the hands of the American people. Most of these people are honest, law-abiding and reasonably sane. And despite what the NRA would have us believe, a clear

majority of these gun owners are in favor of banning assault-style weapons and performing background checks on anyone wishing to purchase a weapon. Are you listening NRA? Do you even care?

It seems to me that any meaningful change in America's gun culture will require at least a generation -- if not two. We are a violent, largely desensitized society. We watch movies and play computer games in which murder, mayhem, destruction, dismemberment and death are what pass for entertainment. We are glued to media which pays far more attention to the names, backgrounds and "issues" of mass murderers than Nobel Prize Winners. We lack the patience to demand anything more than simple black-and-white solutions to highly complex problems.

I really don't know what if any legislative fixes are on the horizon. Personally, I would like to see us consider a system like they have in Switzerland, where every adult male is legally required to possess a gun, but then places severe restrictions on ammunition. Then too, if it were in my power, I would mandate that the media never, ever publish the name, image or specific identifying information about anyone involved in mass killings. Many mass murderers, loners buoyed or plagued by whatever demons they may possess, wish to "go out in a blaze of glory," thereby making their names known to the entire world. Letting it be known that we will never again permit names or likenesses of these people to appear in print may stop a few in the future. (It is in consonance with this suggestion that I have not named the Newtown executioner . . .)

Can anything be done to stop these mass killings? No one knows for sure. However, one thing is certain: to merely debate or deliberate won't save a single life.

Time is of the essence. We've got to get to work.

If not now, when?

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The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Question: What do French diplomat Jean Nicot (1530-1600), the French Controller General Etienne Silhouette (1709-1767) German Astronomer Franz Mesmer (1734-1815), French physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (1738-1814), British editor Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) and Austrian novelist Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895) all have in common?

Answer: Their names have all been immortalized as either nouns (**nicotine**, **silhouette** and **sado-masochist**) or verbs (to **mesmerize**, to **guillotine** and to **bowdlerize**).

English abounds in this sort of thing. Think of all the eponymous verbs we use on a daily basis: To "sue," "mark," "pat," "jack," "rob," "hope," "pierce," "don," "grace" and "chuck" are but a few. Then, there are all the brand names which have either taken on generic lives of their own -- Kleenex, Saran Wrap, Xerox (also used as a verb), Jacuzzi, Chapstick and Vaseline, to name but a few -- or have become generic verbs -- such as "to Photoshop" or "to Google."

In the political realm there is the verb "to gerrymander," defined as "Manipulating the boundaries of an electoral constituency so as to favor one party or class." Etymologically, the term comes from Elbridge *Gerry* (1744-1814), the 5th Vice President of the United

States and salamander. Goodness knows there are millions who use the term without knowing who Gerry (pronounced with a hard "g") was. Likewise, how many people know what it means "to Mirandize" a suspect without having the slightest idea who Ernesto Arturo Miranda actually was, or what *Miranda v Arizona* was all about?

And then there is "Borking," a term named after the recently deceased judge and legal scholar Robert Bork. "To Bork" (a verb used with an object) means "Trying to block candidates for public office by systematically defaming or vilifying them."

The term goes back to 1985, the year that President Ronald Reagan nominated Bork to the high court. Many will recall that in nationally



televised hearings, the Senate Judiciary Committee delved into Bork's judicial ideology, not just his legal qualifications or competence. His past commentary on hot-button issues such as the Civil Rights Act ("*While the ugliness of racism is clear, having the state coerce you into more righteous paths is a principal of unsurpassed ugliness. .*"), and the court's 1965 decision

establishing a constitution right to privacy, caused committee Democrats - and Republican Senator Arlen Specter, to oppose his nomination with a heretofore unseen level of ferocity. Led by then-Senator Joe Biden and the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Bork would be turned down by a roll call vote of 58-42 -- the most votes ever against a Supreme Court nominee. Looking backward, the "Borking of Robert Bork" was a pyrrhic victory for which both the Democrats in specific and the American public in general have been paying reparations for more than a quarter century.

Prior to Robert Bork, Supreme Court nominees -- along with virtually anyone else a president might name -- were ratified by the Senate

with both dispatch and dignity. Ever since Robert Bork, presidential nominees -- and increasingly, not just for the bench -- have been subjected to intense scrutiny both in committee and before the cameras. Since the beginning of the Obama Administration, tens of dozens of presidential nominees have never even received a hearing; their positions have gone unoccupied. In 2012, "Borking" is far more than a verbal term; it is a vile technique; a technique whereby the wheels of government can be ground to a virtual halt in the name of ideological purity.

Whether practiced by Democrats or Republicans, Borking is both puerile and counter-productive; it has turned United States Senate -- once called "The world's greatest deliberative body" -- into a sandbox. Until recently, senators gave sitting presidents tremendous leeway when it came to naming people to the Cabinet or federal bench. Indeed, in all American history, only 21 nominees have been defeated or withdrawn. That number will likely double within the next four years.

And if it does, it won't just be because of "Borking," for indeed, as of a few days ago, there is a newer, even more pernicious political gerund making its way to the front of the line: "Ricing" . . . as in U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice. What makes the latter far worse than the former is that that one need not even have received an official nomination for the process of "Ricing" -- of defamation and vilification -- to commence. Remember, Senate Republicans began questioning whether Dr. Rice was qualified to become Secretary of State when she was nothing more than the purported front-runner -- not the nominee. Slashing attacks on her suitability, her temperament, and her political judgment quickly became page-one headlines; so much so that she removed her name from consideration.

Who knows, maybe Ambassador Rice *wouldn't* have turned out to be the greatest Secretary of State since Thomas Jefferson or William Seward. The fact that she was forced to withdraw her name from consideration means we will never know, and is yet another

indication of just how partisan and spiteful the art of governance has become. Believe it or not, no Secretary of State nominee has ever been defeated . . . and we've had some real doozies reigning at Foggy Bottom. Senator John Kerry, who just became the president's official nominee for State, will likely avoid most of the traps and pitfalls set for Ambassador Rice and be confirmed. It certainly helps that he has been a senator for more than a quarter-century, is well-known to those who will pass judgment on him, and has specialized in foreign policy.

But "Ricing" continues. Former Nebraska Senator -- and Vietnam War hero -- Chuck Hagel is being touted as the next Secretary of Defense. He too is getting "Riced" over statements he made in years past about what he called "The Jewish lobby," and the perception in some quarters that he is not sufficiently hawkish when it comes to Iran or Hamas. *(This may well be true, but it is always good to keep in mind that the Secretary of Defense does not set U.S. military policy; his -- or her -- responsibility is to carry out policy as set by the President of the United States. And yet, the name, record and reputation of this non-nominee are also being Riced.)*

Make no mistake about it: "Ricing," like "Borking" has as much -- if not more -- to do with partisan politics than with what's truly best for America. It is yet one more indication of how much we have come to treat governance and leadership like some fantasy league blood sport.

To paraphrase Juliet, "What's in a name? That which we call 'Ricing' by any other name would smell of defeat . . ."

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OF BLOOD, FIRES AND FEET

The *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel's* James D. Davis is one of the longest-serving religion writers in America. Jim is also one of the genuinely good guys; a man who walks the walk and writes with the best of them. For more years than I can count, my favorite part of Sunday's paper has been Jim's *Faith and Values* column, where he runs a brief interview with a member of the local clergy/faith community. Within the limit's of the column, Jim's questions are rather probing -- anything but cookie-cutter -- although he



does ask everyone to describe in brief their "worst moment on the pulpit." He also asks everyone what their favorite quote is. Understandably, most respond with a verse from the Bible.

Were Jim to pose the favorite quote question to me, I would have a difficult time choosing between three that have long shaped my thoughts and actions. The first comes from Leviticus 19:16:

לֹא תֵעָמֵד עַל-יָדֵם רֵעֶךָ

Namely, "Don't stand idly by while your brother bleeds."

The second is a verse from the Mishnaic work *Ethics of the Fathers* (2:5):

מִקּוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁוּב

Which translates roughly as "*In a place where everyone is acting like a jerk, you strive to be a mensch.*"

The third comes from Bobby Kennedy:

Some men see things as they are and say 'why.' I dream things that never were and say 'why not.'

Which obviously needs no translation.

That which links these three seemingly disparate quotes should be just as obvious: they are all calls to action -- strong reminders that sitting around and *k'vetching* (Yiddish for "complaining" or "bitching") about ignorance, injustice and inanity just won't cut it. As the old advertising slogan for VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) went, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

All of which brings us to the New Year.

Goodness knows, it will be good to leave 2012 behind. Outside of President Obama winning another four years and adding a couple Democratic seats in the House and Senate, it has been year of insanity. As Father Time departs, Congress has failed to rescue America from tumbling down the so-called "Fiscal Cliff." It need not have been. Those of us who follow politics closely understand that both the fiscal issues confronting us and the impasse we face are far from insoluble. Poll after poll indicate the American public's overwhelming preference for raising a bit more tax revenue from the very wealthy -- not as an end-all-and-be-all -- but as beginning. A clear and overwhelming majority wants to see Congress and the White House hammer out a deal. But instead of a congressional majority working together to shore up and save the American economy, less than a third of that body has decided to hold an entire nation in thrall. In thrall to what? To the dictates of the hyper wealthy. To a political catechism which teaches that agreeing with this president and this administration on *anything* -- up to and including that January follows December -- will open them up to primary challenges from people on their political right. (It makes one shudder to think that there are actually people further to the right than members of the Congressional Tea Party Caucus.) They are so tied in to the Norquistian "*No tax increases for anything . . . ever! Period!*" orthodoxy that they refuse to even accept a return to pre-Bush era tax rates on people making over \$1 million a year. (For the mathematically challenged, this means they



refuse to ask for even a penny more in taxes for those who make \$19,230.70 a week, \$2,747.25 a day, 365 days a year. *Aargh!*)

Speaker Boehner is trapped between a rock and a hard place. He cannot lead for the simple reason that there is no party to lead. He has Majority Leader Cantor glaring over his shoulder and a monolithic minority within his caucus who suspect him of being a closet liberal for actually holding talks with President Obama. Their allegiance to Grover Norquist, the Koch Brothers and [ALEC](#) come first; their allegiance to the American people -- outside of the most conservative voters in their districts -- comes a distant second. And, just as the senate is hamstrung by the ever-present threat of a filibuster, so too is the House held captive to the so-called (unwritten) "[Hastert Rule](#)." (Also known as the "majority of the majority," this doctrine states that the Speaker will not allow a vote on a bill to take place unless the majority of the majority party supports it. As they say, "*rotz-a-ruck*.")

Not only is Congress placing the dictates and desires of a minority ahead of those of the American public vis-a-vis the Fiscal Cliff, they are also kowtowing to the NRA in the matter of all things pro-gun -- despite a clear majority supporting reinstatement the Assault Weapons Ban; requiring background checks at so-called "gun shows;" and placing severe limitations on the number of rounds in a single ammunition clip. Then too, there are innumerable state legislatures enacting laws against women, minority voters and the elderly -- all against the stated wishes of a clear majority.

What in the world can we, the angry, frustrated, fed-up majority do? After all, they have all the money; they can pretty much do what they want.

Actually, they can't. If the 2012 election proved anything, it was that tens of millions of people standing in line hour after hour in order to vote can trump hundreds of millions of dollars. And here is where my three favorite quotes come in:

First, we cannot simply sit back and stew; if we see injustice, we must do something about it. To do otherwise is tantamount to sitting by and watching our brothers -- and sisters -- bleed. Sure, we aren't always going to win, but sitting back and merely *k'vetching* guarantees a loss every time.

Second, despite there being so many childish jerks out there, we must strive to act like adults. Let's not waste too much time vilifying those who are holding back progress; in the long run, it takes away from the progress we seek.

Third, never stop dreaming big dreams; of bringing heaven and earth ever so much closer together.

Stay in touch with your local elected representatives. Make sure your views are heard. Let them know that you will absolutely *not* vote for anyone who supports issue X or is against issue Y. In the long run, votes matter even more than dollars. The 2012 election proved that.

Concretely, I also recommend taking part in a process which hearkens back to our earliest days; petitions. There are three great petition sites on the internet:

The first is SignOn.org. These are the folks that created, among other things, a petition calling on Macys to get rid of the Donald Trump collection. They got more than a half-million people to sign the petition, and although they have yet to rid themselves of the Trump label, it has pretty much kept "The Donald's" mouth in check for the past few months.

The next is change.org. Through this site, you can create your own petition, place it on FaceBook, Twitter or any of the other social media networks and hopefully put pressure on those who think they know what's best for you and me. Public sentiment is more powerful than most of us realize.

Last and certainly not least is the White House website, which solicits petitions from the great unwashed public. Remember, this president started out his professional life as a community organizer. He firmly believes that together we can make a difference. The "rules" of this website are unique: once a petition garners a minimum of 25,000 electronic signatures, the White House will respond. Unbeknownst to many, the president's "change of heart" on the Defense of Marriage Act had a lot to do with all the people who signed a petition. Then too, there are more than 100,000 people in Texas who have signed a petition calling for the Lone Star State to secede from the union. Ah well, the petitionary process isn't just for those with two feet on the ground. . .

May we all pledge that in 2013 we *will not* stand by while others idly bleed; that we will strive to act like adults and dream big dreams. And above all, let us do everything in our power to hold the feet of those in thrall to the wishes of a select few -- to hold those feet to the fires of popular will.

Best wishes for a happy, healthy and productive 2013 . . . or as we say in Hebrew,

ליוסטר סמחס!

(Wishing you a "Happy Silvester")

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