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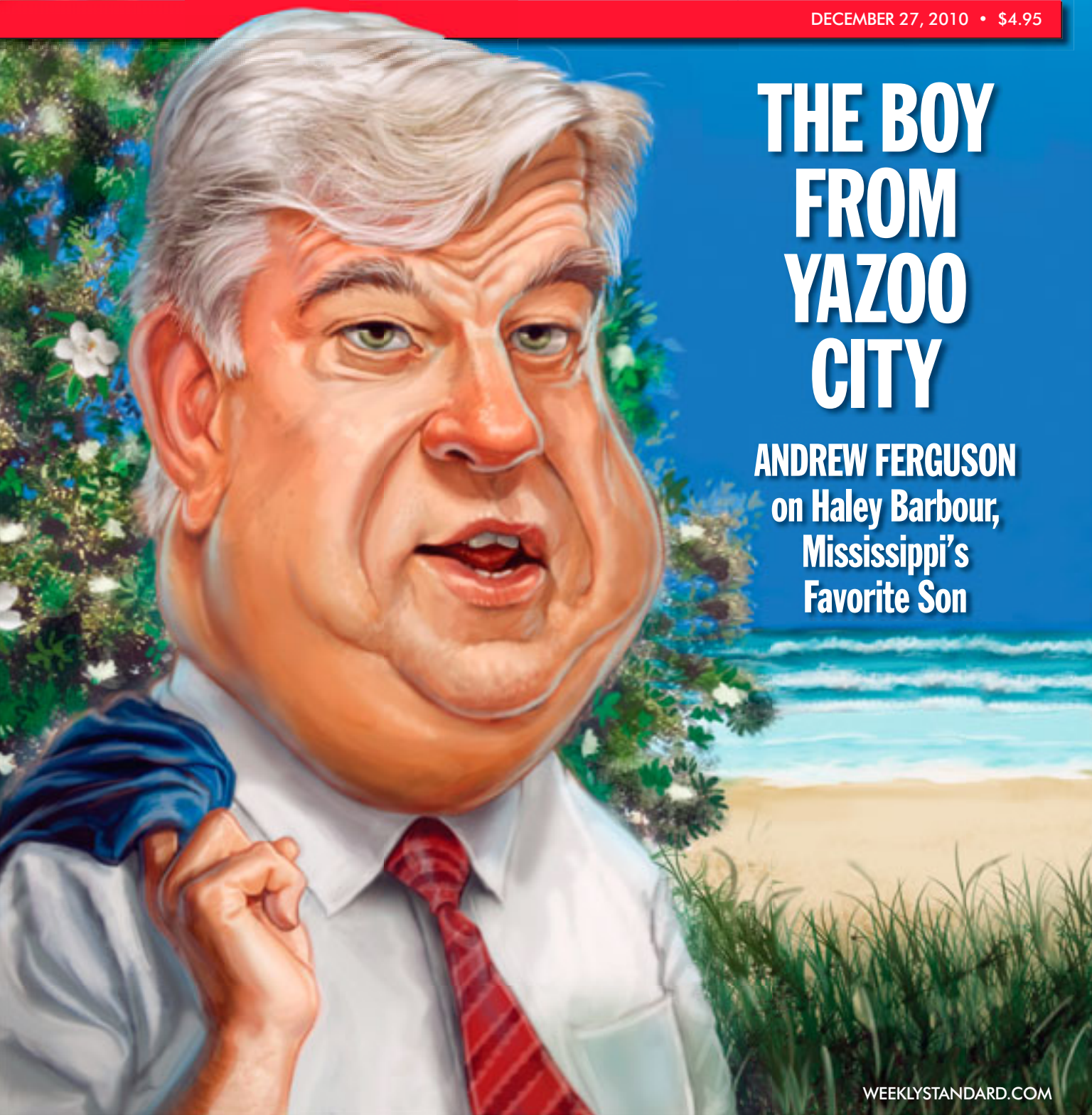

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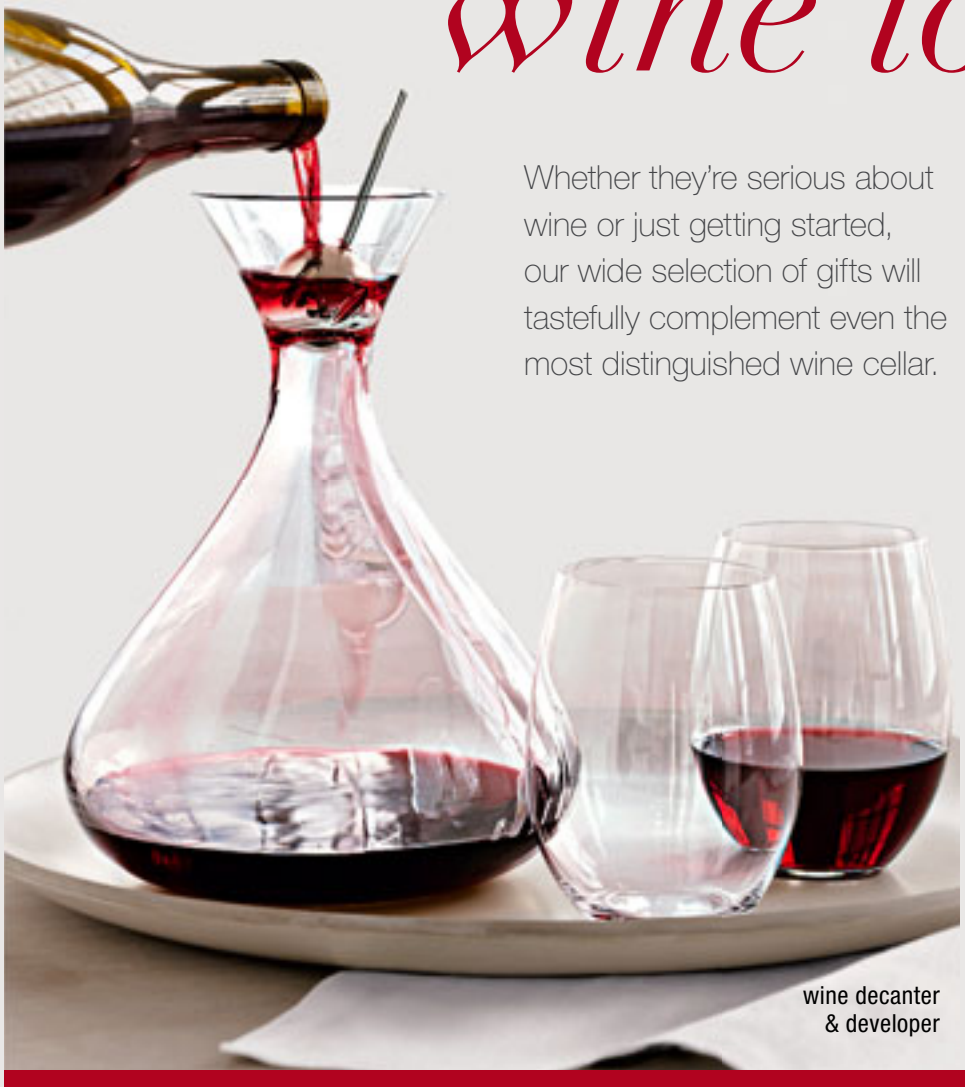

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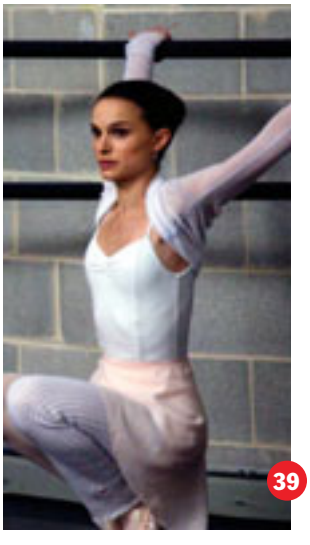

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COVER BY GARY LOCKE

American Narcissus (cont.)

A few weeks ago Jonathan V. Last catalogued at length the splendid narcissism of Barack Obama. Many readers sent in their own favorite moments of the president's mirror-gazing and Obama did his part by adding fresh examples.

For instance, last week Obama took time for an event in Northern Virginia where he read to a class of second graders. The book he chose? *Of Thee I Sing*, by Barack Obama. The week before, Obama began a statement honoring Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese dissident being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, with the following: "One year ago, I was humbled to receive the Nobel Peace Prize—an award that speaks to our highest aspirations, and that has been claimed by giants of history and courageous advocates who have sacrificed for freedom and justice." He then graciously allowed that Liu was "far more deserving of this award than I was." No kidding.

But while Obama will downplay his own magnificence every once in a blue moon, he gets testy when others do so. In late November, Obama held a public meeting with Hamid Karzai. The Afghan president thanked him, saying that Obama had "set the tone right." Obama responded, "That was my goal. Every once in a while, I do things right." The president's unscripted moments are often uncomfortable. At a ceremony conferring the Medal of Honor on Staff Sgt. Sal Giunta in November, the president quipped, "Now, I'm going to go off-script here for a second and just say I really like this guy." Two honors for the price of one!

One reader flagged a passage from Ryan Lizza's 2004 *Atlantic* profile of then-state senator Obama. Toward the end of the piece, Lizza describes watching the candidate doodle while making a series of fundraising calls:

> I couldn't help noticing, when we sat down to talk in the dilapidated storefront that houses his Springfield campaign headquarters, that the blue-pen drawing he'd doodled on his newspaper during fundraising calls was a portrait of himself.

GARY LOCKE

Other readers pointed to a 2004 interview with Beliefnet.com, where Obama described the concept of sin as "Being out of alignment with my values," and to Obama's creation, following his November 2008 victory, of the "Office of the President Elect"—just in case anyone forgot. Many readers were fond of the moment during the presidential campaign when Obama finally tossed Jeremiah Wright under the bus. After sitting through years of Wright's racist, hateful, anti-American sermons, what finally prompted Obama to cut ties with the reverend was Wright's description of Obama as a garden-variety politician. At the event where he turned on Wright, Obama explained,

> I want to use this press conference to make people absolutely clear that obviously whatever relationship I had with Reverend Wright has changed as a consequence of this. I don't think that he showed much concern for me. I don't—more importantly, I don't think he showed much concern for what we are trying to do in this campaign and what we're trying to do for the American people and with the American people.

And finally: "That's—that's a show of disrespect to me. It's a—it is also, I think, an insult to what we've been trying to do in this campaign."

But for sheer hilarity, it will be difficult to top the following exchange between Obama and Indian businessman Bhupendra Kansagra, at a roundtable meeting during the president's recent trip to Mumbai. The president tried and failed to guess where Kansagra was going with his remarks:

> Mr. Kansagra: Thank you. Welcome, Mr. President, to India. As a fellow Kenyan, I'm very proud to see that you have made—
>
> The President: Made something of myself? [Laughter.]
>
> Mr. Kansagra: —India the focus of your drive for exports out of the U.S. To that effect, the 30 aircraft order, which is the second of such orders we have placed with Boeing, will enhance SpiceJet's penetration into the Indian low-cost travel, low-cost transportation market, which really is the focus for SpiceJet. ♦

Bob Feller, 1918-2010

Hot Stove League action picked up this past week as the Boston nine pulled ahead of their Bronx rivals with the acquisition of Carl Crawford and Adrian Gonzalez. In the senior circuit, the Philadelphia club signed the game's top southpaw hurler in Cliff Lee—just as one of the greatest right-handers ever to throw a baseball passed away at the age of 92.

Bob Feller made his big league debut in 1936 with the Cleveland In-

dians, for whom he won 266 games (losing 162) over an 18-year career, while striking out 2,581 and finishing with a lifetime ERA of 3.25. He was nicknamed "Rapid Robert" for his fastball which, in combination with his 12-to-6 curveball, made him perhaps the most feared pitcher of his generation—a legendary generation whose hitters included the likes of Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Hank Greenberg, and Feller's own nemesis, Yankees' right-fielder Tommy Henrich.

And for all Feller accomplished—he was an eight-time all-star who led the Tribe to a World Series victory in 1948 and was named to the Hall of Fame in 1962, his first year of eligibility—he might have put up even better numbers, were it not for the war. But then, the same might be said of all of that era's great stars.

As David G. Dalin wrote in our November 1 issue, Hank Greenberg enlisted at the age of 30, when he was officially exempt from military duty, to fight the Nazis. "My country comes first," said Greenberg. Feller, who joined the Navy just after Pearl Harbor, felt the same. "I've never once thought about all the prime years that I missed," Feller said later. "I'm as proud of serving as anything I've ever done in my life."

We admire as much as anyone today's professional athletes, young men whose athletic skill and daring cannot but entertain and amaze us, but in the end their image is not well served by the rhetorical excess, often their own, of referring to their place of well-paid work—the gridiron, diamond, court, or rink—as the "trenches." Greenberg and Feller knew the difference. So did Ted Williams, who flew combat missions as a Marine pilot; same with Braves lefthander Warren Spahn, who saw action at the Battle of the Bulge.

In all, there were some 500 major league ballplayers who served in World War II, and all but two returned. One was Harry O'Neill of the Philadelphia A's, who was killed at Iwo Jima; the other was Elmer Gedeon, an outfielder with the Washington Senators, the precursor of our current hometown nine. A three-sport star at the University of Michigan, Gedeon once apparently slid across an ice-covered pond to save his cousin's life when the youngster fell through a hole—an event that on reflection could have inspired a plot point in one of our favorite holiday classics.

In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey rescues from the icy depths his brother Harry, who later becomes the pilot who saves a troop transport ship, and—who knows?—maybe wins a war in the bargain. In real life, it's Captain Gedeon who became the pilot, one who died flying a B-26 over France in 1944, and whose efforts, along with those of the rest of the 500, and hundreds of thousands of other American servicemen and women, really did help win a war.

This week, America lost one of the last of those 500, a right-handed pitcher, Chief Petty Officer Bob Feller, U.S. Navy (ret.). ♦

A Royal Snub?

First the Clintons, and now the Windsors? President Obama was famously not invited to the grandiose New York wedding of Chelsea Clinton. Now London's *Daily Mail* is reporting

that the Obamas similarly aren't invited to Prince William's ceremony.

> President Obama and his wife Michelle will not be invited to Prince William's wedding next year. Because Prince William is not yet heir to the throne, his wedding to Kate Middleton is not classed as a "state occasion"—and the couple feel under no pressure to fill the 2,000-strong guest list with heads of state, the *Mail* understands.
>
> They are more eager to ask ordinary citizens and charity workers than foreign dignitaries and VIPs to what will be the first royal "people's wedding," courtiers suggested.
>
> A handful of heads of state are likely to be invited in line with previous royal weddings, possibly including France's President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife Carla Bruni.

The *Mail* continues by noting that First Lady Nancy Reagan attended the royal wedding in 1981 between Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

The Scrapbook can't help but wonder if the royals' snub isn't a result of Obama's less than sterling interactions with the queen and her ministers. At the first meeting of the two in 2009, the president's gift to Her Royal Highness was an iPod with some of Obama's speeches already loaded. At least now, there will be no chance of a similar faux pas over a wedding gift. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

"Moderation, very much alive on the center-left and among Democrats, is so dead in the Republican Party and on the right . . . " (E.J. Dionne, the *Washington Post*, December 16). ♦

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The Greatest 'Gatsby'

I happened to walk past the Navy Memorial on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington the other day, and tried to picture how the block had once been configured. Where there is now an open plaza and grand monument there was once a traffic island—dividing Pennsylvania Avenue where it intersected with Seventh Street—on which stood a statue of Benjamin Franklin. When the memorial was built in 1987, Franklin was moved a few blocks west to the Old Post Office Building. And the shabby 19th-century brownstones at Seventh and Pennsylvania are long gone.

All hail the Navy Memorial, of course; but I do miss those brownstones—one, in particular, because it was the scene of an opening chapter in a lifetime's history of book-collecting and, I am bound to say, an interesting Christmas memory.

A half-century ago, on the corner behind the statue, stood the Benjamin Franklin Bookstore, one of those multistory secondhand urban establishments, now nearly extinct. In those days I sometimes took the bus downtown after school and, if I were feeling especially affluent, paid a visit to the shop. In my memory it had three or four dimly lit floors that seemed to contain an endless expanse of volumes along the walls, and oblong tables piled with books.

Once when I went there early in the evening, I headed toward the Fs in the fiction section and, miraculously, stumbled upon a first edition of *The Great Gatsby*. It was, in bookseller's lingo, in fine condition: a nice, tight copy (without dust jacket) in dark green binding, with gilt lettering on the spine. In my memory there were other Scott Fitzgeralds alongside—*This Side of Paradise*, perhaps, and *The Beautiful and Damned*—but *Gatsby*, by my reckoning, was the jewel in the crown.

There was one problem, however. This particular first edition of *The Great Gatsby* cost $10—a sum which, to this apprentice consumer in November 1963, was decidedly princely and beyond my means. I distinctly remember holding it for a tantalizing minute or two, turning its pages, and then reluctantly replacing it on the shelf.

Later that evening, at home over dinner, I mentioned this excursion to my parents and the (comparatively reasonable) price of a treasured first edition of the single greatest work by an American novelist with whom I was, at the time, decidedly infatuated. Unfortunately, neither my mother nor my father was the collecting type, and although my father did acquire the occasional Victorian volume on natural history from his London bookseller, he had little affinity for F. Scott Fitzgerald, and both of them frowned on my wasting allowance money. If anything was said in response to my pointed anecdote, I have forgotten it.

So the subject was dropped, and I did my best to expel from memory the painful image of that slim green volume buried among the stacks on a darkened upper floor of the Benjamin Franklin Bookstore on Pennsylvania Avenue in downtown Washington.

DARREN GYGI

Since I introduced this subject with an allusion to "an interesting Christmas memory," the reader may guess what happened next. Six weeks later, on Christmas morning, there was the first edition of *The Great Gatsby*, unwrapped and uninscribed, under the tree. I was suitably grateful to my father for this unexpected and unaccustomed gift; but 47 years later, while *Gatsby* sits behind glass in an antique secretary desk in my living room, a certain mystery still attaches to his gesture.

I should explain that my mother and father were not especially affectionate people; and that my father, while an outwardly respectable parent, was distant and rather enigmatic to me. His principal attitude toward his youngest child appeared to be impatience, leavened with annoyance and occasional fury, and he died before I could have known him as an adult. As it happens, I am now in possession of the bulk of his papers and effects—he was a microbiologist and naval veteran of World War II—and the deeper I delve, the less familiar he becomes.

Which makes this rare gesture of generosity the more mysterious. Sad to say, I can't imagine my father taking the trouble on my behalf to go to a part of town he seldom visited. My only plausible theory is that he would annually join his fellow alumni of the University of Pennsylvania in laying a wreath at Franklin's statue—and must have noticed the bookstore nearby. That, combined with the Christmas season, might have impelled him to act.

Well, who knows? I dared not ask at the time, and the answer lies buried with him. But I treasure *The Great Gatsby*, both as an emblem of my youthful passion for Fitzgerald and a rare talisman of parental benevolence. Not to mention that it's now worth a few thousand dollars.

Philip Terzian

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Surge Protector

When President Obama announced his Afghanistan policy a year ago, some conservatives had understandable reservations. Was the president sending enough troops? General Stanley McChrystal had asked, in essence, for 40,000 more troops, but Obama sent only 30,000 or so. Was Obama really committed to "victory"? That was a word he didn't use, just as he didn't talk about "counterinsurgency" or "nation-building." Instead he talked about beginning a drawdown in July 2011. That raised a lot of doubts about his level of commitment.

The past year, culminating in last week's unveiling of the White House "Afpak" review, should have put most of those doubts to rest. President Obama has had repeated chances to downsize and retreat from Afghanistan. That was the option urged on him by many in the Democratic party last June, when the president fired Gen. McChrystal. It was urged on him again before the latest policy review. But Obama has consistently refused to waver, even though it might seem to his political advantage to distance himself from an unpopular war.

President Obama at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan

AFP PHOTO / JIM WATSON

The key to the president's behavior may be found, we believe, in a revealing passage from Bob Woodward's latest book, *Obama's Wars*, which recounts the following exchange between the president and vice president. Biden reportedly told Obama: "If you do what McChrystal wants and adopt his strategy, 'You own this war.'" Obama shot back: "I already own it."

The president was right. And so, on Afghanistan, Obama has become a hawk in dove's plumage. He seems to understand that success in this war is vital to the success of his presidency—and he's acting and talking like it.

On December 16, for instance, the president said, "We will never waver from our goal of disrupting, dismantling, and ultimately defeating al Qaeda." It would have been nice if he had included the Taliban in that sentence. But Obama has made clear he realizes that the only way to keep al Qaeda out of Afghanistan is by neutralizing the Taliban.

During his press conference, Obama also said, rather ludicrously, that much of the recent progress on the ground has been "the result of us having sent a clear signal that we will . . . start reducing American forces next July." Not quite. In reality that deadline has made our troops' jobs harder by emboldening the Taliban and casting doubt about our resolve among the great hordes of Afghan fence-sitters. What has really turbo-charged progress was the decision by Obama to join with other heads of state at the NATO Summit in Lisbon last month in support of a new deadline for "Afghan forces . . . assuming full responsibility for security." The new deadline is the end of 2014 rather than mid-2011. (The summit declaration was also careful to note that this "will not equate to withdrawal of [NATO] troops.") That is a welcome, if unacknowledged, shift on the part of the president.

There is little expectation now of a major troop pullout next summer that would threaten the success of the counterinsurgency campaign General David Petraeus is carrying out. As some of us saw for ourselves on a recent visit, American forces and their international and Afghan allies have already driven the Taliban out of many of their traditional safe havens in Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south.

But don't take our word for it, or Petraeus's, or the president's. The success of coalition forces is confirmed by the Taliban themselves. A December 16 *New York Times* article quoted an unnamed midlevel Taliban commander saying that "the government has the upper hand now" around Kandahar, the biggest city in the south. "The people are not happy with us. . . ." the commander went on. "The local people are not willingly cooperating with us. They are not giving us a place to stay or giving us food." In explaining this shift, the Taliban leader stressed the importance of the 2014 deadline, which "has made people change their minds" about whether American troops are on the way out.

What else could Obama be doing? Military leaders

would always like to have additional resources so that they can do more and do it faster. But we did not get the sense in our travels across Afghanistan that there is a critical shortage of combat troops—at least not in the areas of the south where Petraeus is putting his main effort. (Regional Command-East remains an economy of force mission, although troops there have done an impressive job of disrupting cells of the insurgent Haqqani network, as well as stopping catastrophic attacks planned for Kabul—an underappreciated achievement.)

In any case, sending additional troops to Afghanistan would not necessarily fix the biggest vulnerabilities of our strategy—corruption and bad governance in Afghanistan, and terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan. U.S. forces are beginning to address the former issue with steps such as barring Watan Risk Management, a firm affiliated with the Karzais, from bidding on American contracts. The issue of sanctuaries is more intractable; attempts by both the Bush and Obama administrations to cajole Pakistan into abandoning its proxies in the Taliban and the Haqqani network have clearly failed. Drone strikes have been more successful, but have been directed primarily at al Qaeda because that is all Islamabad will support. But we can make significant progress in Afghanistan nonetheless. After all, we are doing so now.

The biggest need is for more "enablers," such as heavy-lift helicopters to move troops around this vast and mountainous country. The problem is that the administration has imposed a cap of 98,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan (plus another 3,000 that can be approved by the secretary of defense if the need is dire). So, if extra aviation units are sent, someone else has to leave. But there is little slack in a mission that has been chronically underresourced for years. The administration would do well to relax this cap, in line with the president's promise on Thursday "to give our brave troops and civilians the strategy and resources they need to succeed." The president, moreover, would be well-advised to spend more time explaining and defending the war to the American people.

But on the whole Obama is doing more than most conservatives expected he would—and certainly more than most in his party would like him to do. And Republicans, to their credit, are standing behind him. Far from disavowing this as "Obama's war," John Boehner released a statement last week declaring that "we must remain steadfast in our commitment to the counterinsurgency strategy our commanders on the ground have put in place."

We are confident that our troops, notwithstanding the numerous obstacles in their path, can rout the Taliban—provided that they have support on the home front. Judging by Obama's and Boehner's statements, that support is there. The public at large remains skeptical but, as we saw in Iraq, their views can turn around if they see progress on the ground. And progress is starting to materialize.

—Max Boot

Overruling Obamacare

In October 2009, at one of her weekly press conferences, Nancy Pelosi was asked by a reporter "where specifically does the Constitution grant Congress the authority to enact an individual health insurance mandate?" Pelosi shook her head and replied: "Are you serious?" When her spokesman Nadeam Elshami was later asked to clarify the answer, he responded, "That is not a serious question."

But it has turned out to be a pretty serious question after all. On December 13, U.S. District Court judge Henry Hudson ruled that in fact Congress does not have the authority to enact such a mandate. The case, brought by Virginia's attorney general Ken Cuccinelli, will now be appealed. It will no doubt end up—perhaps together with a series of other lawsuits filed by officials in more than 20 states—before the Supreme Court in the next year or two.

At issue is Obamacare's requirement that every American purchase some approved form of health insurance or pay a fine. Without that mandate, much of the rest of the architecture of Obamacare falls apart. That architecture is essentially a command-and-control approach to keeping health care costs down: The government defines what counts as insurance, compels insurers to ignore risk in pricing coverage, imposes price controls on coverage, and then forces everyone to buy the resulting insurance products.

That last part is necessary because the law's requirement that insurance companies charge sick and healthy people the same price would create a powerful incentive for Americans to avoid buying health insurance at all until they were sick. After all, why pay for coverage when you don't need it if you can just buy it for the same price when you do need it? Of course, no insurance system could survive if only the sick bought coverage. So Obamacare simply orders everyone to buy insurance. Having taken the economic logic out of insurance, the law's champions had to take away the public's freedom to choose whether to be covered or not.

The problems with this approach are legion. Command-and-control policies do not have a very good track record, to say the least, and decades of experience with the Medicare system demonstrate that command-and-control does not keep costs down more effectively in health care than anywhere else. Creating a competitive health insurance market would better control costs without pushing people around so much.

But, in our system of government, questions of legiti-

mate authority precede even these questions of wisdom and efficacy. Can the government really order us to buy something we don't want to buy and punish us for failing to do so?

The administration's case for the constitutionality of the mandate rests on two arguments: (1) the Commerce Clause permits such a law because a failure to buy insurance has an effect on interstate commerce, and (2) if you don't like the first argument, well, then the mandate is not actually a mandate but rather a tax and is therefore permitted under the government's power to tax.

The first argument is certainly not easy to like. If, as the administration argues, a person's decision not to purchase health insurance invites the government to compel him to purchase it because being uninsured can create a burden on the economy (by requiring taxpayers to help shoulder the cost of his care if he gets sick), then there is really no limit on the government's reach at all. By the same logic, a person's choice not to jog or eat broccoli could add to the burden of our health care costs, so the government could mandate that the person exercise and eat his vegetables. Almost every choice we make has some economic consequence, but surely the Commerce Clause does not mean that the government can therefore force us to make a different choice.

The administration's second argument is not much better. Payment of the fine for noncompliance with the individual mandate would take place through one's annual tax return, but in no other way does it make sense to conceive of the mandate as a tax. While the health care law was being debated, its advocates—including the president—sternly insisted that the mandate was not a tax. And it is far from clear, in any case, why the government should have an unlimited power to "tax" us for making choices that liberals do not like.

In a sense, then, the question now before the federal courts is whether the government simply has unlimited power over the life of every American. How the Supreme Court addresses that question will say a great deal about the future of our system of government.

And yet the future of our health care system need not depend at all, as the future of our legal system unfortunately does to a considerable degree, on the whims of Justice Anthony Kennedy. Obamacare is a disaster for a host of reasons of which the individual mandate is only one. The 112th Congress need not wait for the courts to decide the fate of the mandate. For reasons constitutional, economic, and moral, Congress can repeal Obamacare and replace it with real health care reform.

—Yuval Levin

The Week Before Christmas

'Twas the week before Christmas, and all through
the House
The liberals were stirring, and boy did they grouse!
While earmarks were hung on the Reid bill with care
In hopes that the public would not see them there,

The "rich folks" were nestled all snug in their bed—
In hopes they'd be spared, like the president said—
While Nancy in kerchief and Bernie in cap
Were hunting for corpses that Congress could tap.

So the week before Christmas there came the big test:
Did liberals still have the power to best
The public and almost the whole GOP,
Or had they been routed?—yes, that's what we'd see.

The tax cutters crushed all the Dems in their way,
And the omnibus crashed like a blown-out soufflé.
In the end, we discovered, elections do matter—
And so does a public that makes a loud clatter.

A tax cut for Christmas is mighty surprisin',
With nary an earmark to cloud the horizon—
Obamacare's reeling, there's progress in 'Stan,
It's important next year that we stick with the plan.

By then we'll have entered the era of Boehner:
Our pocketbooks fuller, our politics saner.
We'll even buy beers for the lib'ruls to cry in
When they see the budget from Chairman Paul Ryan.

So THE STANDARD exclaims, with the future so bright:
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

—William Kristol

Class Warfare

The last refuge of a Democrat.

BY PETER WEHNER

GARY LOCKE

Democrats are enraged at President Obama for his decision to extend George W. Bush's tax cuts for all Americans, including top income earners. What explains their anger?

It cannot be because of concern for the deficit. After all, Democrats are responsible for an unprecedented two-year spending binge (the United States spent $1.3 trillion more over the last two-year period—2009-2010—than in the two-year period preceding it). In addition, increasing tax rates for the middle class, something Democrats oppose, would do far more to reduce the deficits than increasing tax rates for the top 2 percent of income earners. Nor do most Democrats believe the deal Obama struck with Republicans would hurt job growth. The White House is highlighting independent forecasts predicting the package could create as many as 2.2 million jobs next year.

What, then, explains the ferocious opposition many Democrats have for the tax deal Obama struck with Republicans? Senator Mary Landrieu spoke for many of them when she said, "I'm going to argue forcefully for the nonsensicalness and the almost, you know, moral corruptness of that particular policy. This is beyond politics. This is about justice and doing what's right."

For a lot of Democrats, this is not simply a matter of wise vs. unwise economic policy; it is about basic justice. Those who favor allowing high-income earners to keep more of their money are not simply wrong; they are guilty of an immoral act. One cannot help but conclude that even if lower tax rates for the wealthy led to strong economic growth, more jobs, and a higher standard of living for everyone, it wouldn't matter. Punishing "the rich" would remain a top priority.

I am reminded of something Jimmy Connors, one of the greatest tennis players of his generation, said when asked to explain his fierce competitiveness. "I hate to lose more than I love to win," Connors said. Of some liberals it can be said: They hate the rich more than they love economic growth or tax cuts for the middle class. It is more emotionally satisfying to punish the wealthy than it is to assist the nonwealthy.

Part of this is driven by a deeply ingrained animus toward the rich. If you examine how Democrats characterize the affluent in America, it's almost always negative. The top income earners are portrayed as greedy, selfish, and generally contemptible. Mention the wealthy and liberals don't think of creative, entrepreneurial,

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and hard-working people; they think of Gordon Gekko. Even President Obama, in arguing for passage of legislation his administration negotiated, couldn't hide his disdain for "millionaires and billionaires." David Axelrod, Obama's senior adviser, referred to reductions in the estate tax as "odious."

What animates this liberal cast of mind, apart from their contempt for the well-to-do, is the belief that the rich need to pay more taxes in order to reduce inequality. Inequality, according to this outlook, is intrinsically bad—and tax cuts for the wealthy, even if they make economic sense, accelerate inequality. This is an offense, and the role of the state is to narrow inequality through redistribution of income. Equality of outcome is, for liberals, more important than equality of opportunity. The duty of the federal government is to ensure greater "fairness" in the system.

There are many reasons why this attitude is, in the most fundamental sense, wrong. Here it's worth recounting what a professor does every semester with his students. This professor told me and Arthur Brooks, with whom I cowrote *Wealth and Justice: The Morality of Democratic Capitalism*, that he will redistribute points on the first exam in order to achieve an equal outcome of results. He then tells his students to imagine that he has taken points off their exam in order to achieve that result. To a person, these students are adamant that such a thing is simply unfair; they have earned their grade, they insist. To take points off their exam in order to give them to someone who scored lower is unfair. That is, of course, precisely the point. The students understand, in very personal terms, that justice is a matter of receiving one's due.

Pope John Paul II called "personal economic enterprise" a fundamental human right and, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* ("On Social Concern"), wrote:

> Experience shows us that the denial of this right, or its limitation in the name of an alleged "equality" of everyone in society, diminishes, or in practice absolutely destroys the spirit of initiative, that is to say the creative subjectivity of the citizen. As a consequence, there arises, not so much a true equality as a "leveling down." In the place of creative initiative there appears passivity, dependence and submission to the bureaucratic apparatus which . . . puts everyone in a position of almost absolute dependence.

This is not to say that a tax system that levies a proportionately higher tax rate on those with higher income is itself evil or even unwise. Simple justice does not require a society to tax the rich at higher rates than others, but compassion for the neediest might. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, wrote, "It is not very unreasonable that the rich should contribute to the public expense, not only in proportion to their revenue, but something more than in that proportion."

But a progressive tax system is a world apart from the modern liberal belief that inequality is itself a sin that government should take great strides to ameliorate. It cedes a frightening amount of power to the federal government to fine-tune outcomes and take upon itself the task of leveling out differences.

Indeed, inequality is the inevitable outcome of human differences. A healthy society, while caring for the poor and the weak, also needs to celebrate and reward human excellence. Tom Brady deserves to make more than his New England Patriot backup Brian Hoyer. And to demonize the wealthy is not only unwarranted but undermines civic comity. In an effort to promote an economic theory, liberals are appealing to class resentment, which is itself deeply contrary to the American ideal as interpreted authoritatively by Lincoln, who praised ambition and enterprise and upward mobility. "I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good," Lincoln said. "So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else."

Mary Landrieu is right in one respect: There is a moral calculus to the current economic debate. The problem for her is that she, and contemporary liberalism, are on the wrong side of it. ♦

Obama's Learning Curve

For a smart man, he can sometimes be awfully slow. BY FRED BARNES

Let's stipulate that President Obama is one smart dude. Everyone says so. "Obama is one of the most articulate and intelligent men ever to have been president," historian Alan Brinkley wrote recently in *Democracy*. Soon-to-be House speaker John Boehner agrees. "I think he's engaging," Boehner said of Obama on *60 Minutes*. "Certainly smart. Brilliant."

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But more than brainpower, there's another quality that Obama badly needs at the moment, 23 months into his presidency: the ability to learn and change course when that's called for. It's not a matter of betraying principle. What's involved is assessing facts on the ground and making adjustments when things change or don't go the way you expected.

To be successful, a president must be adept at this. President Reagan traded his desire for cuts in domestic spending

for congressional support for a military buildup that was crucial to winning the Cold War. The key to prevailing in Iraq was President Bush's decision to reject a drawdown of forces and order a "surge" of troops. President Clinton moderated his policies, leading to welfare reform and a balanced budget.

So how is Obama doing? The answer is better than you might think, but poorly in the one area most likely to jeopardize his reelection in 2012. The surprise is his adjustment on foreign policy and national security. Obama's most glaring failure is his lack of flexibility on economic policy and spending.

Starting on the negative side, the president appears to believe his policies aren't responsible for slow economic growth and minimal job creation since the recession ended in June 2009. Rather, the darn economy is to blame. This is a case of blaming the dogs for refusing to eat the dog food. That the dog food is the problem is beyond Obama's comprehension.

Obama extends the Bush tax cuts, December 17.

True, he reached agreement with Republicans to prevent income tax rates from rising next month, including for high earners. But he had no choice. To keep from violating his pledge not to raise taxes for the middle class, and averting political suicide, he had to forgo raising them for the upper class. He did so grudgingly. Republicans just wouldn't "budge" on this, he said.

Obama believes in the FDR model, despite all the evidence that its reliance on government regulations and spending failed to lift America out of the Depression. One piece of evidence: Unemployment was nearly as high in the late 1930s as it was in the early 1930s.

At least President Roosevelt had an excuse. He was trying what hadn't been tried before. Now it's been tried and failed, leaving Obama with no excuse. Yet he insisted, in explaining his deal with Republicans, that the extension of jobless benefits will have "the biggest impact" in spurring the economy. If that's true, twice the unemployment would lead to twice the boost to the economy.

The impression Obama gives is that of someone oblivious to history. He vows to raise the top rate for well-to-do taxpayers in two years, though Presidents Reagan, Kennedy, and Coolidge produced prosperity in part by cutting that rate. Nor does Obama understand that temporary tax cuts, like the partial holiday on Social Security taxes, rarely work.

One more negative. The president hasn't learned that faulting others for his own troubles is unattractive and anything but persuasive. A president who whines looks like he's not up to the job. At his press conference in early December, Obama said this: "The economy is not growing fast enough to drive down the unemployment rate given the 8 million jobs that were lost before I came into office and just as I was coming into office." A mystifying statement, for sure, and a lame excuse as well.

Now for the more positive side. For years, Obama noisily opposed everything in the tool kit for fighting Islamic terrorists. This includes the use of Predator drones, the Patriot Act, wiretaps, military tribunals, renditions, and imprisonment of terrorists at Guantánamo. He opposed the Iraq war and Bush's troop surge.

Without apologizing or publicly noting his reversal, Obama is currently using all the tools that Bush did. He's dramatically increased the number of Predator strikes on al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and ordered his own surge of American troops in Afghanistan.

Why? Because even a left-wing president like Obama quickly discovers that protecting the country is not only a requirement of office but one that necessitates measures he might otherwise deplore. He hasn't always acted willingly. Congress forced him to keep Gitmo open. And he's still deficient in refusing to treat terrorists captured here as prisoners of war.

But he's done better in fighting terrorism than we had reason to expect. He also could have backed out of Afghanistan or gutted the war effort, but didn't. And after months of pursuing the illusion that China would clamp down on North Korea and help in other ways, Obama has figured out that China's interests and America's aren't the same.

Obama's learning curve is steep. The biggest impediments are ideology and his lack of experience in the world of profit and loss. He held a "working meeting" last week with 20 business leaders, mostly supporters or rent-seeking CEOs on the prowl in Washington. The day before, a headline in the *New York Times* read: "Its Recovery Sputtering, Japan Will Cut Corporate Income Tax Rate." In contrast, the result of the president's meeting with CEOs was a new task force on something or other.

Obama also honored the NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers last week at a Washington recreation center, remarking that Coach Phil Jackson had won five championship rings with the Lakers, "one behind the six he won with the Chicago Bulls," Obama's favorite team. "Not for long," Lakers star Kobe Bryant shot back. The same could be said for how long Obama's economic policies should last. ♦

NEWSCOM

Can You Plug a WikiLeak?

It's not easy.

BY JONATHAN V. LAST

Lost among the many debates concerning WikiLeaks is a practical question: When an irresistible force, such as the Internet, meets an immovable object, like a government, which one's gotta give? Could a government shut down the website if it really wanted to? The answer is: yes and no.

As a technical matter, it would be nearly impossible to remove from circulation the documents WikiLeaks has already released. Information on the Internet is resilient because the source files can reside on billions of computers in many different countries. WikiLeaks posts all of the documents it releases on its website, where users can view or, more to the point, download them. This website is run from servers currently located in France. Those servers could, in theory, be shut down. But even if they were, the downloaded copies would live on. What's more, WikiLeaks had the foresight to publish its full run of documents in what is called a torrent file.

Torrents are the most common and efficient method of peer-to-peer sharing—that is, a somewhat anonymous exchange of files between computer users. The creator of the file turns it into a torrent "seed" and then allows others to download that seed from him. Once the seed has been published, anyone wanting a copy of the file in question can download it not just from the original source but from anyone else who has already downloaded it. Once a torrent has been out in the wild for a prolonged period of time, it becomes very hard to kill; it has been reproduced too many times and is stored on too many different computers. (Hollywood knows all about this problem: Torrents are most often used to pass around pirated movies and TV shows.)

WikiLeaks made its complete archive of documents available as a torrent file some weeks ago. By now, it is safe to assume that it has been downloaded many thousands of times. The torrent file is small enough to reside on personal computers and even smart phones. And since every torrent that has been downloaded is capable of being used as a seed for others to download, there's no stopping that information now—genies, bottles, horses, barns.

But what about WikiLeaks going forward? People tend to assume that the lubricating power of the Internet makes it impossible to stop the flow of information. But that's not always true. Take the case of ESPN reporter Erin Andrews. A year ago, someone with a spy camera filmed her through a peephole in the door walking around her hotel room in the altogether. Andrews took immediate, aggressive legal action. Today it's nearly impossible to find the video on the Internet. On a larger scale, China has successfully censored the web for a billion citizens for several years. Governments are not powerless against the Internet.

To understand what could be done to stop WikiLeaks, you begin by looking at WikiLeaks as a system with three functions: (1) It gathers leaked information from third-party sources; (2) it publishes this content; and (3) it distributes this published material across the web to readers. As a technical matter, each of these processes can be curtailed to some degree. Let's start with the front end of the operation and work backward.

WikiLeaks publishes by uploading material onto its website, which resides on the organization's servers. You access the site by going to wikileaks.org. Three weeks ago wikileaks.org became inoperable when a massive distributed denial-of-service attack (DDoS) was launched against it. That is to say, a small network of computers conspired to send so many requests to wikileaks.org that its server became overloaded and crashed. The DDoS assault on WikiLeaks sank the group's main website for a day or two.

WikiLeaks responded by asking hosting providers to voluntarily set up "mirrors"—exact replicas of the WikiLeaks site—on other servers at different addresses. Many volunteers appeared. As of this writing, there are 1,885 mirror sites running, with URLs such as wikileaks.enzym.su and wikileaks.thinkfurther.de.

It would be difficult, though not impossible, to launch denial-of-service attacks against all of the mirrors. But what is vulnerable is WikiLeaks' canonical server—the WikiLeaks server that is dedicated to supplying the mirror sites. In theory, one could approach WikiLeaks posing as a host interested in providing a mirror. When WikiLeaks established the mirror, an attacker could then use the data gathered about the canonical server to launch an attack against it, thus disrupting all of the mirrors at once.

But the most promising line of foreclosure is a legal one. WikiLeaks has been on the run for the last month, moving its virtual operations in an attempt to avoid being shut down. Originally its domain (the IP address which points a user to a website) was registered in Sweden and its servers were hosted there, too. But the threat of being shut down forced the group to move its domain registration to Switzerland and the hosting to France. Almost immediately, the French minister of industry asked that the site be banned from French servers. The hosting company, OVH,

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won a temporary victory when a judge ruled that it could not be forced to evict WikiLeaks.

But that may not be the end of the story. The only reason WikiLeaks is using OVH servers is that after leaving Sweden, it set up shop on servers run by Amazon.com (and moved its domain registration to another American company, EveryDNS.net). These companies quickly severed ties with WikiLeaks, not because they were forced to by law but because the backlash against them for being in business with WikiLeaks was more trouble than it was worth.

Other companies have also cut ties with WikiLeaks. PayPal, the service WikiLeaks once used to collect donations, stopped working with them after the last group of leaks was released. So did Visa and MasterCard, which refused to process money being sent to the group. As a result, it has become much more difficult for WikiLeaks to receive donations. Other big, high-profile companies are still providing service to WikiLeaks—Facebook and Twitter, for instance, allow WikiLeaks to use their services to network and disseminate information about their activities. There's no reason a government couldn't lean on them, as well as on the second-level companies that do business with the businesses who support WikiLeaks, such as OVH.

If gay advocacy groups can force Dr. Laura Schlessinger's radio program off the air through coordinated complaints and boycotts, it seems likely the U.S. government and its allies could exert enough pressure to make it tremendously uncomfortable for corporations to be in the WikiLeaks business.

The end-user experience with WikiLeaks is also vulnerable to pressure. Filters, applied to a network, would make WikiLeaks and all of its mirrors invisible to users within the system. That's the Chinese model, and although it's possible for determined users to get around such a firewall by using encrypted trickery, the number of people sophisticated enough to do so is quite small.

America doesn't have a network built like China's, but there are other ways to keep people from looking at WikiLeaks files. For instance, to combat the WikiLeaks torrents, a government could create dummy torrents designed to mimic the WikiLeaks files. These dummy files would have the same file size and same file nomenclature and would look like the real WikiLeaks to anyone searching for its torrents. But once you downloaded them, they would contain only gibberish. If these dummy files were massively seeded on the torrent networks, it would make it difficult and time-consuming for users to find genuine WikiLeaks torrents in a sea of meaningless fakes.

But we haven't! Julian Assange supporters in London, December 14.

Which brings us to the site's first-order function: collecting leaked information from volunteers.

WikiLeaks exposes one of the dirty secrets of security: You can't make a system totally secure. You'll never have a setup in government from which it is technically impossible to leak documents. All you can do is make sure that employees know that if they leak, they will be caught. And then hope that no one is willing to pay that price. In that sense, one of the most effective tools for curbing WikiLeaks would be an energetic, and public, prosecution of Pvt. Bradley Manning.

Even if WikiLeaks disappeared, might other organizations materialize to perform the same function? Perhaps. A former WikiLeaks staffer, Daniel Donscheit-Berg, is readying a competitor, Openleaks.org, for launch in the near future. It's possible that other leak sites could be as destructive as WikiLeaks. Or more so. But it's also possible that if it were run to ground, WikiLeaks might be replaced by a more diligent and judicious organization. After all, it's not difficult to imagine a leak site that really does operate in the public interest. The problem with WikiLeaks is the practice, not the theory. (Donscheit-Berg has split with WikiLeaks because he thinks the group's leader, Julian Assange, is running the shop in an irresponsible manner.)

It seems equally possible, however, that WikiLeaks is a product of the moment: that it took off because a single megalomaniac with just the right resources appeared at a time when the costs for leaking and publishing sensitive information were not yet well defined. If WikiLeaks were driven underground and potential leakers saw that the cost of giving away secrets was frighteningly high, then maybe this would become the movement's high-water mark.

All of that said, it's entirely possible that the most prudent course of action for the Obama administration is to leave WikiLeaks alone. But it's important to remember that the Internet is not an all-powerful force before which mere governments are helpless. The challenge in dealing with WikiLeaks isn't a dearth of options. It's balancing the benefits against the costs. ♦

NEWSCOM

The Corn Conspiracy

Ethanol is forever.

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

The machine was virtually new. I'd run a mere two tanks of gas through it and now the wretched thing wouldn't start. I'd pulled the starter cord 30 times, or more, and the best response so far was a forlorn cough that sounded terminal. Could I have neglected to premix the gas last time I filled the tank?

Nah. It would have run hot and seized up.

Maybe something had fouled the filter?

So I took the thing apart and looked at the filter. Cleaner than the collar of my best white shirt.

Plug?

I took it out and it easily passed the eyeball test.

I tried dumping the gas and putting in some from a different can. Same 50-1 mix, just bought more recently. Maybe my machine liked *fresh* gas.

Ten more pulls on the starter cord and nothing.

I swore for a minute or two and when that didn't work, I was out of options. I called the man who'd sold me the machine. For 15 years, he'd been faithfully caring for my chain saws and other tools. He has the magician's touch with a two-stroke engine.

"This leaf blower you sold me isn't worth its weight in scrap," I said politely.

"Won't start?" he said. Calmly.

"*No*, it won't start. And how did you know?"

"Second or third tank of gas, I'd guess."

"Yes and I say again . . . *how did you know*?"

"Happens to most of them. It's the ethanol. I should have warned you. Bring it in."

I did. And he made some carburetor adjustments that were beyond my meager abilities and nowhere described in the owner's manual. In a few minutes, the machine was humming.

"That's it?"

"You're good to go."

"What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. But I'll tell you something. If I'd been charging for every call like this one, last 20 years . . . well, ethanol would have made me rich. That stuff ought to be illegal."

Ah, I explained, but it *is*. If you make it yourself and sell it to someone who wants to drink it, then there is an arm of the government (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives) that will come and arrest you. Ethanol for drinking is called "moonshine" and Washington disapproves of it. It is what you get when you distill a mash that is made of fermented corn. There is an art to it and lots of lore. Bob Dylan recorded a haunting ballad about it, one verse of which goes:

My daddy he made whiskey, my granddaddy he did too
We ain't paid no whiskey tax since 1792
You'll just lay there by the juniper while the moon is bright
Watch them jugs a-filling in the pale moonlight.

Junior Johnson, the stock car driver and subject of Tom Wolfe's celebrated article *The Last American Hero*, did a stretch for moonshining, though the revenuers never caught him on the road, actually hauling. A section of North Carolina highway is now named after him.

Fair to say a lot of people have affectionate feelings about moonshine, even if they've never tasted any.

The other kind of ethanol, though, doesn't have many fans. Nobody will be singing ballads about the EPA inspectors whose job it is to make sure Americans are burning enough ethanol in their cars, outboards, and lawnmowers to keep the Iowa corn farmers in the chips. Many of us—like my mechanic and me—purely hate the stuff. To which the government says, "Shut up and put some in your gas tank. It's good for . . . "

Well, for *what*?

For a while, people argued that ethanol was good for the environment. Nobody, but nobody, makes that argument any more. Even Al Gore has turned his back on the stuff. But if there are no good environmental outcomes as a result of the government's mandates on mixing the stuff with gasoline, there have been other measurable outcomes. The ethanol program has resulted in higher food prices, lower mileage in automobiles, and damage to older and smaller internal combustion engines.

So, of course, as part of the tax bill that will probably become law by the end of this year, taxpayers from this generation and at least two to follow will be subsidizing the production of this kind of ethanol just as they have been for a generation already. The subsidies were scheduled to expire at the end of this year but that cannot be allowed because . . .

Well, because the people who have become accustomed to the money would miss it. So they will continue to grow corn, fencerow to fencerow, across the Midwest. The making of ethanol will continue to require the use of vast amounts of water and fertilizer, and the EPA will continue to compel its use in engines that will run less efficiently when they burn it.

There are those in Washington who do not understand why so many citizens hate Washington. Well, in microcosm, ethanol is the answer.

It is because, well, Washington started hating them first. ♦

Geoffrey Norman, a widely published author, edits the website Vermonttiger.com.

The Once and Future Governor

Jerry Brown's third chance to get it right.

BY BILL WHALEN

In Sacramento on December 8, Jerry Brown ponders the California deficit.

Palo Alto

Located just a short stroll from California's capitol, Memorial Auditorium long has been a venue for political celebrations. More recently, it's been a graveyard for governors of the Golden State.

Gray Davis held his second swearing-in at the big building in Sacramento. Eleven months later, he was out of a job. His replacement, Arnold Schwarzenegger, visited the auditorium a week before his historic recall win. Arnold vowed to mend state government's dysfunctional ways; his reform agenda was unceremoniously terminated.

That Jerry Brown, California's next governor come January 3, would choose the same locale to begin a dialogue on the predominant issue facing him in 2011—a state budget deficit that's $28 billion and climbing—shows the once and future "Governor Moonbeam" isn't superstitious. But just what he can achieve, beyond one-day summits and public posturing, is anyone's guess.

Then again, the enigmatic Brown has long been one of California's favorite guessing games.

Having held the job from 1975 to 1983 (succeeding some fellow named Reagan), Brown is returning to the governor's office either in an act of civic-mindedness or as a compulsive campaigner. He beat Republican Meg Whitman decisively in a bitter fight over personality and not policy—so what is his blueprint for fixing California's woes? And, perhaps most vexing of all, can the notoriously peripatetic Brown (twice a presidential candidate during his two terms as governor, and a third time against Bill Clinton in 1992) stay focused on what presumably is the final chapter in a four-decade political career?

Here are three reasons why Brown could, theoretically at least, provide positive answers to those questions:

He has nowhere (else) to run. At age 72, Brown will soon be the nation's oldest governor—of a state devoted to life, liberty, and the pursuit of age-defying solutions. Sure, there's no stopping Brown from challenging President Obama in 2012 if he wants to be a latter-day Harold Stassen. The problem is, unlike his "we the people" crusade against Clinton and the Democratic establishment in 1992, Governor Moonbeam Version 2.0 wasn't designed with ideology in mind. In California's 2010 gubernatorial race, Brown didn't campaign as a neo- or paleo-Democrat. Instead, he offered himself as a tightwad and an experienced government hand—in short, the anti-Whitman. It's not what the left craves in the way of an anti-Obama insurgency. This is good news for Californians, who have suffered the consequences of three previous governors distracted by national politics.

He has nowhere to go but up. Californians like to use four-letter words to describe the goings-on in Sacramento—"hope" not being one of them. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, only 13 percent of voters approve of the two branches of state government's working arrangement. Only 2 percent of Californians trust the state to always do right. Just 3 percent have a great deal of faith in Sacramento's decision-making process. After seven years of a predecessor enamored of "fantastic" ideas (hydrogen highways, high-speed rail, curbing greenhouses gases), there's an opening for Brown. And that would be embracing smaller-scale ideas, much as Bill Clinton did in rebuilding his presidency. The governor-elect isn't much a fan of the initiative process (though California seems headed to a big initiative fight in 2011 over taxes), which might

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Bill Whalen, a Hoover Institution research fellow, analyzes California and national politics.

also work to his advantage if he can end the seemingly endless cycle of campaigning that characterized the Era of Arnold—with the exception of 2007, California has held a regularly scheduled or special statewide election every year since 2002.

He may be able to say no to his own base. Gray Davis, the last Democrat to rule California (and, by the way, Brown's gubernatorial chief of staff), took office after 16 years of Republican governors. He wasted little time before lurching to the left, paying back public employee unions that had paved his way to victory. Brown did the same in 1975 as a newly elected post-Reagan governor, pacifying liberals with all kinds of goodies, including collective bargaining rights for the aforementioned unions. The difference then: Brown was an idealist. Now, he's more pragmatic—or so he'd have you believe. He's also sending mixed signals about seeking a second term in 2014, meaning he might feel less beholden to labor's purse strings. The liberals who dominate the state legislature will expect Brown to sign bills that Schwarzenegger vetoed: state-run single-payer health care, access to college financial aid for illegal aliens. Brown may not be as accommodating. It's worth remembering that Brown was the last California governor to have a veto overridden (12 in all during his two previous terms).

In the meantime, something far less speculative is California's horrific fiscal outlook. In addition to the $28 billion budget shortfall that must be solved by next summer, lawmakers face an ongoing $20 billion annual spending-revenue imbalance for the foreseeable future. California's credit card is maxed out, with $15 billion already owed in "recovery" bonds for budgetary borrowing. Of course, that's peanuts compared with California's pension obligations, which may run as high as $500 billion. America's nation-sized state holds the dubious distinction of being the world's eighth largest economy with one of the worst credit ratings in the country. Not that a recovery is expected any time soon: California employment won't return to its prerecession level for another eight years at least.

Where this is taking Brown and his fellow Democrats seemed obvious after his Memorial Auditorium dog and pony show on December 8 (and a similar event in Los Angeles about a week later): a tax increase, put before voters in a special election at some point in 2011. Perhaps Brown was simply preaching to a choir of Democrats who don't believe California has a spending problem, but the liberal spin was hard to miss: The Golden State ranks next to last in students per teacher and is fourth worst in number of state employees per resident. Meanwhile, there was precious little talk of privatization, outsourcing to local government, or trimming government waste. Brown also repeatedly referred to California as "the world's eighth richest political jurisdiction," perhaps a warning sign that he'll soon ask the citizenry to surrender more of that wealth.

But before he does so, maybe Brown should talk to the outgoing governor. In special elections in 2005 and 2009, Schwarzenegger campaigned for 10 ballot measures. All 4 of Arnold's measures in the first special election went down to defeat, buried in an avalanche of campaign spending by liberal special interests. In 2009, Arnold tried to sell California on 6 budget-related initiatives. All but one—prohibiting pay increases for lawmakers during deficit years—lost handily; only one of the 5 losing initiatives received more than 38 percent support.

The antigovernment trend continued this past November. Californians approved Proposition 26, requiring a two-thirds majority for fee increases by the legislature—a virtual impossibility. Two other initiatives marketed under the guise of revenue enhancement—Prop 19, legalizing recreational marijuana use, and Prop 24, undoing business tax incentives—were soundly rejected. Voters even said no to an $18 automobile fee to finance state park operations.

Schwarzenegger understood the folly of his ways, telling reporters at one point: "If I would do another *Terminator* movie, I would have Terminator travel back in time and tell Arnold not to have a special election." Time will tell if California's next governor—also a time traveler, from out of the Golden State's past—discovers the same remorse. ♦

Britain's Exploding Exports

Where suicide bombers go for higher education.

BY **ROBIN SIMCOX**

London

If you wanted an example of a well-integrated European Muslim, you couldn't have done better than the pre-2001 version of Taimur Abdulwahab al-Abdaly. In Sweden in those years the Iraqi-born Abdaly played sports, went clubbing, worked as a DJ, and even had an Israeli girlfriend. But that was then; on December 11, the 28-year-old launched a suicide bomb attack in the center of Stockholm, Sweden, killing himself and injuring two others. So, what happened to Abdaly during the last decade? Unfortunately, what turned a regular Muslim adolescent into a fanatical jihadist is plain for everyone to see—it is the British educational system.

Robin Simcox is a research fellow at the Centre for Social Cohesion in London.

Abdaly moved to the U.K. in 2001 to study at the University of Bedfordshire in Luton, near London. A friend of Abdaly's told London's *Daily Telegraph* that once he started studying there, "everything changed . . . he had grown a beard and he was very serious. He talked about Afghanistan and religion. . . . Someone had taken advantage of him and had brainwashed him." And so Abdaly becomes another name on the growing list of those who have passed through British schools and gone on to commit Islamist terrorist attacks. If the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, the war on terror is being lost in the labs and lounges of our universities.

A report I coauthored with Hannah Stuart and Houriya Ahmed for the Centre for Social Cohesion earlier this year showed that of all Islamism-inspired terrorists convicted in British courts or responsible for suicide bombings in the U.K. between 1999 and 2009, at least 31 percent attended a British university. Among the more famous, Omar Sheikh attended the prestigious London School of Economics before he masterminded the 2002 kidnapping and beheading of Daniel Pearl. And then there's Omar Sharif, who went to King's College London before his 2003 suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv pub called Mike's Place that killed 3 and wounded 50. Furthermore, as we noted in our study, five terrorists have been senior members of a university Islamic society (ISOC). These include Waheed Zaman, part of the al Qaeda cell that aimed to set off homemade liquid bombs on transatlantic flights in 2006, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to detonate a bomb concealed in his underpants on a flight to Detroit last Christmas Day.

It was the Abdulmutallab case that opened a window onto British academia's culture of denial. As president of the University College London (UCL) Islamic society, Abdulmutallab was known to have organized extremist events and exhibits, one of which juxtaposed images of mujahedeen fighters against the collapse of the World Trade Center. One student who attended said that he was shocked. "It seemed to me like it was brainwashing," he told the press, "like they were trying to indoctrinate people." How could Abdulmutallab's views have escaped the school's attention? Under pressure from the media, UCL established an internal inquiry. Not surprisingly, the investigation concluded that UCL was in no way culpable for failing to notice either Abdulmutallab's radical beliefs or the attempts of his ISOC to influence students.

British universities are in denial about extremist students.

Sometimes even when the school is paying attention it seems not to matter. Consider the case of Mohammed Atif Siddique, a student that Glasgow Metropolitan College staff saw accessing terrorist websites on several occasions. According to British court documents, school officials were "reluctant to do anything for fear of some accusation of racist conduct." In 2007, Siddique was charged with terrorism-related offenses, like providing instruction or training for the purpose of assisting, preparing for, or participating in terrorism; and distributing or circulating a terrorist publication.

Of course, the reluctance, or inability, to describe things as they truly are is the price paid for political correctness. No one would hesitate to condemn a campus culture in which students were inspired by neo-Nazis to carry out terrorist acts in the name of white supremacy. And yet the liberals and leftists who typically fill faculty and administrative positions would never dream of holding the Muslim community to the same standards. Instead, they are much more likely to invent a convenient narrative, one in which, for example, Muslim threats of violence and terrorism are really just responses—and quite understandable ones at that—to Western war-mongering. In this view, suicide bombing is a legitimate defense of Muslim lands against the neo-imperialism of the West. The Islamists loudly denouncing British, as well as American, foreign policy, insulting our soldiers, and glorifying terrorism are just exercising their rights to freedom of speech. And by hosting clerics like Murtaza Khan, universities are admirably defending these rights—even as Khan advocates stoning women for adultery, preaches that Jews and Christians are the "enemies" of Muslims, and claims that it was the West, rather than al Qaeda, that slaughtered nearly 3,000 people on 9/11.

In the end, it is the moral bankruptcy of our academic intelligentsia that has allowed and now empowered radical clerics like Khan to operate on British campuses. At some point in the near future, another young Muslim educated in the U.K. will take what this cleric and many others say to heart. This student will try to murder as many people as possible because he thinks his religion demands it and the West deserves it. And university authorities will once again look the other way. Perhaps at some point British society will put its foot down, and complain that it's sick of our tax money funding factories that turn young Muslims into terrorists. But in the meantime, we Brits can no longer feign surprise that our universities are churning out al Qaeda's foot soldiers.♦

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The Boy from Yazoo City

Haley Barbour, Mississippi's favorite son

By Andrew Ferguson

Jackson, Mississippi

Governors move about in a bubble. From home to car to statehouse to plane, from ribbon-cutting to banquet to car to home, they are cushioned in a space built by bustling aides and scary-looking troopers in buzz cuts and plain clothes. In the bubble the governor is king, pasha of his own status-sphere, a singular figure of unchallengeable importance. There's no one else quite like him in Helena or Jefferson City or Columbus.

And then the bubble transports him to somewhere like the Republican Governors Association conference, held last month at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront. The bubble encounters other bubbles. Awkwardness and disorientation ensue. At the Hilton's VIP entrance the black SUVs nosed one another to get closer to the red carpet so the pashas could be disgorged. Troopers eyed other troopers and whispered darkly into cuff links. Advance men fidgeted, as they always do, indifferent to all pashas but their own, trying to pick one governor's luggage from a great dogpile of gubernatorial luggage. At the elevator banks and escalators, in the lobbies and meeting rooms, it was the same: a collision of status-spheres, a paralyzing standoff.

So it was, anyway, at this year's RGA, for all the governors but one. Haley Barbour—governor of Mississippi, chairman of the RGA, and likely presidential candidate—required no traveling status-sphere, for the Hilton itself was his bubble, before which all other bubbles went pop. When he appeared in those hallways or meeting rooms, crowds parted in deference and then, when he paused to chat with someone or other, came together to surround him in solicitude. Other governors, de-bubbled, hovered at the edges of his orbit, hoping to get a greeting.

They had come to the RGA to share in its greatest triumph, a near sweep of gubernatorial contests on November 2, for which Barbour is held more responsible than any other national Republican. He's been here before. During his first full year as chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1994, Republicans won the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. This year's victories once seemed equally improbable. Barbour became chairman last year in a moment of crisis, when the previous chairman, Mark Sanford of South Carolina, was shown to have a weakness for Argentinean divorcées, or at least one Argentinean divorcée. Barbour's first move was to replenish the RGA's coffers—he is the Midas of political fundraisers. In midsummer he tossed a $12 million lifeline to the struggling campaigns of Chris Christie in New Jersey and Bob McDonnell in Virginia, buying each enough time to regain his financial footing and go on to an upset victory in November. This year the RGA spent $102 million, compensating for notoriously feeble fundraising at the RNC. Republicans won nine of ten swing states, eight of which had Democratic governors; and four out of five Great Lakes states, all governed by Democrats.

"Wherever the races were hot and heavy—Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin—the rest of us kind of followed in the draft created by Haley and the RGA," said Ed Gillespie, the Republican strategist and Barbour protégé. "His impact has been dramatic, and people know it."

Since he first entered national Republican politics, as a young lawyer from Yazoo City, Mississippi, Barbour has been one of the most popular figures in the party. "If you don't like Haley Barbour," Gillespie said, "you've got something wrong with you." Amiable and humorous and tirelessly upbeat, his persona is large and unusual enough to pass for colorful in today's politics. There's the voice, for one thing: an accent so rich and unapologetic—*nine* comes out *nan*—that a Yankee used to the gentler roundings of more acculturated Southerners might think he's getting his leg pulled. The Barbour style of pronunciation involves a fatal collision of sibilants, as if he'd left the dentist's office before the Novocain could wear off. He doesn't so much walk as saunter. Though not tall, and not as heavy as his legend suggests—what poundage there is looks tightly packed—he's physically imposing, not to say intimidating,

Andrew Ferguson is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard.

First among equals: Haley Barbour center-stage at the Republican Governors Association conference in San Diego last month.

AP PHOTO / DENIS POROY

with impressively large hands and head, and short thick arms that swing freely when he walks. You don't have to be a Midwestern weenie to imagine him as the Southern sheriff in *Deliverance*, squinting at Jon Voight through aviator sunglasses and suggesting he might want to get his pale Yankee ass out of town.

But some Republicans have started to see more than a fundraising genius in the good old boy from Yazoo. "Being a very successful two-term governor makes a difference," Gillespie said. "He's still a hail-fellow well-met, he still loves people, he's still a master of the political game. But after Katrina"—the hurricane that wiped out a third of Mississippi in Barbour's second year in office—"after the budget fights he's been in, taking on the trial lawyers, there's a gravitas there now. It used to be everyone just called him 'Haley.' Now they're just as likely to call him 'Governor Barbour.'"

But President Barbour? All year he has been deflecting questions about his presidential ambitions, saying he wouldn't consider the topic while he concentrated on the business at hand—a big Republican win in November. ("The main thing," he would say, "is to keep the main thing the main thing." This is one of his "Barbourisms." Being a cracker-barrel aphorist is also enough to make a politician colorful nowadays. Another Barbourism, slightly more ominous: "Ask for forgiveness, not permission.") Yet in San Diego, with the election two weeks gone, Barbour still wouldn't budge when reporters pressed him, beyond an admission that he'd think about the matter and decide next spring.

In San Diego he was surrounded by governors who with little effort can see themselves as president too: Rick Perry of Texas, Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, Mitch Daniels of Indiana, and probably more we haven't heard of. When the governors lined up for a picture in the Hilton ballroom, however, it was Barbour who maneuvered himself into the middle of the line-up. Their bubbles didn't matter here, and no one tried to stop him.

"It's not really a delta," Bubba Mott said. "It's an effluvial plain. The real delta is down south, of course, by New Orleans. But we like to call it the Mississippi Delta. Sounds better than Mississippi flood plain, doesn't it?"

Whatever you call this lowland crescent tilting toward the Mississippi, plain or delta, Yazoo City is on the edge of it. The writer Peter Robinson once noted an unfailing distinction between Northerners and Southerners: If you mention the name of Haley Barbour's hometown, the Northerner will try to suppress a snicker, and the Southerner will wonder what in the world the Northerner is snickering at. Yazoo City is "the gateway to the Mississippi Delta," or flood plain, and also the county seat of Yazoo County. It sits

with its back to the last undulations of the Mississippi hill country and its face to the Yazoo River, canalized by a levee to the west. In between lies the city itself, which Mr. Mott admitted "is not what it was."

Old photos of downtown from the first years after the Second World War show a thriving commercial district, five blocks long, lined on either side with cars and jitneys parked up against sidewalks filled with men in boaters and women in complicated hats. There were three restaurants, three theaters, and shops enough—"with fine merchandise," Mr. Mott said—to satisfy the wants of the most cosmopolitan Yazooan. From downtown the residential neighborhoods radiated out toward the schools, a white school near the white neighborhood, a school for blacks near the black neighborhood on the other side of the railroad tracks. Everyone walked everywhere, Mr. Mott said, to school or to town for shopping, because everything you needed was only blocks away. On Friday nights the streets would swell with arrivals from the surrounding farms and plantations for the high school football games, giving downtown the feel of a fairground. Once the game started, the streets were deserted and the shops would close. When it was over, Main Street flooded again with customers and the shops would throw open their doors and the theaters resume their entertainments. This was the Yazoo City that Haley Barbour was born into and would soon see fade away.

For decades Mr. Mott owned the *Yazoo Herald*. He has known some combination or other of Barbours his entire life. Barbours have been in Yazoo for at least five generations. Haley's mother LeFlore claimed descent from Greenwood LeFlore, the first elected chief of the Choctaw nation. The chief was a wily customer who managed to elude the forcible removal of his tribe in the 1830s and get himself elected state senator, accepting the demotion without complaint. Politics runs through both lines of Haley's family. His great-great-great-great-grandfather was the first senator from Mississippi after statehood in 1817. His paternal grandfather was a judge, the leading stockholder in the town bank, and a prominent railroad lawyer, the Illinois Central's man in Mississippi. He built a fine two-story stone house at the corner of Second Street and the optimistically named Grand Avenue; both the choice of building material and the second level made the house unusually magnificent in a town of clapboard bungalows.

Haley's father built a house next door when he married LeFlore. He was a lawyer, too, remembered in the lore of Yazoo City as a hard-drinking charmer who could seduce a delta jury with theatrical flourishes and windy

quotations from classical literature. He died of a heart attack when Haley was two. LeFlore worked odd jobs as she raised her three boys alone.

Mr. Mott drove me through the neighborhood where Haley and his brothers, Jeppie and Wiley, grew up, and where Jeppie still lives, a few blocks from downtown. A couple houses stand empty. The side streets dead end at the railroad tracks. On the far side of the tracks are the historically black neighborhoods. "They *were*," Mr. Mott said, when I asked how the neighborhoods were segregated. "Now of course people live wherever they want to." He did note that the real estate market in Yazoo City has been in a steep decline since well before the most recent collapse. A local realtor told him not long ago that in the past ten years fewer than ten houses had been built to sell.

Mr. Mott considers Haley Barbour the greatest governor the state has ever known. Normally chatty and light-hearted, he grows severely serious when he says this. He had taken me to the old white elementary school—none of the black schools survived desegregation—which has been turned into a "cultural center" and a history museum. The biggest exhibit recalls that day in July 1977 when President Carter came to Yazoo City to hold a nationally televised town meeting and then spend the night. (The centerpiece of the exhibit is the headboard of the bed the president slept in, its authenticity certified by a brass plaque.) The next-biggest exhibits are dedicated to Willie Morris, the once-famous Southern overwriter who whipped memories of his Yazoo childhood into a series of sweet, frothy memoirs, and to Haley Barbour. Barbour's exhibit is a tall poster-board triptych, painted blue and draped in patriotic bunting. Black and white autographed photos of Barbour with various Republican presidents are arranged here and there. At the center the governor and his wife Marsha smile in full color from the cover of a Christian magazine.

"Some politicians just talk about it," Mr. Mott said gravely, remarking on the importance of staying true to one's roots. "But Haley believes it. He lives it. He went off to Washington to work. But he lived here. He always came back on the weekends. He still does, with all his responsibilities. He still attends the Presbyterian church like he always did. Now he's got guards, so he comes late and leaves early, not to create a disturbance. You could not find a deeper Mississippian than Haley Barbour."

Certainly it's a theme the governor himself warms to.

"There's a sense of place here you don't find in other places, a way of belonging," Barbour told me later. He still recalls a statistic from the 1970 Mississippi census, which as a young man he helped direct. "The percentage of Mississippians who said they had been born here was 91 percent. Ninety-one percent! It's lower than that now, but it's still higher than normal, than what you'd find anywhere else. I had an office in Washington, D.C., for 19 years and I met people who didn't know where their grandparents were buried." He tucked in his chin and widened his eyes, as though he'd just caught the family cat smoking a cigar. "In the South, that's just unheard of."

As an illustration of Mississippi's "way of belonging," Barbour mentioned the law firm his grandfather started with his brother-in-law in 1895. Haley practiced there in the 1970s and 1980s. It's now run by one of Haley's brothers and one of Haley's nephews. "That firm has been on the same block in Yazoo City for 115 years," Barbour said, with great emphasis. "In that time it's moved twice, from one side of the street to the other. But always on the same block."

'I had an office in Washington, D.C., for 19 years and I met people who didn't know where their grandparents were buried,' Barbour said. 'In the South, that's just unheard of.'

Once I asked one of Haley's childhood friends, Chuck Jordan, now of Greenville, Mississippi, what it was like growing up in Yazoo back then. "It was just an ideal childhood," he said. "I think of dances, parties, football, Little League, boys doing all the things boys do in a small town." Barbour has the same memories. "I grew up in a town that was like a family," he said. I mentioned that all the Yazooans I talked to about the old days made sure to tell me how everyone walked wherever they had to go—a marker, I supposed, of simplicity and leisure. "That's true," he said, "although you couldn't walk two blocks before someone offered you a ride. That's what I mean about family."

The center of attention in the Yazoo family was often one of the Barbour boys. The high school yearbook from Haley's senior year, 1965, has a two-page spread dedicated to him alone. The photographs are printed in the typical incomprehensible yearbook style, as if they'd been airbrushed on the page with gray ink. But it's easy enough to make out the BMOC, to borrow a phrase from 1965. One photo shows an unexpectedly trim Haley in formal attire with a pretty companion, after their election as Mr. Yazoo City High School and Miss Yazoo City High School. Below that was a thick paragraph of accomplishments: four-year letterman in football, two-year letterman in baseball; president of the High Wire Club; coeditor of the yearbook;

American Legion Award, National Athletic Scholarship Society, National Honors Society; vice president of the student council and president of the student body. "Known for his cocky friendliness and versatility," said the caption, "Haley Barbour was elected Mr. Yazoo City High School capping four years of honors at Yazoo High. Despite his activities, he was a straight 'A' student."

The page opposite shows him on one knee in full football attire, helmet on hip. Another photo caught him in his letter sweater, holding a bulky microphone and declaiming earnestly.

"He was probably running for something," said Harold Kelly, Barbour's high school football coach and the principal, back then, of Yazoo High. Mr. Kelly had given me the yearbook to thumb through. "He ran for everything. He came into my office one time and said, 'Coach, I'm going to run for president of the student body.' He was just a junior at the time. I said 'Haley, that's a position for seniors. Wait your turn. Wait till next year.' He said he'd gone and checked the bylaws and there wasn't anything in them that prevented a junior from running for president. I could check. So I took the bylaws down and read through them and of course he was right. So he ran and he won. I came home that afternoon and I told my wife, 'I've just been talking to the future governor of this state.'"

The year 1965 was also a signal year in Barbour's political development. His older brother Jeppie came home from the Army and shocked the family by declaring himself a Goldwater Republican. As a politically well-connected family in Mississippi, Barbours had been bred to be Democrats since the Pleistocene Era. But there were subtleties and gradations. "We were Eastland Democrats," Haley told me, referring to James O. Eastland, the long-serving U.S. senator, steadfast conservative, committed segregationist, and the bane of the national party's left wing. As it happened, Barbour said, "our grandfather was Eastland's daddy's lawyer." The two families had long been close. ("Mississippi is more like a club than a state—everybody knows each other," Chuck Jordan said.) Coming out as a Republican, Haley said, "took a lot of guts on my brother's part."

No doubt that's true as a personal matter, but ideologically the leap from Eastland Democrat to Goldwater Republican was not death-defying. Haley followed, and so did other Barbours, including LeFlore, who bragged to her children that she had never voted for a Democrat for president, and never voted for anyone other than a Democrat for any lower office—a bipolarity typical of the Eastland Democrats. "She voted for Strom Thurmond in 1948," Barbour said. "She even voted for Willkie in 1944. There were three votes for Willkie in town, her and her mother and daddy. The way the town reacted, she said you would have thought Hitler got those three votes."

Jeppie decided to run for mayor in 1968, and Haley, then in his third year at the University of Mississippi, volunteered as campaign manager. Jeppie won on a platform that included the revitalization of downtown, which already was showing signs of decay as stores closed or moved out to the new strip malls opening on the outskirts. But the issue that overwhelmed Yazoo City, and brought it national attention, was school integration.

In 1969 the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals issued an order forcing the city to integrate its school system by January 7, 1970, more than 15 years after the Supreme Court outlawed "separate but equal" public education. When Haley graduated, Yazoo City High School had yet to admit a black student. (He encountered black classmates, very few in number, for the first time at Ole Miss.) Yazoo public schools had been separate but not, of course, equal; per pupil spending in black schools was less than one third what it was in white schools. As deadline day approached reporters flocked to Yazoo City from the three national television networks, the wire services, most large metropolitan newspapers, and several newspapers from England and France.

"The only problem I remember was," Jordan told me, "we had all these reporters staying here from all over the world, and we didn't have a bar in town! So we set one up in the library."

Willie Morris was in Yazoo City for deadline day too, like Haley a son of the segregated South, though unlike Haley a racial liberal. "By the middle of the day," Morris wrote in *Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town*, "it was quite apparent that Yazoo City had indeed integrated its schools calmly and deliberately." The national reporters presented the city to the world as a model of how integration at its best could work. The new school system was roughly 55 percent black, and as the deadline passed few whites withdrew for the handful of private schools that had hurriedly opened not long before.

Jeppie Barbour is one of the protagonists of Morris's book. He is portrayed as a racial moderate, despite his boasts about the Mace canisters that local police had taken to wearing on their belts. "You get a drunk," Morris quotes Jeppie saying, "you either get him to come with you or you have to manhandle him. You give him Mace and he'll want to go anywhere with you. It keeps that nigger's head in good shape."

Jeppie saw the policy of the city's white leaders not as capitulation to the federal government but as resignation to the inevitable. "We're gonna make the most of this," he told Morris. "It won't be any fun. We don't have many

newcomers, and it's hard to leave here no matter what happens. We're not gonna have any mass exodus, black or white. . . . We don't have much other choice."

Both Mr. Mott and Mr. Kelly had told me that Yazoo City was perhaps the only municipality in Mississippi that managed to integrate the schools without violence. I asked Haley Barbour why he thought that was so.

"Because the business community wouldn't stand for it," he said. "You heard of the Citizens Councils? Up north they think it was like the KKK. Where I come from it was an organization of town leaders. In Yazoo City they passed a resolution that said anybody who started a chapter of the Klan would get their ass run out of town. If you had a job, you'd lose it. If you had a store, they'd see nobody shopped there. We didn't have a problem with the Klan in Yazoo City."

In interviews Barbour doesn't have much to say about growing up in the midst of the civil rights revolution. "I just don't remember it as being that bad," he said. "I remember Martin Luther King came to town, in '62. He spoke out at the old fairground and it was full of people, black and white."

Did you go? I asked.

"Sure, I was there with some of my friends."

I asked him why he went out.

"We wanted to hear him speak."

I asked what King had said that day.

"I don't really remember. The truth is, we couldn't hear very well. We were sort of out there on the periphery. We just sat on our cars, watching the girls, talking, doing what boys do. We paid more attention to the girls than to King."

Mr. Kelly, the former football coach, drove me through downtown and then out to the house that Haley and Marsha Barbour still own, where they raised their two sons. I could recognize downtown Yazoo City from the old photos, but only by its configuration. It looked as if it had been picked clean. There were a couple of bars, a hardware store, and a café that seemed to open at odd hours, and not much more. On one block the empty storefronts had been painted a variety of bright pastels, like San Francisco row houses, in a sad emulation of vitality. Mr. Kelly told me that an entrepreneur had been trying to refurbish some of the old buildings as condo lofts, the way they have in other, larger downtowns up north, but without success. Where families once walked to downtown for new clothes or appliances, they now drive an hour south to the suburbs of Jackson, the state capital, and hope in the meantime that the city government succeeds in its efforts to lure a Walmart out to the bypass.

Mr. Kelly turned around and drove out toward the hills. The relief and earnest fellowship of January 7, 1970, proved fleeting. Jeppie Barbour had been wrong: There was indeed a mass exodus, but within the city itself. After two years the white student body had declined sharply, as parents withdrew their kids and enrolled them in the new private schools. The public schools today are more than 80 percent African American. It's been a kind of privatized resegregation. Even before integration, the more affluent Yazooans had begun detaching themselves from the neighborhoods around the central city and moving into ranch houses and split levels on large lots carved from the woods outside of town. Haley and Marsha's house is up a winding road on a hillside covered in dogwood and sweetgum trees, just above the nine-hole Yazoo Country Club. Down the hill and across the tracks, Mr. Kelly showed me, is Manchester Academy, where the Barbours sent their two boys. It's a private K-12 school, founded in 1969.

"It was built for people who didn't want their children to go to public schools after integration," Mr. Kelly said. Just down the road, ground is being cleared for the new Haley Barbour Parkway.

Yazoo City, today—no longer the thriving town where Barbour grew up.

NEWSCOM

What role Yazoo City's segregationist past might play in Barbour's presidential campaign is hard to say. It could become an issue, particularly for Washington political reporters who enjoy moralizing about race and public education while sending their own children to progressive schools like Sidwell Friends and St. Albans, where applicants of color are discreetly screened and their numbers carefully regulated. An even bigger issue, though, might be Barbour's lobbying. Political reporters as a rule are highly suspicious of lobbyists, and Haley Barbour was one of the best lobbyists Washington has ever seen.

After Jeppie's victory Haley decided to give himself up to Republican politics almost entirely. He worked for Richard Nixon's campaign, which brought him a plum patronage job, directing the 1970 census in the state. "There wasn't a lot of competition," he said. He never returned to Ole Miss to finish his undergraduate degree, though he did get a law degree in 1973. He joined the family firm in Yazoo City and traveled the state trying to build the party. Republicans then, he says, were the party of youth and progress—"made up of Jaycees and Boy Scouts"—in contrast to the Democrats, sclerotic from a century of single-party dominance and burdened with the legacy of segregation. "I was Republican county chairman when I was 25," he told me, "and I was the oldest Republican county chairman in the state."

Barbour embraced the new, unapologetic culture of lobbying with his customary skill and enthusiasm, and by the time he left his firm to run for governor, his client list read like a corporate all-star roster.

In 1979, he managed the Southern states for the presidential campaign of the former governor of Texas, John Connally, considered at the time to be Ronald Reagan's chief conservative rival for the 1980 nomination. Arrogant, willful, and volatile, Connally raised and spent $11 million before the campaign even reached the Southern primaries, a sum that bought him a single vote on the convention floor. Back in Mississippi two years later, Barbour capped a decade of party-building with a run for the U.S. Senate seat held by John Stennis. Like Eastland, Stennis was a pillar of Democratic politics and a right-wing stalwart. Barbour was 35 and Stennis was about to celebrate his 81st birthday—a milestone that became the centerpiece of Barbour's campaign. Barbour's yard signs and bumper stickers carried the not-terribly-subtle motto "A Senator for the Eighties." But the senator *in* his eighties was a political friend of President Reagan, who declined to campaign for his fellow Republican Barbour after Stennis implored the president to stay away. Even so, Barbour managed to raise $1.6 million, an astounding sum for the time and for the state. He lost with a respectable 35 percent of the vote. His relations with the Reagan White House remained strong enough for him to get a job in its political office, working with the young Hoosier Mitch Daniels, still one of his closest friends.

When Barbour moved to Washington he left Marsha and the boys in Yazoo City. "We never regretted it," he said. "The boys graduated from Yazoo City schools. They got a good small-town experience growing up. The alternative would be growing up in Northern Virginia, McLean or someplace. And Marsha had a lot of great friends in Yazoo City." But as Mr. Mott solemnly told me—as every friend of Barbour's in Mississippi will tell you—"he came home every weekend"; or "most weekends," as others say; or "every other weekend," as Barbour himself says. He was in any case a long-distance parent, as most politicians must be. Of his life in Washington, Marsha once told *USA Today*: "I haven't really been that much a part of it. He's so busy and so consumed. He hasn't been home for an anniversary in a long time, or a birthday." It's a one-way bargain that the wives and husbands of politicians often strike. "I could be alone in Yazoo City or alone in Washington," she was once quoted saying. "I prefer Yazoo City."

It was the contacts he made through the Reagan White House that set the table for his lobbying career. In January 1987 Barbour quit political office and returned part time to the law practice in Yazoo City. But the tug of Washington was too insistent to resist. "You may not know this," he said to me, mordantly, "but you can make a lot more money lobbying in Washington, D.C., than you can practicing law in Yazoo City, Mississippi." He broke from the family firm for good in '89 and set up shop full time in Washington. He worked solo at first. "I didn't want to be a part of a big firm," he said, fearing it would restrict his commuting to Yazoo. "It also meant that I didn't have to take credit or blame for the clients of some partner down the hall."

By the time Barbour set to work in Washington, the nature of lobbying was in the final phase of a profound transformation. It had once been the work of discreet and solitary wise men, a Democrat like Clark Clifford or a Republican like Bryce Harlow, who could resolve a client's difficulty with a phone call or a whispered word over dinner and resisted the title "lobbyist" as déclassé. Clifford visibly shuddered at the sound of the word. The breakdown of the seniority system in Congress rendered

the old techniques obsolete, indeed impossible: Power that had once been centralized in a few committee chairmen was scattered, placing hundreds of legislators on more or less equal footing—each his own little power center, open for business. And the remorseless expansion of the federal government into areas of commercial life that had once been off-limits opened up vast new mission fields for lobbyists. And they were no longer ashamed to be called lobbyists.

Perhaps this last change was the most profound. Today the word, and the business, are considered no more discreditable than "podiatrist" and "podiatry." It's just another way to make a ton of money in Washington. "You bet I was a lobbyist," Barbour says, often. "And I was a damned good one." His tone when he says this is peremptory and defensive but unabashed.

"Lobbying is just like being a lawyer arguing a case in a courtroom," he told me. "It's a form of advocacy." This analogy—comparing lobbying to our adversarial system of justice—is popular among lobbyists. They have even adopted the terms of lawyering: They create accounts in firms with clients for whom they write briefs. The analogy has its problems, though. Ideally the adversarial argument in a courtroom is resolved by a disinterested third party, a judge who determines for the record, once the arguments are made, what's true and what isn't. When a lawmaker is lobbied, by contrast, every party has an interest, including the lawmaker; the arrangement has no use for a disinterested arbiter. It's pure persuasion—an effort in which fact and argument are only two tools among many others. When lobbyists spend a great deal of time going to parties with the people they lobby and writing large checks for their reelection campaigns, they are not doing so to tighten their arguments. The successful lobbyist may or may not be the one with the strongest case or the soundest facts; he is definitely the one who has most artfully brought the most pressure to bear. Lawyers who try this with judges get disbarred; lobbyists who do it with legislators get rich.

Barbour embraced the new, unapologetic culture of lobbying with his customary skill and enthusiasm, and by the time he left his firm to run for governor, in 2002, his client list read like a corporate all-star roster: Microsoft, BellSouth, Pfizer, Citigroup, Delta, GlaxoSmithKline, Exxon. In 1991 he took on two partners to form a firm called BGR. Throughout the nineties it was routinely listed among the top five lobbying firms in *Fortune* magazine's annual survey of Washington insiders. No insider was further inside than Barbour. In 1993, while working at BGR, he was elected chairman of the National Republican Committee. As chairman he was responsible for deciding which candidates would receive financial support from the RNC. If they won, they were grateful and would soon have the pleasure of being lobbied by the man who had decided to give them financial support. The conflict of interest was brazen but commonplace: DNC chairman Ron Brown had rigged a similar arrangement for himself with his fellow Democrats.

BGR was—and still is, though without Barbour—a Republican firm. From the most powerful partners to the lowliest receptionists, it hired only Republicans. It lobbied Republicans only on behalf of positions congenial to Republicans. One-party firms are rare in Washington, where a bland and carefully balanced bipartisanship is a surer guarantee of a broad client base and acts as a hedge against the ever-shifting allocation of power. But among the newly emerging Republican majority of the 1990s, Barbour's firm gained a reputation for excellent ideological hygiene. "There were some things we wouldn't do," Barbour told me. (He may be the first lobbyist ever to utter those words.) "We didn't represent just anybody. We had to agree with the underlying principle, at least. We were always pro-business. We wouldn't do protectionism. We wouldn't do labor issues."

They did, however, do tobacco. Professional good-government types look on Barbour's lobbying career with horror, and when you ask why, they'll likely point to a single line item from 1997, slipped into an omnibus spending bill hours before the bill was voted on. In its combination of sneakiness and audacity, the incident has become part of the Barbour legend.

At the time the large tobacco companies were paying vast sums to state governments as compensation for medical expenses the states incurred treating residents with tobacco-related illness. The companies reasoned that the payments were essentially taxes that they should be able to write off their federal tax bill. The argument was good enough for Barbour. The former head of the Republican National Committee went to see Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott. He arrived in the final hours of a furious battle over a balanced federal budget, just in time to draft a provision and tuck it into the law without debate. For several weeks it looked as if he had saved the companies $50 million. Another day, another dollar: or rather another million dollars, the fee he earned from his tobacco clients, according to press reports. Weeks later, however, the provision was uncovered and brought to light—you never know what you'll find when you start reading legislation. It was reversed after a suitable uproar. Barbour kept his fee and his tobacco clients.

For all its certified Republican fondness for limited government, BGR was, like all Washington lobbying firms, a creature of big government. Big government is what made Haley Barbour rich. Without it no one would have needed to hire him to beg Congress or the executive branch for loopholes, exemptions, tax credits, line items, carve-outs, extenders, earmarks, or any other of its infinite blandish-

ments. Because the primary tool of lobbying is talk, it is a low-expense, high-reward business. Of all the methods of Beltway banditry—public relations, advertising, polling, image consulting, campaign management—it is by far the most lucrative, with profit margins often reaching 50 percent. Barbour and his partners sold the firm in 1999 to the international marketing company Interpublic. The *New York Times* reported the price to be $20 million, paid on condition that Barbour and his partners continue to run the business. Which he did until he heard Mississippi's call.

So deeply was Barbour enmeshed in the money culture of Washington that he even put up money for a restaurant in partnership with Tommy Boggs, a fellow lobbyist (Democratic flavored) with a reputation as large as Barbour's. Called the Caucus Room, it is less an eatery than a staging area for Washington operators. The fare is steak and martinis, the prices are inflated beyond reason, the décor is all mahogany and manly leather, and the floor plan ensures a dozen nooks and crannies and tucked-away rooms for private parties. Walking in you can't help but think that there's one restaurant designer who's seen too many episodes of *West Wing*. Except the Caucus Room is real, and it was an instant success with Barbour's friends on Capitol Hill. Over one two-year period, Bloomberg News reported, members of Congress spent more than $300,000 at the Caucus Room, with an average bill of $1,140. Barbour has since sold his stake, but for a time his involvement with the restaurant was almost a parody of Washington insiderdom—a Christopher Buckley novel come horribly to life. A congressman could pay Barbour's restaurant for a private room to host his fundraiser, at which, as often as not, someone from Barbour's firm would show up with other lobbyists to give him a donation for his fundraiser which, if everybody was lucky, would help him get reelected to Congress where, according to plan, he could be lobbied by Barbour himself.

Feeding, funding, and finagling: Haley Barbour provided one-stop-shopping for all your Beltway needs.

I asked Eddie Mahe, a longtime Republican consultant and a man Barbour calls his mentor, about what role the lobbying career might play in Barbour's run.

"If he does run for president," Mahe said, "there is no doubt that you will see lots of ads in the primaries branding him a rich, slick Washington lobbyist. But he's astute enough to understand the vulnerability. He'll frame the issue the way he wants it framed."

For the moment, this is how he wants it framed: "The first thing a president's going to have to do when he takes his hand off the Bible is start lobbying. He's going to need to lobby Congress. He's going to need to lobby the bureaucracy. He's going to need to lobby the governors. He's going to need to lobby our allies and our international competitors.

"And I'm a pretty good lobbyist."

Will this line sell?

"He'll make that case very well," said Patrick Griffin, a Democratic lobbyist and a sometime professional antagonist to Barbour. "He could say, Okay, look at me. I'm governor of Mississippi, and I've been very successful. I've been a lobbyist in Washington, and I was very successful. So what about it? Are you going to evaluate me on my scorecard or something else?

"He could dare 'em to make an issue of it. He's got the personality to do that. And he'd win the argument.

"Besides," Griffin added, "does he look like a slick Washington lobbyist to you?"

"When I first ran for governor," Barbour told me, "my opponent attacked me as a Washington lobbyist. So we did some research. It showed that people thought I'd be a better governor *because* I'd been a lobbyist. Before Katrina, 37 percent of the state budget of Mississippi came from the federal government: Medicaid, highway funds, aid to education. People knew I understood the federal government. People knew I had a lot of friends in the federal government. And they knew it might come in handy."

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the morning of August 29, 2005. It is by some measures the greatest natural disaster in American history. It was surely the governor's finest hour. After 20 months in office Barbour was already popular with voters and—a neater trick—successful with a strongly Democratic and hostile legislature. In his first year he forced through a tort reform that at a single stroke defanged the state's bullying trial lawyers and transformed Mississippi's legal climate, bringing back some of the doctors and medical services that had fled to avoid crushing insurance premiums. For perhaps the first time in the state's history, he introduced honest accounting into the budget, closing a $700 million deficit and beginning an unbroken string of balanced budgets, with only a single tax increase, on cigarettes.

In a dark irony, Katrina made the state's budget-balancing easier. The devastation reached 200 miles inland, killing 230 Mississippians, destroying 60,000 houses, and leaving more than 100,000 homeless—90 percent of the population in the state's lower six counties. (The homeless rate in New Orleans and surrounding areas, by contrast, was 40 percent.)

No one has plausibly assessed Barbour's performance during Katrina as anything short of stupendous. "Right man, right place, right time," said Sid Salter, a reporter for the *Jackson Clarion Ledger*. Salter accompanied Barbour on helicopter tours of the devastated region and recalls

the governor weeping at the sight. "We all had tears in our eyes," Salter said. "I saw hardened crime reporters crying, guys who'd seen just about everything." Even today Barbour wells up when he talks about Katrina: "It was like the hand of God had reached down and swept everything away. I mean, there was nothing left."

The hurricane and its aftermath summoned two talents that Barbour had in abundance: the ability to create organizations on the fly, and the ability to persuade people to give him lots of money. On the ground he oversaw the creation *ex nihilo* of emergency medical centers, bases for search and rescue operations, distribution systems for food and water, and, perhaps most impressive, the useful deployment of an army of volunteers from around the country and the world that would eventually number close to one million. Marsha Barbour became a kind of folk hero for spending weeks in the remotest parts of the state where help was scarce. Meanwhile, Barbour buried Washington in requests for aid. Over the next three months, he made 19 visits to the capital and was responsible for designing every federal aid package that came to the Gulf, not merely to Mississippi. At last count, the federal government had given Barbour's state $24 billion in aid. The state budget isn't quite $6 billion.

AP PHOTO / SUSAN WALSH

The governor and his wife survey damage in Biloxi four days after Katrina made landfall.

Henry Barbour, Haley's nephew and closest political confidant and a lobbyist in Mississippi, said the talk about a "slick Washington lobbyist" ceased after Katrina. "When he was flying to Washington, setting up camp on Capitol Hill, getting help from federal agencies you've never heard of, people started to think, Say, maybe this lobbying thing isn't so bad."

Now the federal aid is trickling to an end, along with Mississippi's $2.4 billion share of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, also known as the Obama stimulus. Like most Republican governors, Barbour opposed the stimulus on principle and used it to balance his state's budget. Barbour's new budget plan cuts spending on most state agencies by 8 percent or more. I asked him if the cuts from his previous budgets had hurt state services.

"Oh no," he said. "Have there been a couple state parks that were closed at one point for a while? Yeah. But those weren't used that much. In terms of the core functions of government, law enforcement, education, roads, we're fine. There's a humongous amount of money being spent on K through 12."

We were flying to an event in the governor's state plane, and from a thousand feet Mississippi looked lovely. He told me the legislature came back in January, and he expected many bloody battles over his proposed budget. The legislature would recess in the spring, and then . . .

And then, I said, you can tell us if you're going to run for president?

"I expect a decision around then," he said.

I told him something his nephew Henry had told me in San Diego: "All the people who say Haley Barbour can't be president because he had a career in Washington are people who have a career in Washington."

Barbour laughed.

"People will tell you there are a lot of handicaps," he said. "I'm governor of a very poor state. They'll say that's a handicap. People will tell you it's a handicap to be from the South. I had an office in Washington for 19 years, working as a lobbyist. I have an accent. People will tell you those are handicaps."

He leaned back and folded his hands across his chest, looking to me like a man who's made up his mind.

"But I don't think so." ♦

Howell Raines, Thomas L. Friedman, Arthur Sulzberger Jr., 2002

Times a-Wastin'

There once was a paper of record

BY JOSEPH BOTTUM

Bill McGowan should have won a Pulitzer for *Coloring the News*, his 2001 tirade against the transformation of mainstream American journalism into a circus show: clowns, freaks, and the fat lady, all in the center ring. As it happens, the book did win a National Press Club Award and sold reasonably well, but it should have sold phenomenally. McGowan should have won everything from the Nobel Prize for chemistry to the Lady Byng Memorial Trophy for gentlemanly conduct in the National Hockey League. He should have had totems carved of him on small Pacific islands. The book should have been displayed on every coffee table in America—because it mattered.

Gray Lady Down
What the Decline and Fall of the New York Times Means for America
by William McGowan
Encounter, 288 pp., $25.95

Hard now to remember, almost a decade on, that there was a moment in 2001, after the attacks of September 11, when it seemed possible for the nation's newspapers and magazines and television news programs to be called to seriousness. Called to abandon the culture wars. To shake loose from all the decadent, shock-the-booboisie feature stories that are luxury goods of a fat and lazy media culture. To go out and report the actual news.

Didn't happen, of course, but McGowan was there at the time with a diagnosis and a plan, all based on his vision of what journalism had been on the rare but real occasions in American history when it practiced its profession with sincerity and skill. And now, with *Gray Lady Down*, he's returned to the subject. The argument is, essentially, that the *New York Times* remains the nation's premier media outlet—which is a fact with dire implications, for the *Times* ain't what it used to be. In journalistic standards, in commitment to the American experiment, and in financial worth to its owners, the grand old Gray Lady has collapsed on the sidewalks of Eighth Avenue. Where a wealthy tourist named Carlos Slim is giving her artificial respiration and fingering her valuables, while the town's workaday citizens hurry by, their gazes averted and copies of the *New York Post* clutched in their hands.

The trouble is that, this time, it doesn't matter. The moment when such anguished cries might have made a difference has long gone by. McGowan loves the *New York Times*, loves it in a way only an old newspaperman and obsessive reader can. But the effect of his book isn't to call the paper back to its better self. It's merely another kick at the old gal

JAMES ESTRIN / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Joseph Bottum is a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

as she lies gasping on the ground.

Yes, she brought it on herself, in many ways. She left her finances in the hands of a spendthrift relative (whose nickname, Pinch, ought to have been a clue). She drugged herself up with section after section of soft feature stories. She talked so incessantly about her crochets and pet peeves that no one wanted her in the house anymore. She carried herself with an arrogance so annoying that her every misstep was greeted with jeers. But now that she's down, why bother putting the boot in?

On the day the current instantiation of the *New York Times* dies—gets sold by the Sulzberger family, or bankrupted, or turned into an online-only publication—the nation's writers will fill their columns and blogs with long thumbsucking accounts of what it means for the decline and fall of America. For a week or two. And then they'll move on. Because, the truth is, the *New York Times* doesn't really matter all that much anymore. It's a local paper with pretensions, a newsletter from the vicar of a once important but now mostly moribund parish, and the brutal economics of these days will eventually gobble it up.

Not that *Gray Lady Down* is a bad read. Remember the *Times*'s coverage of the rape accusations against the Duke lacrosse team? Remember the ins and outs of its relation with Judith Miller during the runup to the Iraq war? Remember Jayson Blair, whose "widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper," as the *Times* itself ended up having to admit? McGowan reminds us of those stories and much more besides. Particularly in the chapters on race, homosexuality, and the culture wars, *Gray Lady Down* recounts all the little bits—the slanting of prose, the prettifying of photographs, the assigning of beats—that add up to an astonishing amount of dishonesty at the newspaper: a raging left-wing agenda masked by the claim to be objectively reporting the news.

McGowan clearly believes that things were better, once upon a time, which creates the most significant problem in the book: its author's conviction that things could be better once again. *Gray Lady Down* opens with an account of the funeral of A. M. Rosenthal, the longtime editor whose death (in 2006) marked the end of an era. And throughout, McGowan uses Rosenthal as a symbol and a shining light, the figure who teaches how things ought to be.

The trouble is that the Rosenthal Era was over long before A. M. Rosenthal's death. First joining the *Times* in 1946, he stopped editing it in 1986 and ceased writing his column in 1999. For that matter, even Rosenthal's golden age wasn't all that golden. In the 1970s and '80s, Rosenthal himself created the "sectional revolution" at the newspaper, the addition of topical section after topical section—fashion, science, technology, etc.—that brought in an enormous amount of advertising revenue. But as *Gray Lady Down* repeatedly points out, the soft-news features of these sections created what became standard practice in American journalism, allowing the leftist political opinion and shared liberal culture of the *Times* newsroom first to infiltrate and then to take over the reporting that was supposed to be objective reporting.

In other words, maybe it was always thus at the nation's newspapers. Golden ages only look golden when something even worse follows them. Besides, interesting as it all may be, it doesn't really matter anymore. The *New York Times* is just another local newspaper, in the same financial and circulation trouble as them all. Why, exactly, are we supposed to care? ♦

B&A

An Idea of Order

The imagery of Europe spinning out of control.

BY JAMES GARDNER

Western art is like a deck of cards that scholars forever shuffle and reshuffle in hopes of finding new meanings in the hands they've dealt themselves.

Chaos & Classicism
Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936
Guggenheim Museum
New York
Through January 9

Consider the two decades that intervened between the armistice of November 11, 1918, and the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. As with Western culture in general over the past several centuries, a welter of styles and formal convictions competed, during these years, in the open marketplace of artistic practice. This period saw the emergence of Surrealism and the Bauhaus as well as the evolution of Expressionism, Dada—and much besides. But in this latest offering at the Guggenheim Museum, guest curator Kenneth E. Silver reads the cards differently, choosing to define the period as one of Classicism, which he perceives as having arisen in response to the chaos of the Great War.

Traditionally, the twenties are seen as a period of fairly orgiastic liberation after the pent-up privations and horrors of the Great War, when the better part of a generation was maimed or slaughtered in the trenches of Ypres and the Marne. But for Silver it is more importantly a *rappel à l'ordre*, a call to order, through

James Gardner recently translated Vida's Christiad *(I Tatti Renaissance Library).*

'Self-Portrait' (1922) by Giorgio de Chirico

a renewed insistence on craft, through a quest for serenity and return to realism after the systematic distortions of Expressionism and Cubism.

What informs the curator's argument is the inarguable fact, too often overlooked, that a great many classically themed objects were made during this period. But a far greater quantity was produced in the years leading up to and including World War I. Thus to characterize the period as classical has more to do with how art historians arrange the cards in their hand than with any facts on the ground. Picasso, one of the major figures of the exhibition, had discovered Classicism—or something like it—in his Ballets Russes period (starting in 1917), while another luminary of the show, De Chirico, found solace in the "metaphysical style," which Silver equates with Classicism, as early as 1910.

What Silver's argument has going for it is that a great deal of the classical art produced during the years in question has not usually been viewed as a coherent strain of visual culture, but rather as a sequence of spasmodic interludes and aberrations. Perhaps this is because most art historians have insisted on seeing these years in the context of mainstream Modernism. What adds interest and consequence to this exhibition is that Silver removes the notional divide between Modernism and its enemies and usefully finds far more common ground among them than many critics and scholars had seen before.

But when Silver, a professor of art history at NYU, speaks of Classicism, he is really talking about two things: those artists who energetically invoked the forms and mythology of Greece and Rome, and those who merely rejected the Expressionism of the first 15 or so years of the 20th century, whether through realism, geometric abstraction, or some modified form of Cubism. It is with regard to the first group that Silver's argument is most successful and engaging. The years in question were indeed marked by a *ritorno al mestiere*, or return to craft, after the riotous excesses (as they were now perceived) of the Cubists and Expressionists.

"The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past," Picasso wrote in 1923. "Perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was." It was in this spirit that he began to create his great reinterpretations of Ingres, a trend represented here by Picasso's masterful depiction of his seated wife Olga (1923). This is a study in muted browns and grays, of diffused shadow moving across the sitter's marmoreal face and hands like daylight stealing over the gnomon of a sundial.

Even more explicit in its classical longings is De Chirico's *Self-Portrait* (1922), which depicts the artist from the chest up, beside a marble bust of himself in profile. But more explicit still are the pottery designs of Gio Ponti, who would go on, a generation later, to become one of Italy's most successful International Style architects. Somewhat whimsically, he has created bone white urns and plates, accented with gold, burgundy, and blue, that are populated by naked figures in the art deco style.

It is with regard to the second category of artists whom Silver includes among the Classicists that he runs into trouble. It requires a rather energetic amount of good will to apply the term Classicism to Mies van der Rohe's sundry designs for his famed Barcelona Pavilion, designs as spare and angular and unadorned as you would expect Bauhaus-inspired objects to be. The same might be said for Fridel Dethleffs-Edelmann's *Self-Portrait Wearing an Artist's Smock*, a powerful work of intense realism and keenest observation. If I understand the curator's point, it is primarily included because its realism (like Mies's formal simplicity) roundly rejects the uncontrolled exuberance of the previous generation's Expressionism. But surely neither of these attributes, by itself, is sufficient to qualify as classical!

The frisson of transgression that runs through this exhibition consists in its including certain explicitly classical painters and sculptors who were much admired by Hitler and Mussolini and whose supreme *Gesamtkunstwerk* was the staging of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Among the works in question are several busts, fascinating in their absurdity, of Il Duce as the embodiment of the Nietzschean *superuomo* and reborn Roman emperor. One of the final paintings on view, and I suspect one of its secret stars, is Adolf Ziegler's triptych, *The Four Elements*. This very nearly pornographic depiction of four Aryan women is rendered with a precision that, to many viewers, will doubtless recall the paintings of John Currin, one of the most esteemed artists of the

moment. Ziegler's Nazi bona fides were impeccable: He was entrusted by Hitler with the task of organizing the infamous exhibition of "degenerate art," Cubists, Expressionists, and the like. The present work is said to have hung in the Führer's bedchamber. But however odious a man he might have been, it must be said that Ziegler was an accomplished realist and that there is a beauty of sorts to the present work.

From an art historical perspective, his inclusion in the present show, like that of similarly classical artists, is defensible on several grounds. In recounting the progress of 20th-century art, historians have always indulged in clannish, even cliquish, triage: There is the In Crowd, which includes Picasso, Kandinsky, Pollock, and so on; there are those whose entrée is provisional on good behavior, like Salvador Dali and Andrew Wyeth; and finally there are accomplished realists like Fridel Dethleffs-Edelmann and Antonio Donghi, who never had a chance. But if one refuses to play that game, if one looks at the entire deck of cards laid out face up, it becomes clear that certain artists have been selected or omitted because they did or did not share such formal and intellectual convictions as appeared, until recently, to be nonnegotiable. Surely they cannot rival in consequence the great modern masters; but their purely artistic success is easily equal to that of many painters and sculptors whose names are more familiar to art lovers because they were Modernists, not antimodernists.

Now that Modernism has long since receded into historical canonicity, we are able to see that, politically and even formally, its luminaries shared more with their apparent opponents than has usually been appreciated: in their stylistic self-determination as well as in their sexual explicitness, and in those interludes of realism and Classicism explored in this exhibition. It is a constant of cultural history, though almost never appreciated, that at any given moment apparent antagonists, the followers of Rubens or Poussin, of Wagner or Brahms, of Pollock or Reinhardt, have more in common with one another than either has with anyone who lived in an earlier or later age. ♦

B&A

Dante in Love

Youthful ardor leads to arduous going.

BY CHRISTOPHER BENSON

The great books of the Western canon rest on the presupposition that all the books contained therein are *ipso facto* "great." But what happens if you encounter a book from one of the authors that seems—well, not so great? The initial response is disappointment, like paying a half-month's salary for a dining experience that a food critic likened to the sensations of a supernova, except that your meal ends not with a bang but a whimper. The subsequent response is guilt: Why don't you sense the greatness that *must* be there; is your palette not trained enough to detect the subtleties?

La Vita Nuova
by Dante Alighieri
translated by David R. Slavitt
Harvard, 160 pp., $18.95

Reading *La Vita Nuova*, Dante's first book, induced this disappointment and guilt because, as loath as I am to say, some of the lyrics don't seem a whole lot more elevated than Katy Perry's hormonal hit "Teenage Dream." If I'm a philistine whose blunted imagination cannot apprehend the beauty, compare the lyrics for yourself.

First, Katy Perry:

My heart stops
When you look at me
Just one touch
Now baby I believe
This is real
So take a chance
And don't ever look back.

Now, Dante:

My face grows pale. I feel my body shaking.
In the presence of such sweetness, I am unmanned.
I am reduced to total helplessness and if I could, I'd ask my lady for help, salvation from this strange duress, painful, and yet, I must admit, even more pleasurable than anything I know—although I cannot speak or tell her so.

Yes, more than seven centuries separate these lyrics written by twenty-somethings, but they both emphasize the physiological and ethical malfunctioning that often accompanies love—or more accurately, lust. Perry invites her lover to put his hands on her skintight jeans; and to get Freudian, Dante pleads for his lover to ease the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Where one indulges the fantasy, owing to the sexual liberation of postmodern America (Perry), the other defers the fantasy, owing to the sexual restraint of medieval Catholicism (Dante). Content aside, the lyrical expression is not that different: breathless, terse, above all youthful.

I'm not alone in my disappointment with Dante's inaugural poetry. The Italian scholar Robert Harrison writes:

> The most striking aspect of the *Vita nuova*, for those who do not merely take its canonical stature for granted, or whose perception of the work is not mystified by the fact of its authorship, is the utter seriousness with which the author sets out to dignify and solemnify the rather innocent (and often mediocre) lyric poems that he composed in his youth. The *Vita nuova* gives the impression that Dante was unwilling to allow the poems to stand on their own but strove, through his prose commentary, to give them the sort of weight they lacked in their own right.

Judging these poems "innocent (and often mediocre)" is ageism, plain

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Katy Perry

Dante Alighieri

and simple. But a prejudice against the young can be fair when there's evidence of inexperience. According to Harrison, Dante provides his own evidence by self-consciously and retrogressively defining "the nature and ambition of his literary vocation." *La Vita Nuova* is a book within a book: His "little book" compiles, copies, and comments upon what is written in "the book of my memory." The commentator seems insecure with the author, who's trying to find not only his voice but his leitmotif as well. Under the rubric *Incipit vita nova* (a new life begins), Dante anxiously enters a career with words after finding his muse in a Florentine woman named Beatrice, who blurs the line between fact and allegory.

While the smitten Dante of *La Vita Nuova* doesn't reward the reader like the world-weary Dante of *La Divina Commedia*, we're still witness to the initial ascent of the soul's journey toward God, a journey that gets entangled in the irregular heartbeats of erotic love. Following the autobiographical breakthrough of Augustine's *Confessions*, this story narrates Dante's youthful obsession with Beatrice, whom he first sees in church, an important location because it symbolizes the intersection of *eros* and *agape*. Although I'm skeptical about a nine-year-old who testifies, "It was from that moment that Love tyrannized my soul which in no time had wedded itself to him," he becomes the slave of Cupid—the personification of the Latin noun *cupido* (desire). The burden of slavery goes so far that, after his second sighting at age 18, Love feeds his burning heart to Beatrice in a dream. And what better way to evoke the violent upheaval of *eros* than an image of forced cannibalism?

Sickened with longing for his "young angel," Dante invents a "screen" to hide his feelings for Beatrice: Other women are selected as public objects of his attention. If this lad had been on Freud's sofa, these screen ladies would be diagnosed as sublimation, the super-ego's policing of the unruly id. Whether the screen intensifies or diffuses his love for Beatrice is up for debate, but at the end, it's clear that Beatrice has triumphed over her rivals, albeit in death rather than in life. Anguished over the loss, Dante courts death so he can be near Beatrice again. Eventually, he realizes that the incorporeal Beatrice is superior to the corporeal Beatrice because she was given to him as a rung in the ladder toward heaven, as a face to behold, dimly or brilliantly, "the face of him *qui est per omnia secula benedictus*" (who is blessed for all eternity). Overcoming the self-referential narcissism of youth, the poet has begun, in good Platonic fashion, to govern the appetites of his heart through the reasons of his soul, leading him out of grief and closer to glory.

Translations of *La Divina Commedia* abound, but *La Vita Nuova* has been somewhat neglected. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first to translate it into English; Dante Gabriel Rossetti liberally translated the *libello* and idolized Beatrice in his paintings, who was modeled after his deceased wife, most notably in *Beata Beatrix*. In our day Mark Musa's prose and blank verse translation has become the standard. If you want your verse to rhyme, as it does in the original Italian, then this new translation of David Slavitt's will be welcome. Rhyming hazards the risk of distortion through subtraction and addition, a risk that Slavitt accepts because the fun is working "within the constraints of the forms." The prose commentary of *La Vita Nuova*, which Slavitt rightly describes as "unnecessary and boring,"

BRYAN BEDDER / GETTY IMAGES; CORBIS ART

is rendered in a clear and direct manner, bringing attention to where it belongs: to the poetry.

Following Slavitt's preference for viewing translations as performances, permit me to treat one moment from the famous canzone in Chapter 19. Here, Dante glorifies Beatrice to the point of blasphemy.

> *An angel speaks to the Mind of God to report*
> *that there is a marvel on earth both strange and rare*
> *whose actions arise from a radiant soul down there,*
> *the glow of which illuminates the sky*
> *even to paradise's heights. In short,*
> *our only lack in heaven is her fair*
> *and splendid presence. All the saints declare*
> *that the Lord must take some action to rectify*
> *this defect promptly. Fortunately, I*
> *can announce that Pity speaks to God as well:*
> *His judgment is that the lady ought to dwell*
> *on earth for a while longer: "It is my*
> *will that he say to the souls in hell that this*
> *was the vision he had of hope of heaven's bliss."*

Yeats compared the relationship between form and content to the inseparability of dance and dancer. Form actually generates meaning rather than just containing it. Slavitt's rhymed verse achieves efficient pace and pleasurable repetition, but there's a monotony about the beat that seems ill-suited to the rapturous mood. His diction is clunky, throwing off rhythm and meaning. We might expect such phrases as "in short" to be deployed at the end of a business luncheon, not as a summary of your lover's attributes. *Defect*, used as a synonym for *lack*, connotes more than an absence in heaven, implying a failure of God. The verbs *declare*, *must*, and *rectify* in this sentence—*All the saints declare / that the Lord must take some action to rectify / this defect promptly*—turn the saints into outraged customers and the Lord into an incompetent CEO, as if Google's website had crashed. Compared with Musa's sublime phrase "a living miracle," Slavitt exalts Beatrice as "a marvel on earth both strange and rare," which could make her a carnival sideshow rather than *the highest nature can achieve / And by her mold all beauty tests itself*, as Musa puts it later. The personification of Pity creates some ambiguity about who's speaking when it's clearly God. Divine speech dictates crystalline syntax, as in Musa's *the hope of heaven's blessed*. Instead, we get jumbled syntax in Slavitt's *the vision he had of hope of heaven's bliss.*

At this critical moment, and elsewhere in the performance, the rhymed verse struggles to communicate what we ought to be hearing, though secular ears may be largely deaf to the shock of Dante's extravagant use of sacred language in reference to Beatrice. In this canzone, a mortal woman achieves beatification *prior* to death. Angels and saints conspire to fix the cosmological misalignment. Love itself says, *Upon her face you see depicted Love, / There where none dares to hold his gaze too long*, as if Love fires himself from the job because of her epiphany. Is all this poetic hyperbole? Perhaps it crosses what Robert Harrison calls "the limits of sacrilege."

The live question for any reader of *La Vita Nuova* ought to be this: Has Dante argued that erotic love is *the* royal road to union with God? If Beatrice is a means of coming closer to God, *eros* redeems the lover. If, however, she's an end in herself, *eros* damns the lover because it has become an idol rather than a burnt offering. ♦

B&A

Coincidence?

They think not, neither do they know.

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

To understand the conspiratorial mindset, it helps to be the subject of one.

I had that experience in early 2008, after publishing an article exposing newsletters published by the Texas congressman and gadfly presidential candidate Ron Paul in the late 1970s through the mid-'90s. At one point circulated to nearly a million subscribers in the pre-Internet age, the newsletters were characterized (I wrote) by an "obsession with conspiracies, sympathy for the right-wing militia movement, and deeply held bigotry against blacks, Jews, and gays." Released on the day of the New Hampshire primary, the article caused a small tremor in the presidential race. Paul claimed that he was not their author, nor aware of their content. Most respectable libertarians at places such as the Cato Institute and *Reason* quickly disassociated themselves from a man they had formerly lauded as a standard-bearer.

Voodoo Histories
The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History
by David Aaronovitch
Riverhead, 400 pp., $26.95

But to Paul's diehard supporters, there was something more nefarious at play. They wanted to know how I got my hands on these newsletters. The answer, as I had explained, was simple: I plugged Paul's name into WorldCat, an online library catalogue, which led me to locate collections of the newsletters housed at the University of Kansas (where they are stored in one of the country's most expansive collections of extreme right-wing political documents) and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

But the Paul obsessives were not satisfied by so prosaic an explanation and within a day of my article being posted online had devised their own theory. Individuals at the Cato Institute, corrupted by their exposure to power in Washington, and more committed to

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the attainment of filthy lucre than the realization of libertarian principles, had long held a grudge against Paul and saw a perfect accomplice in a young reporter at a center-left magazine. The Cato people tipped me off to the existence of the newsletters, the location of which they knew because both Cato and KU receive large donations from the Koch Foundation. One of the most generous backers of "Beltway Libertarian" organizations, Koch, in the eyes of true believers, is a sellout to the cause. (The term "Kochtopus," which appeared in a recent *New Yorker* hit job on the Koch family, was devised by extreme libertarians, not left-wingers.) Paul supporters even came up with an epithet—the "Orange Line Mafia," a reference to the Washington subway system—to describe the conspiracy.

The least that can be said of Paul's defenders is that none of them claimed that the newsletters were somehow forged by Paul's enemies. Had Ron Paul not eventually taken responsibility for the epistles, however, they probably would have accused me of counterfeiting. For the conspiracy theorist, should the initial counter-explanation prove untenable, there is always a handy alternative. This is a common tactic of the conspiracy theorist, as documented here by David Aaronovitch, a columnist for the *Times* of London. In this deeply researched and highly enjoyable study of conspiracy theories, he not only debunks several popular myths—ranging from the claim that Franklin Roosevelt knew of the Pearl Harbor attacks in advance and allowed them to happen as a pretext for American intervention in World War II, to the latter-day incarnation of that claim alleging similar perfidy on the part of George W. Bush—but examines what it is that makes conspiracy theorists tick.

Aaronovitch seeks to separate conspiracy—a legal definition characterizing work with others in the commission of a crime—from conspiracy theory. The plot to kill Abraham Lincoln, for instance, was a conspiracy in that it was a carefully devised plan—consisting of several actors—to assassinate the president. What Aaronovitch is concerned with are the array of alternative explanations to commonly held understandings of events and phenomena. Accordingly, he provides a handy definition of a conspiracy theory: "The attribution of deliberate agency to something that is more likely to be accidental or unintended."

Aaronovitch's most useful insight—and the one which perhaps goes furthest into explaining why conspiracy theories are so prevalent throughout history—is his contention that conspiracy theories are ultimately about those who devise them rather than the events in contention. Claiming membership in a small community of people who *really* know how the world works allows one to be "part of a genuinely heroic elite group." In this vein, conspiracy theories set the way for these "lonely custodians of the truth" to make martyrs of themselves while demonizing their intellectual adversaries as irredeemably evil.

The saga of Hilda Murrell, to which Aaronovitch devotes a chapter, exemplifies this tendency. Murrell was an elderly follower of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, a Soviet-backed group the aim of which was to oppose the deployment of NATO nuclear missiles in Europe and bring about the end of Britain's nuclear deterrent. Her 1984 murder at the hands of a local laborer became the subject of righteous outrage for anti-nuclear activists, who intimated that she was really the target of a political hit job by the Anglo-American military-industrial complex. The septuagenarian spinster and rose-grower thus became their secular martyr.

Not all conspiracies are held by figures on the margins of society. One of the more popular theories—that a cabal of influential neoconservatives deceived the American people, Congress, the Pentagon, intelligence agencies, and a majority of the pundit class into supporting a war against Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq—is held by a plurality if not majority of liberals in America, has been endorsed by high-ranking Democratic politicians and left-wing editorialists, and is all but received wisdom among European elites. That it is a view so widely held in respectable quarters makes it no less a conspiracy theory. Similarly, the notion that the Israel Lobby controls the levers of American foreign policy—indeed, controls the world—has gained disturbing currency in recent years. Purveyors of the Israel Lobby thesis are frequent practitioners of one of the most irritating traits of conspiracy theorists, which is the vaunting of their own "courage" at "speaking truth to power" when, in actual fact, they are bringing upon themselves nothing more than the favor of elite media custodians, not to mention increased book sales.

What is it that makes conspiracy theories so protean? Why have people held to them throughout history? Some thrive on nothing more sophisticated than simple bigotry; *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a summation of millennia of crude theories about Jewish power. Aaronovitch believes the creation of conspiracy theories, and humanity's belief in them, may be intrinsic: Believing in an all-encompassing theory gives the powerless a sense of being powerful and helps alleviate the individual's insignificance in a world where technology can have a dehumanizing impact. Aaronovitch quotes David Mamet, who writes that "it is in our nature to dramatize"—that is, to spin stories about our lives and the world to make complicated and uncomfortable things easier to understand. They also put us at the center of the world, writes Aaronovitch, acting as a "defense against indifference, against the far more terrible thought that no one cares about you."

A recent poll shows that nearly one in five Americans believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim. Much of this sentiment can probably be chalked up to frustration over the challenges facing the country, and ascribing failure to overcome them to the family origins of the president is a lot easier than owning up to their intractability. As this necessary book explains, the most pernicious effect of conspiracy theories is that they hinder us from confronting the truth. ♦

B&A

Mencken's Afterlife

Saving the Sage of Baltimore from conventional wisdom. **BY ALEC MOUHIBIAN**

"So many young men get their likes and dislikes from Mencken," wrote Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*. Go ahead. Go to your nearest campus and find a single English major who's heard of the Sage of Baltimore. You will sooner find a virgin who hates vampires. They might even be the same person.

Records are made to be broken, but the variety of reputations achieved by H.L. Mencken (1880-1956) in the century since he first hit the presses is truly out of reach. His outdated status as a youth sport is only one example. Who else will ever manage to be blacklisted three times by three vastly different administrations of thought police so many decades apart? The first, for ethnic reasons, came during World War I. The second, for political reasons, came during World War II—by which time the man whose journalism had been the jazz of American letters became a little too purist for the smart set. They were lining up at the bakery of half-baked ideas; Mencken wouldn't touch those ideas if he had to live on capitalism the rest of his life. Resented for his isolationism and fierce opposition to the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt, Mencken resigned from the *Baltimore Sun* in 1939, forced to finish his life as a relic—good for a morning chuckle, perhaps, but not much else.

And then, 33 years after his death, came crown number three. It followed the 1989 publication of Mencken's diary. According to some very good people, these diaries proved two things: one, that their author was a racist and anti-Semite; and two, so was anyone who continued to read him. Far from sanitary, way short of okay, Mencken swiftly joined the fraternity of forbidden minds, where he (along with recent inductee Philip Larkin) could be kept from corrupting the young. Even at his most popular, however, Mencken wore multiple masks.

H.L. Mencken, 1946

"He was using words as a weapon," reflected Richard Wright in *Black Boy*.

> I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weakness of people, mocking God, authority.

Yet this same destructive critic worked a night job as the most important literary champion in our history, persuasively elevating Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Ring Lardner, and many another native artist in the process of fortifying American literature on its own terms against Anglophilia and Eurolust. This same deep-frier of philistines was ready to trade "the whole Acropolis for one American bathroom." The contradictions perplexed his strongest admirers, even then. Which brings us to the question of how, precisely, Mencken is comprehended today.

The question matters, not only for his sake but for our own. Satirical journalism is now the chief source of news and taste for people under 40, and all satirical journalism in America—filtered one way or another through generations of imitators—flows from the tradition of Mencken. So many young men, after all, get their likes and dislikes from Jon Stewart. In September, the Library of America reissued the complete set of Mencken's *Prejudices* (1919-1927), the six-volume series containing his best essays. The release suggests that, after 20 years, the hysteria over the diaries may have faded. The suggestion is most welcome. But I'm afraid the contemporary view of Mencken still sells him short. At best, he is largely considered a master stylist who offers little more; at worst, he's a bigot or a cliché—a multiple-choice answer to an exam on the Scopes trial. Cliché being the homage ignorance pays to pretension, the originality and substance of his thought go frequently unnoticed.

Everyone knows Mencken the blasphemer, but which living atheist star could write a line like the following, from an article on the fundamentalist Rev. J. Gresham Machen: "If he is wrong, then the science of logic is a hol-

GEORGE KARGER / TIME & LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES

Alec Mouhibian is a writer in Los Angeles.

low vanity, signifying nothing." Everyone knows Mencken the skeptic, but which professional skeptic would realize that "the happiness of any given skeptic is always to be found, not in his doubts, but in his surviving delusions." Everyone knows Mencken the literary expert, but what proud wordsmith would so readily admit that "complete honesty, intellectually, seldom expresses itself in formal words: its agents of notification are rather winks and sniggers, hip flasks and dead cats."

I cite these not as evidence of complexity. What they signal, before all else, is a stage far higher than the one we're used to. Attacking from an institutional cushion—whether of the smirky liberal or comfy conservative variety—our current iconoclasts typically serve up their targets as villains of some kind of obvious truth. They know the answer to every question they ask. Their audiences know, too, and need no applause sign to make their knowingness known. Mencken never colluded with an audience: He always squared up man-to-man, his own soul equally at stake, because he recognized that his opponents were actually fellow contestants in the vain human aspiration to finish first in a race of one.

The result could still be a bloodbath. It could also be a joyous dance. There is a satire that destroys its targets and another, subtler kind that makes them more interesting than they began. Mencken's magic was to do both at the same time. Facing a distinctively honest or original mind, he rarely failed to notice and sing its praises, no matter where it came from or how deeply its biases differed from his own. He elegized priests, businessmen, wives. He could spot a "peasant touched by the divine fire" and support writers of vastly disparate style and purpose. What sophisticated literatus alive would promote to publishers such a blunt instrument as Ayn Rand, as Mencken did when the young immigrant sent him her first manuscript in 1934?

Honest failures, too, were treated with sympathy. Writing of (the now largely forgotten) Hamlin Garland, Mencken captured the tragic case of a displaced writer who sees and smells the divine fire with no hope of feeling its flames: "An awareness of beauty is there, and a wistful desire to embrace it, but the confident gusto of the artist is always lacking." And his obituary of Calvin Coolidge expressed a prescient appreciation of our last limited governor. After years of lampooning, one might even think Mencken came to like Silent Cal. But "like" is such a strong word. Let's go with "unhate."

Frauds, of course, deserved no peace. Pedantic frauds, political frauds, artistic frauds, and their earnest enablers—to observe the Turkish funeral Mencken gave them is to have the pleasure of watching them die all over again. But his efforts always aimed at identifying the permanent, perennial form of fraudulence at their core. At this he succeeded repeatedly, and his lasting character studies of ideas surely amount to more than a stylistic achievement. His trenchant critique of the welfare state, and its essential criminality, comes to mind.

But take a lesser known example, such as Thorstein Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, coiner of "conspicuous consumption." Whole industries of sociology and fiction have sprouted from the repressed materialism of Professor Veblen's anti-consumerist theories, whose anatomy Mencken described as "the self-evident made horrifying, the obvious in terms of the staggering," sustained by that special talent "to take what every one knows and pump it up to such proportions that every one begins to doubt it." Reading Mencken precisely and hilariously neuter such dogma makes you sense the evaporation not only of Veblen but also John Kenneth Galbraith, Noam Chomsky, and most award-winning fiction of the last half-century.

Style was partly to blame for Mencken's shortcomings, or at least his confused legacy. Mencken wrote and wrote and overwrote, no doubt relishing his sole opposition to taboos that no longer exist. Some of the rhetorical excess clouded his subtler thoughts and inspired countless anti-Americans—unable to imitate his wit or courage or lucky frown—to absorb only his contempt. Introducing an anthology called *The Impossible H.L. Mencken*, Gore Vidal offers the phrase "United States of Amnesia" several times. And yet, in a curious way, these faults refute the deeper charges against Mencken, for they resulted not from too much cynicism but too little. Confronting our politics in full color, every day, the reporter was too caught up in all its visible weaknesses to notice its hidden strengths. Nor was he detached enough to treat professed opinions with the proper perspective.

"You cannot gauge the intelligence of an American by talking with him," Eric Hoffer observed, "you must work with him." Judging an American by his words is like judging a basketball player by his words, but Mencken was often too sincere to do otherwise. Critics of his assaults on American democracy note that, while they were usually true enough, enough isn't quite enough: not in the 20th century, not after Mencken's praise of, say, Wilhelmine Germany. Does it not behoove a lover of liberty, even a satirist, to present a better system for its preservation if he finds the most stable one on record to be doomed? The point is fair, but it deserves a counter. If liberty could never survive on Mencken's arguments, neither could it survive on the proper arguments alone without unscripted tributes to the vitality and grace of the true Individual. Heir of no group, parcel of no trend, Mencken was original, and his originality was his greatest and ultimate contribution.

My favorite Mencken story features his conversion of a friend to Catholicism. One day, as Mencken told it, his friend came to him shaken by doubts about papal infallibility. Mencken had no trouble affirming the concept from biblical premises, and a crisis was averted:

> Some time later, when this man was on his death-bed, I visited him and he thanked me simply and with apparent sincerity for resolving his old doubt. . . . He died firmly convinced that I was headed for Hell, and, what is more, that I deserve it.

The perfect ending for a man who mocked our values, destroyed our hopes, and gave us faith. ♦

B&A

Danse Macabre

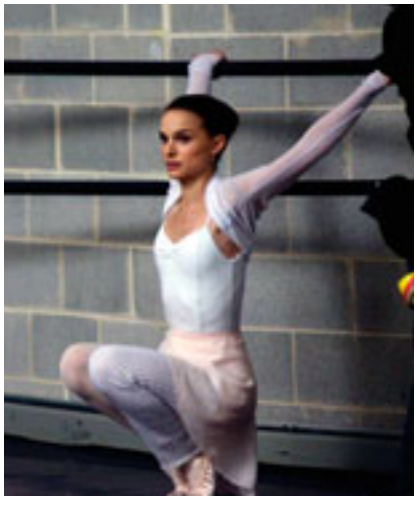
A ballerina's swan dive. **BY JOHN PODHORETZ**

Black Swan is an intimate and inexpensive little movie that might be on its way to breaking out as a major hit—this year's *Juno* or *Little Miss Sunshine*. Made for $13 million, it's earning mammoth grosses in limited release. Like those predecessors, *Black Swan* has crowd-pleasing qualities that suggest it may prove intriguing and palatable to a much larger audience. But while *Juno* and *Little Miss Sunshine* used the conventions and techniques of scruffy independent films to tell fundamentally heartwarming stories about families, *Black Swan* uses those same conventions and techniques to tell the story of a high-strung New York City ballerina and her descent into madness.

The result is a lurid horror flick that might scare the bejesus out of a teenager whose idea of a great time at the movies is a blood-and-gore fest like *Saw* or *Hostel*. That horror-loving teenager will be too young to know that what he'll be seeing is a cross between 1948's *The Red Shoes* and 1968's *Rosemary's Baby*. *Black Swan* borrows from the plot of *The Red Shoes*, the British classic about a determined ballerina whose life comes to mirror the story of the girl whose enchanted footwear compels her to dance until she dies. And it borrows from *Rosemary's Baby* in its depiction of an isolated Upper West Sider who gets what she most wants only to find herself lost in a paranoid frenzy because of it.

Those films were anchored by indelible starring performances: Moira Shearer's dazzling turn in *The Red Shoes* and Mia Farrow's perfect depiction of innocence under assault in *Rosemary's Baby*. In *Black Swan*, Natalie Portman also gives a knockout performance that will be remembered decades from now. She spends the entirety of the movie like a priceless piece of Limoges teetering on the edge of a high shelf. The gorgeous fragility she radiates creates an almost unbearable tension in the audience about what will happen when her China doll finally begins its plunge to the marble floor beneath.

Black Swan
Directed by Darren Aronofsky



Natalie Portman

She plays Nina Sayers, who has been for several years a member of the corps de ballet—the dancing chorus—of New York's premier company when she is suddenly cast in the leading role in *Swan Lake*. She lives alone with her mother (Barbara Hershey), who makes noises about how her "sweet girl" is just working herself too hard. Nina is both the fulfillment of her mother's ambitions and her rival in them; the mother, who had to quit the same company decades earlier when she became pregnant, undermines Nina's confidence in tiny but devastating ways.

The *pas de deux* between mother and daughter is the most original and bracing aspect of *Black Swan*, directed with extraordinarily heavy-handed authority by Darren Aronofsky. (There is, literally, one joke in it.) The least original aspect is the character of the company's hard-driving choreographer, Thomas (Vincent Cassel). He's every Svengali impresario the screen has ever seen rolled up in one, and his every line of dialogue transforms *Black Swan* into the worst kind of showbiz cheese. Nina easily embodies the pure White Swan. But she cannot find its demonic alter ego, the titular black swan, within her because she spends so much of her energy repressing any tendency toward emotional and sexual abandon. Thomas demands that she *feel*, that she *seduce*.

On the surface, the plot is as howlingly silly as Thomas's lines. We are meant to understand that Nina is slowly going mad because she is so terribly *repressed*—if only she could eat a burger and allow her pansexual fantasies to become real, she'd be just fine.

But if we don't take its storyline literally, *Black Swan* is actually up to something interesting. The fairytale plots of ballets like *Swan Lake* are really just as wild and lurid as the plot of *Black Swan*, and Aronofsky and his three screenwriters have actually found in their overripe story a cinematic analogue to the emotional extremism of ballet.

The movie begins with a nightmare Nina has in which she is the princess at the beginning of *Swan Lake* upon whom a sorcerer casts the spell that transforms her into a swan. Like *Swan Lake* itself, what follows in *Black Swan* is the acting-out of Nina's worst fear and deepest desire.

Ballet attempts to mix a certain degree of horror (girl under transformative spell by wicked wizard) with extraordinary beauty (the human body transforming itself into a vision of superhuman grace). *Black Swan* mixes the horror of Nina's downward spiral with the extraordinary beauty of her determination—represented by Portman's own transcendent beauty as a peerless object of the camera's gaze.

Black Swan is, like ballet, crazy and brilliant and stupid and unforgettable. Unlike ballet, it's never boring. ♦

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