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BY ANDREW FERGUSON

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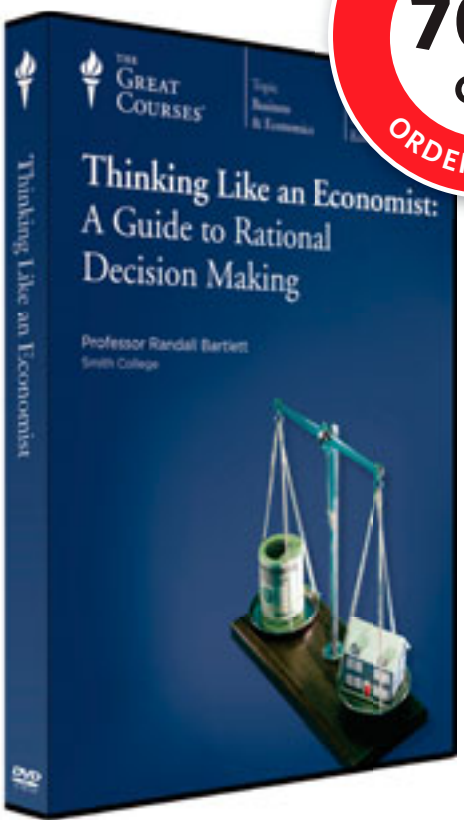

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Do-Gooders Gone Wild

Liberals love to gripe about military spending. Just last week, *Washington Post* managing editor Raju Narisetti actually wrote on his Twitter account: "Thought encounter of the day: 'Would be good if our schools are fully funded and DoD has to hold a bake sale to buy its next fighter jet.'" It would also be good if, à la *Red Dawn*, a ragtag band of plucky high school kids could drive an invading army out of Colorado—*Wolverines!*—but we'd best keep a few aircraft carriers around just in case. Considering that America's worst school districts tend to be some of the best funded, Narisetti might consider this sentiment not so much a "thought" as an encounter with a bumper sticker likely to be found on a '76 Volvo wagon.

In fact, earnest liberals might want to take a good long look in the mirror when considering why we're so broke. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported last week that the famously liberal city by the bay has a procurement process that makes the Pentagon look positively Scrooge-like. City policies "mean paying about $240 for getting a copy of a key that actually cost a worker $1.35 to get done at a hardware store on his break." In another case, the paper found the city had paid $3,000 for a

And after we secure social justice, perhaps we could sell you one of these

"vehicle battery tray" that could be found online for as little as $12.

Now it would be one thing if this were simply incompetence, but San Francisco's problem is a direct result of the city government's misdirected do-gooderism. The city has rigorous "social justice" requirements for contractors that include everything from enforcing a ban on tropical hardwoods to ensuring they've never been involved in the slave trade. Regarding that last sticking point, blogger Moe Lane quips this "would be an impressive moral stance to take if it weren't for the minor detail that they never seem to require that sort of thing from, say, the Democratic party."

Rather than deal with the costs of "social justice" compliance, many would-be contractors have found a novel solution: Any business with the city is done through a third party that amounts to little more than a shell company that meets the "social justice" requirements. The middleman takes a markup of anywhere from 10 to 150 percent, according to the *Chronicle*. But the important thing is preserving the illusion that San Francisco city council members are saving the rainforests, oblivious to the fact they're really just throwing taxpayer funds down a rathole. It seems the road to hell is paved with Brazilian walnut. ♦

Nice Work If You Can Get It

Comic books and state budgets collided recently in Minnesota when it came to light that, in 2010, the Twin Cities' public library system paid author Neil Gaiman a hefty speaking fee to give a talk. In a fit of pique, state house majority leader Matt Dean said that Gaiman is a "pencil-necked little weasel who stole $45,000 from the state." Gaiman has written both science fiction novels and screenplays, and is also known for his work in comics. He responded gamely to Dean's criticism. "If I actually wanted to come after you, dude, I could," Gaiman said of Dean in an interview with the *Star-Tribune*, which went on to report that "Gaiman said he would not file a lawsuit, but was considering other options that would be 'so much more fun than going legal.'"

But the substance of Gaiman's defense was a little strange. In an interview with a local alternative newspaper, he claimed that (1) his speaking fee was actually only $40,000; (2) he only took home $33,600; (3) he normally gets upwards of $60,000; (4) he spoke for four hours, putting his hourly rate well under $10,000; and (5) in any event, he gave the money to charity.

As defenses go, that's about the best Gaiman can hope for, because the rest of the story is even more unflattering to him and the librarians who paid him. The Twin Cities library system paid Gaiman using money from the state's Heritage fund, a program set up in 2008 that raised the state's sales tax for 25 years in order to set aside money for outdoor projects and the arts. Minnesota itself is facing a $5.1 billion budget deficit right now, but Gaiman claims that when the library called him offering the $40,000, they said that "they have this money and it can only be spent on speakers in libraries. It can't even be spent on books or paper clips or staff. And they will lose it, and if they haven't spent it, their budget will be cut by that amount." So rather than help the library and the state of Minnesota live within its means, Gaiman took the money. (The library also billed nearly $2,800 in travel expenses for Gaiman, who lives just over the Wisconsin state line.)

There's nothing wrong with taking free money, of course. And Gaiman is entitled to take Minnesota's suckers for all they're willing to give him. But his huffy, and ultimately revealing, defense shows that Representative Dean at least had the "weasel" part right. ♦

Weight Watchers

Being a kid in America is getting harder these days. The Scrapbook can still recall our carefree summers of enjoying a well-earned ice cream sandwich after a long day playing outside. We cannot remember a time we were asked by anyone to count our calories or keep a food diary. As long as you drank a SunnyD with your after-school snack and ate your serving of broccoli with dinner, your diet could be deemed "well balanced."

Kids today, however, must prove their commitment to personal health and well-being. In San Francisco, you can only earn your Happy Meal toy by choosing a meal with a reduced amount of calories. In some states, you must prove your care for your fellow students (and teachers) on your birthday by forgoing the cupcakes and bringing a healthy snack instead.

Now, Big Brother is taking a closer look at lunch trays in the cafeteria. A new program in San Antonio, Texas—yes, land of Tex-Mex and barbecue—will carefully monitor lunches in area elementary schools. These select cafeterias will be fitted with cameras that photograph children's meal trays after they've made their selections and will photograph their trays again when they are done eating to calculate the leftovers. A special program will then analyze the food for caloric content and nutritional value. Each tray is marked with a special bar code to identify the child, and the findings will then be sent home in a report to the parents. This is to allow parents to "see" what their children are eating and help adjust their diets accordingly. (Of course, results could be skewed if any last-minute lunch-time trading occurs.)

As far as The Scrapbook is concerned, we're wondering how some of our old school-lunch favorites would stack up—gone are the days when bologna had a first name. ♦

Of Thee I Sing

The Scrapbook hasn't done the dishes or swept the stoop in days. We've been too busy reading *What So Proudly We Hail*, a new anthology of American short stories, speeches, letters, and patriotic songs edited by Amy A. Kass, Leon R. Kass, and Diana Schaub (ISI Books, $35). This whopping collection—790 pages—is stuffed with great reading. Just don't drop it on your foot.

The good professors have gathered texts from some of America's greatest statesmen and writers. Their goal is to illuminate questions of national identity, creed, character, civic virtue, the goals of civic life, and unity and integration. "The patriotism we seek to encourage," the editors write, "is deep, not superficial; reflective, not reflexive; and, above all, thoughtful." Inside you'll find authors who run the gamut from Benjamin Franklin to Herman Melville; George Patton to Michael Shaara; Tom Wolfe to our own Andrew Ferguson. These are writers, the editors continue, who "make us think, challenge our unexamined opinions, expand our sympathies, elevate our gaze, and introduce us to possibilities open to citizens in our everyday American life that may be undreamt of in our philosophizing." They are also—this is important—fun to read.

What's great about *What So Proudly We Hail* is that you can open it to any page and immediately begin exploring timeless questions of American creed and culture. And there are no better guides to the material than the Professors Kass and Schaub.

Memorial Day is coming up. What better time to celebrate the exceptional cultural products of this exceptional nation? And Father's Day is right around the corner. Get Pops a copy—the whole

family will be singing "America the Beautiful" and quoting Lincoln in no time. ♦

The Puppet Presidency

Weekly Standard reader John W. Thomas of Cincinnati writes to us wondering

> if Bill Kristol is familiar with Larry Niven's book *Ringworld*, where a cynical race of aliens called Puppeteers manipulate humans. Their leader is known as the "Hindmost" because he leads from behind! Is this then the source of The Scrapbook's musings about exactly what kind of an alien the president's father was ("Birth of a Conspiracy" in the 5/9/11 issue)? Perhaps Obama is a "space alien." Or maybe we're all living in a fictional universe, one where a liberal, antiwar president has us in three wars at once? Perhaps life is just stranger than fiction.

Frankly, we're not sure we want to know the answer. ♦

Nerd Alert!

A recent correction from the *New York Times*:

> An item in the Extra Bases baseball notebook last Sunday misidentified, in some editions, the origin of the name Orcrist the Goblin Cleaver, which Mets pitcher R.A. Dickey gave one of his bats. Orcrist was not, as Dickey had said, the name of the sword used by Bilbo Baggins in the Misty Mountains in "The Hobbit"; Orcrist was the sword used by the dwarf Thorin Oakenshield in the book. (Bilbo Baggins's sword was called Sting.)

Inexplicably, the *Times* failed to mention that Sting glows blue when orcs are nearby. Or so we've been told by one of our senior writers who asked to remain nameless in order to preserve his dignity. ♦

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The Weekly Standard (ISSN 1083-3013), a division of Clarity Media Group, is published weekly (except the first week in January, third week in April, second week in July, and fourth week in August) at 1150 17th St., NW, Suite 505, Washington D.C. 20036. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to The Weekly Standard, P.O. Box 421203, Palm Coast, FL 32142-1203. For subscription customer service in the United States, call 1-800-274-7293. For new subscription orders, please call 1-800-283-2014. Subscribers: Please send new subscription orders and changes of address to The Weekly Standard, P.O. Box 421203, Palm Coast, FL 32142-1203. Please include your latest magazine mailing label. Allow 3 to 5 weeks for arrival of first copy and address changes. Canadian/foreign orders require additional postage and must be paid in full prior to commencement of service. Canadian/foreign subscribers may call 1-850-682-7644 for subscription inquiries. American Express, Visa/MasterCard payments accepted. Cover price, $4.95. Back issues, $4.95 (includes postage and handling). Send letters to the editor to The Weekly Standard, 1150 17th Street, N.W., Suite 505, Washington, DC 20036-4617. For a copy of The Weekly Standard Privacy Policy, visit www.weeklystandard.com or write to Customer Service, The Weekly Standard, 1150 17th St., NW, Suite 505, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Muckraker

Any journalist who has ever said anything worth saying—or in my case, more than a few things they regret—is all too familiar with hate mail.

Years ago, someone hurled a rather bizarre insult into my inbox: "Why I bet you've never had calluses on your hands in your life!" I'm happy to report my hands are blissfully callus-free at the moment. Believe me, I've had much more unpleasant jobs.

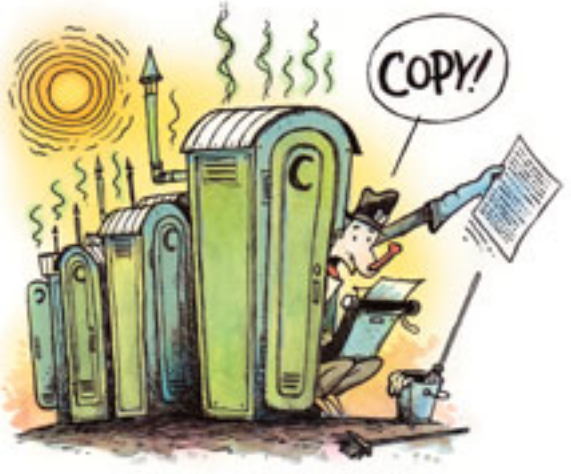
One summer in college I worked at a port-a-potty place. I took the job because I was told I would not be dealing with the, uh, business end of portable toilets. The job was assembling new (read: unused) port-a-potties.

I took large pieces of flat-packed, injection-molded plastic and pieced them together with an air compressor and a rivet gun. (It was vaguely like assembling Ikea furniture.) When each toilet was complete, I would attach a vinyl sign advertising the company's phone number and slogan: "We're #1 and #2!"

Toward the end of the summer, there was a sudden crescendo of demand for the mobile waste management business. A county fair, the big annual rodeo one town over, and the music festival downtown all coincided—and then the mountains started billowing smoke. The county I'm from in Oregon is bigger than Delaware, and it's mostly National Forest. Depending on the weather, it can take weeks to put out a forest fire. Firefighters streamed in from all corners of the state.

I did my cushy job and marveled that everyone around me was working 70-hour weeks. I felt especially bad for the poor guys who drove the trucks with the suction hoses that cleaned the waste out of the toilets. Those guys were as filthy as they were exhausted at the end of the day.

The company was taking new toilets out into the field as fast as I could build them. Curiously, the owner of the business had also invested in some brand new products. I assembled giant handicapped-accessible toilets. I also made about 10 portable toilets that had sinks built in—you pumped the water with a foot pedal.



DAVID CLARK

I wasn't done assembling the toilets with sinks when the owner asked if he could put them to use. The wastebaskets I was supposed to rivet into the sides hadn't arrived yet, but that hardly seemed essential. So I said sure, go ahead and take them.

It was my last day on the job, when the owner came to talk to me. I was only working half the day. My friends and I were scheduled to hop into an old Volvo station wagon that afternoon and drive from Oregon to Mexico and back—but that's another story.

The owner asked if I'd noticed the flatbed trailer filled with toilets in the lot out back. They were impossible to miss. They'd been brought in from the rodeo a few days before and just sat there in the August sun. You could smell them from an impressive distance.

The owner explained to me that these were the toilets with the new sinks. It seems that for the four days they'd been in use, people had been washing their hands in the sinks and drying them off with paper towels from the dispensers I had lovingly installed.

Except without the wastebaskets, people quite naturally thought to throw the paper towels in the bottom of the toilets. But unlike toilet paper, which breaks apart in the water and chemicals in the toilet tank, the paper towels were clogging the suction hoses.

"Those toilets have got to be cleaned out somehow," the owner said, looking at me unusually intently. "You know how busy we are, and I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't have to. I know it's your last day, and you can say no."

I honestly had no idea what he was asking me to do until I realized he was holding a pair of elbow-length rubber gloves and pointing at a box of trash bags.

I thought for a moment about how hard this guy and his entire staff had worked that summer. He'd also paid me $15 an hour for a relatively easy job.

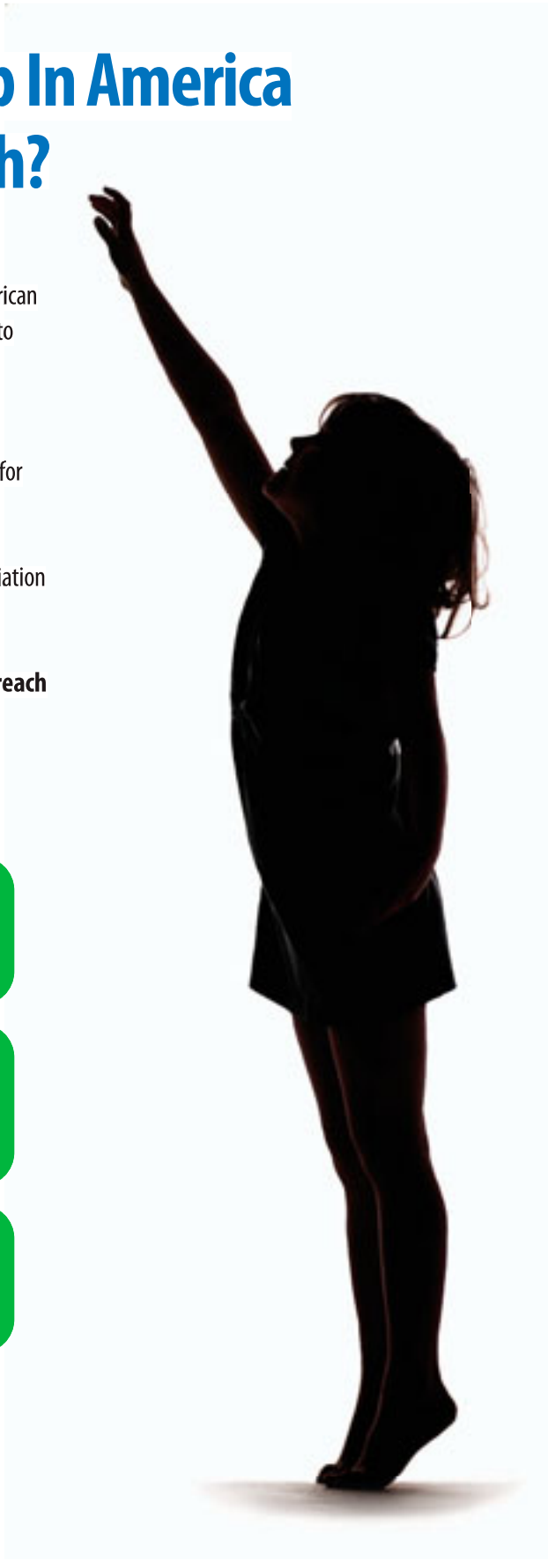
I snatched the gloves out of his hand and never looked back. When I was done I didn't have time to drive home and shower, but I grabbed a bar of lava soap off the grimy warehouse sink and took about two layers of skin off my upper body.

So, belatedly to answer my angry correspondent, no I don't have calluses on my hands, but I'm acutely aware that my job could be much worse.

And as it turns out, spending a few hours sifting through piles of human excrement that have been stewing in the summer sun for days is pretty good training for a career in journalism.

Mark Hemingway

Will Homeownership In America Become Out Of Reach?



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*Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor Poll, March 2011

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NEWSCOM

Press the Advantage

When you are in a fight and have your opponent down on the pavement with your boot on his neck, the last thing you want to do is step off. You keep the boot firmly planted, pressing even harder, until he yields. Otherwise it's a certainty that he'll get back up, start throwing punches again, and drag out a fight that should have been settled sooner.

Such is the case in Afghanistan with the American-led counterinsurgency against the Taliban and its jihadist allies. It's becoming increasingly clear that we have the boot on our opponent's neck. First, there was the killing of Osama bin Laden. While not directly related to the insurgency, the raid on Abbottabad did eliminate the most notable figure tied to the original reason for invading Afghanistan and deposing the Taliban regime.

Second, as each day goes by, there are more signs that the surge of troops into Afghanistan has reversed the momentum of the insurgency. So far, the Taliban's spring offensive has amounted to attacks designed more as publicity stunts than as operationally serious counteroffensives. In the past 90 days alone, the allied effort has killed or captured some 500 insurgent leaders, while taking 2,700 lower-level fighters off the battlefield as well. Over the past half-year, with the surge fully in place, the coalition has seized more weapons caches than in the previous two years combined. Faced with this mounting pressure, it's no surprise that reports from the field are full of accounts of local Taliban and Taliban sympathizers attempting to cut deals to save their skins.

Instead of using this momentum to finish the job, however, there are persistent rumors that the White House wants to use the success of the surge to reduce force levels this July more than commanders in the field desire. Bolstered by the usual voices on Capitol Hill, the White House may also use the opportunity to call for further cuts at year's end, and promise more rapid withdrawals over the following year as we head into the presidential campaign season.

To be fair, President Obama has twice added a substantial number of U.S. troops to the Afghan theater, bringing the total number of American forces to around 100,000. But a precipitous withdrawal of those forces, just as they have gained the initiative, will only prolong the conflict. Our European allies will use the announcement of cuts to make their own. The Taliban will be bolstered by believing that time is on their side. Both the Afghan and Pakistani governments will increase their self-dealing and Machiavellian scheming. And the general population of Afghanistan will once again go back to fence-sitting, hoping for the best but fearing the worst.

There is a simple truth about counterinsurgencies: If resourced properly, and if the strategy of "clear, hold, and build" is carried out consistently, success is very likely. Final victory may take awhile. But the cost of securing that victory decreases fairly rapidly once the population views the insurgents as more of an irritant than a potential victor. Since these conflicts often occur in the messiest and most uninviting of places, however, democracies typically

under-resource their effort and do all they can to get out as quickly as possible. All of which is politically understandable—but strategically self-defeating.

We should not kid ourselves that the number of troops we have deployed to Afghanistan gives us the kind of flexibility that would allow for a significant drawdown. In late 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal spelled out his plans for what was required to turn around Afghanistan, he said the minimum number of troops needed was 40,000. The president gave him 30,000. The Afghan war is resourced at a level that allows the military to simply "get by" with its campaign plans. It's a credit to the American and coalition troops that the anti-Taliban campaign has been as successful as it has been over the past year. But one would be hard pressed to find anyone on the ground in Afghanistan who thinks the effort is flush with soldiers.

One could make the argument that a politically astute White House would build upon this recent success to shore up the president's commander in chief credentials and help neutralize the GOP's traditional advantage when it comes to national security. But, given the close attention the administration pays to poll numbers and the apparent decline in support for the war in Afghanistan, it seems just as probable that the White House will see promises of substantial cuts in our forces there as good politics. That would be a terrible mistake.

Choosing a course of premature withdrawal will be the equivalent of taking America's boot off the Taliban's neck. And it will make it even more difficult to bring this conflict to a successful conclusion.

—Gary Schmitt

Fight to the Debt

Normally in Washington, the agenda for spring and summer is set by the president's budget and the priorities of congressional leaders. But this year will be different. House Republicans have proposed an ambitious platform, in the form of the budget produced by House Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan and passed by the full House last month. But the Democrats who control the Senate and the White House, and who therefore effectively run things, have no discernible policy agenda. What substance there was in the president's 2012 budget was emptied out by a bizarre speech he delivered last month, setting out completely different goals from those of his initial proposal but offering no specific means to achieve them. Senate Democrats, meanwhile, have been unable to agree on any budget outline at all.

Instead, the course of the next few months will be set by a letter Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner sent to congressional leaders three weeks ago, informing them that the government will likely hit its legal debt limit around August 2—a week before the beginning of Congress's summer recess. Since neither party can afford to be seen as giving up too early in the fight over raising the debt ceiling, there is every reason to think that the argument will not be settled until the last possible minute. Geithner's deadline suggests that the period from now until the August recess will be taken up almost exclusively with the debt-ceiling debate.

The general contours of that debate resemble those of the recently concluded struggle to avert a government shutdown over the 2011 budget. Republicans want to get as much in the way of spending cuts as they can in return for their votes, while Democrats want to give up as little spending as possible. And neither side wants to be blamed for a damaging impasse.

But the political dynamics are different. In the fight over the 2011 budget, Democrats could claim that they were merely trying to keep the government open by holding spending at its current level. Now they are asking for permission to borrow yet more money—a lot more. In order to avoid having to raise the ceiling again before the 2012 election, the administration will have to ask Congress for authority to add more than $2 trillion to the debt. That very large number makes this debate far more difficult for Democrats, and gives Republicans an opportunity to demand major concessions.

The question Republicans confront is how best to use the months over which this debate will take place. Republicans ought to build on what they have already achieved—namely, changing the conversation in Washington so that the need for significant spending cuts is taken for granted—while also making progress where they have so far done less well: actually enacting major cuts.

Last week, House speaker John Boehner made an excellent start. In a speech before the Economic Club of New York, Boehner said Republicans will insist on tying the amount by which the debt ceiling would be raised to the size of the associated budget cuts. Those cuts, he said, "should be greater than the accompanying increase in debt authority the president is given." This strategy would highlight the scope of new borrowing required to fund the spending trajectory that Democrats want to sustain, and establish a sensible and easy-to-grasp principle for determining the size of the cuts Republicans will pursue. Voters will likely find it reasonable.

Boehner's one-for-one rule also means that, in order to avoid another debt ceiling fight before Election Day, Democrats would have to agree to $2 trillion in cuts over the next five years (the period over which such cuts would have to be scored by the Congressional Budget Office, according to Boehner's staff). House Republicans have just passed an outline for such cuts: The Ryan budget

reduces federal spending by more than $1.8 trillion in its first five years. But Democrats are unlikely to stomach spending reductions on that scale, and so they will have to accept a smaller increase in the debt ceiling. Thus, Boehner's strategy makes it likely that we will see yet another debt ceiling fight, with a further chance for cuts, before the 2012 elections.

Whatever the eventual level agreed to in this round of the debt ceiling match, Republicans should draw on the Ryan budget as they pursue particular cuts. Along with its cuts in domestic discretionary spending, Republicans could press for at least some portion of its Medicaid reform, which would block-grant the federal portion of Medicaid funding, giving the states far more flexibility to design their own programs and saving another $200 billion over five years and far more in the years beyond.

Republicans should also pursue the budget process reforms in the Ryan budget, including statutory caps on discretionary spending, binding caps on total federal spending as a percentage of GDP, and the transitioning of some mandatory spending into the regular appropriations process. This would be good policy and good politics. Some Democrats may even find it appealing.

The Ryan budget provides Republicans with a concrete policy agenda directed precisely to what the debt ceiling fight will require. The Democrats have no such agenda, giving Republicans an additional tactical edge. Rather than waste the opportunity on gimmicks and slogans, they should make the most of that advantage, and of the best opportunity they will have until next year's election not only to change the conversation in Washington but to make real and lasting spending cuts in the federal budget.

—Yuval Levin

A Time for Choosing

President Obama, the *Wall Street Journal* reports, is preparing a speech that "will ask those in the Middle East and beyond to reject Islamic militancy in the wake of Osama bin Laden's death and embrace a new era of relations" with the United States. Killing bin Laden is the pretext for part two of the president's "reset" with the "Muslim world." The planned address will be a follow-up to the president's first such exercise, his June

2009 Cairo speech. The fundamental question back then, however, remains to be answered: To whom is the president speaking?

The concept of a "Muslim world" is much too vague, for the Muslims of the world are too varied to be addressed as a whole, much less as a single organism that is susceptible in its entirety to anti-American violence. Indeed, the reality of the region is that its sectarian, ethnic, national, and tribal divides often pit Muslims against each other in conflicts of varying intensity. There are Sunni and Shiites, Arabs and Persians, Turks and Kurds. Some of these nation-states, factions, and networks are allied with Washington. Others are American adversaries. Still others play a double game. The competent conduct of U.S. strategy requires that American policymakers distinguish between friends and enemies. Lumping them all together—as simply "Muslims"—makes that impossible.

Obama and his national security team merit all the credit coming their way for finding and killing the man who slaughtered close to 3,000 innocents almost a decade ago. They've closed a tragic chapter in our history with a triumphant note. But bin Laden was never the central issue. The central issue has always been bin Ladenism: the conviction that politics is a portfolio of identity-based grievances that are to be managed through violence, the more spectacular the bloodshed, the better.

Bin Ladenism is not simply a matter of transnational Sunni jihadist-Salafis like the movement's namesake. Hamas, rooted in Palestinian nationalism, is also bin Ladenist, as is Lebanon's Shiite militia, Hezbollah. The same is true for Hezbollah and Hamas's state sponsors in Iran and Syria, both of whom have shed the blood not only of Americans and our allies in Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, and Iraq, but also now of their own people. So when Obama asks Muslims to reject violence, is he talking to Iran's supreme leader, or to members of the Green movement that the Revolutionary Guard shot in the streets of Tehran? Is he speaking to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, or to the relatives of the peaceful protesters that the Assad regime has mowed down with tanks and artillery in Homs, Deraa, Banias, and other Syrian cities?

"Sheikh" Osama, as his admirers refer to him, was simply the emir of al Qaeda, an outfit that projected power thanks less to bin Laden's famous charisma than his organization's ties to Middle Eastern regimes. After all, bin Laden was not hiding in Kabul. He was being hidden in the city that is home to Pakistan's military academy. He had at one time depended on Saudi largesse, and perhaps Iranian support, too. So who is President Obama speaking to when he asks Muslims to abandon militancy—the al Qaeda rank and file, or the security services without whose financial, logistical, and political support terrorist networks are incapable of staging operations?

Bin Laden is dead. Al Qaeda may or may not be weakened. But the larger jihadist-Salafi movement is flourishing, even in places where it was once stamped out. The Egyptian revolution seems to have empowered the Salafis, who recently burned two Coptic churches in Cairo, kicking off a bloodbath that left Muslims as well as Christians dead. Some of these same Salafis, newly released from prison, waged war against Egypt in the '80s and '90s alongside the man who may become al Qaeda's next emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The president's deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, is wrong when he says bin Laden's death coincides with "a model emerging in the region of change that is completely the opposite of bin Laden's model." The rise of one does not preclude the strength of the other. Such models are always in competition. The White House's record, moreover, shows that it tends to take the wrong side.

In Lebanon, for example, the pro-democracy March 14 movement offered a contrast to Hezbollah. But, when the Party of God engineered a coup against the elected government in January, the Obama administration was too busy trying to engage Hezbollah's patron in Damascus to notice. The purpose of the administration's efforts was to bring Syria back to the negotiating table with Israel, since Arab-Israeli peace, in Obama's reckoning, will win Muslim hearts and minds.

Even now, after the regional uprising has shown that the problems of the Middle East have nothing to do with America or Israel but are the issue of a vicious political culture, the White House won't let go of the peace process. Reports are that Obama plans to "revitalize" the peace process in the coming weeks. But that would mean, in light of the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation in the Palestinian territories, giving bin Ladenists a seat at the table.

Obama doesn't need to reset relations with the "Muslim world." He needs to pick sides. His administration laments that it has no leverage against Syria. But this is the White House's way of refusing to acknowledge that its relative silence concerning Assad's atrocities—its feeble insistence that a ruler firing on his own people make good on "reforms"—effectively protects the regime. In Iran, more silence. In Libya, announcing a stand against Qaddafi and then doing nothing to ensure his fall only taxes American prestige.

The idea that America somehow needs to prove its good faith to the entire Muslim world runs counter to the notion that Osama bin Laden's worldview has no hold on the vast majority of Muslims. The message Obama is sending is rather the opposite—that all Muslims are potential supporters of bin Laden. The reality is different. The United States has friends and allies among all the sects, ethnicities, nations, and tribes that shape the lands of Islam, from the Arab states all the way through Africa and Asia. The job of a president is to explain and implement American policy in a manner that invigorates those allies, while pursuing and crushing our mutual adversaries.

—Lee Smith

No More Red Ink

Republicans wade into the debt battle.

BY FRED BARNES

GARY LOCKE

It was no accident that Marco Rubio, the senator from Florida, spoke first. Senate Republicans had adopted a division of labor for their session at the White House last week with President Obama. Eleven of them addressed the president, touching on spending cuts and raising the debt limit.

Fred Barnes is executive editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

Rubio is the youngest (39) and most acclaimed freshman in the Republican caucus. He talked about his 80-year-old mother and Medicare. Republicans, Rubio said, don't want to change Medicare for her and other current beneficiaries. Their aim is to ensure Medicare exists for later generations. That means reforms of Medicare must be taken up now.

Five other freshmen were among the Republicans who spoke. They want a spending reduction plan in place before increasing the debt limit and allowing the government to continue borrowing. The mood of the meeting was "courteous" rather than conciliatory, a senator said. If the president wants "a constructive solution," he'll have to cease his "destructive commentary" on Republican proposals, especially on Medicare.

Republicans had found a passage in Obama's budget speech last month particularly offensive. One senator took a copy of the speech with him and planned to read it back to the president. But he let Rubio and others handle the matter instead.

Here's the passage:

> It's a [Republican] vision that says America can't afford to keep the promise we've made to care for our seniors. It says that 10 years from now, if you're a 65-year-old who's eligible for Medicare, you should have to pay $6,400 more than you would today. It says instead of guaranteed health care, you will get a voucher. And if that voucher isn't worth enough to buy the insurance that's available in the open marketplace, well, tough luck—you're on your own. Put simply, it ends Medicare as we know it.

Obama's harsh words and the reaction of Republicans reflect how far apart they are on the debt limit. They've been divided before on spending and debt issues since Republicans captured the House and added Senate seats in last November's election. This time there's a difference. Republicans have more leverage.

When temporary spending bills were negotiated earlier this year, Republicans were at a disadvantage. Either the president or the Democratic Senate could block spending cuts approved by the House. Indeed the Senate has done just that, notably blocking an entire 2012 budget drafted by Representative Paul Ryan and passed in the House. "We control one-half of one-third of the government," House speaker John Boehner has said. This limits what Republicans can achieve.

House Republicans, eager for

bigger cuts, have become increasingly frustrated with this state of affairs. On the three spending measures, the number of no votes has risen from 6 to 54 to 59. And sentiment among Republicans against raising the debt limit is greater still.

This matters. On the debt limit, it's not a question of blocking what the House does. This time roles are reversed. Obama needs House approval of an increase or his administration cannot borrow more to pay off the government's creditors.

The White House initially sought to have a hike in the debt limit ratified by Congress with no concessions on the president's part. More recently he's acknowledged he must go along with spending cuts to attract Republican votes. His chief economic adviser, Austan Goolsbee, is unhappy about it. He said last week coupling cuts with the debt limit is "quite insane."

Republicans aren't Obama's only problem. Public opinion is running strongly against boosting the debt limit, and not just among Republicans. In a Resurgent Republic poll, independents (64 to 31 percent) and Democrats (50 to 42 percent) believe spending cuts should be tied to the debt limit.

The president's hand is unusually weak for three additional reasons. As a senator in 2006, Obama voted against boosting the debt limit, offering a high-toned excuse for doing so. That deprives him of moral standing today on the issue. Also, the national debt has soared in his two-plus years in the White House. In 2011, deficit spending is expected to add $1.6 trillion to the national debt, which already exceeds $14 trillion—up from $10.6 trillion when Obama took office. That undercuts his economic standing.

Both Boehner and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell insist the president must agree to "trillions" in spending cuts before they'll support a debt limit increase. Obama may not like this, but in his budget speech last month he proposed $2 trillion in cuts over 12 years. His proposal was vague and may not have been entirely serious, but that was his number. Now Republicans are demanding he agree not only to specific cuts of that size, but to reductions and spending caps and entitlement reforms to their liking.

Obama's best argument, one he cited in his session with Republican senators, is that the government will default on its debt unless the limit is raised, causing an economic collapse. McConnell, for one, is not impressed with this.

The idea the Obama administration will default is "nonsense," he told me. "They're not going to default. No treasury secretary is going to default." McConnell was referring to Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, who says the government will run out of money to pay debts on August 2.

Republicans are united on the requirement for spending cuts. Kevin McCarthy, the House Republican whip, says there's "not one Republican vote" for increasing the limit "where no cuts are proposed." All 47 Senate Republicans are likely to follow McConnell's lead.

Did Obama get the message from Rubio and his Republican colleagues? Republican senators aren't sure. But McConnell couldn't be clearer. "There is going to be a big package [of cuts] or we'll still be arguing about the debt ceiling this fall," he said. As far as I could tell, he wasn't kidding. ♦

The Illusion of Peace with Syria

Don't even think of engaging with Assad.

BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS

The news from Syria grows grimmer by the day—more peaceful protesters killed, ten thousand arrested in the past week, army units shelling residential neighborhoods.

But the Obama administration's response has not grown grimmer or louder. As recently as May 6, Secretary of State Clinton was still talking about a "reform agenda" in Syria, as if Bashar al-Assad were a slightly misguided bureaucrat rather than the murderer of roughly 1,000 unarmed demonstrators. As for the president, though the White House has issued a couple of statements in his name, he has yet to say one word on camera about the bloodletting in Syria. This is not a small matter, for a tough statement attacking the regime's repression and giving the demonstrators moral support would immediately circulate over the Internet. American sanctions against Syria, meanwhile, have not named Assad, and there has been no call for him to step down.

Why is the administration appearing to stick with Assad and refusing to call for his ouster? A key reason may be the hope that an Israeli-Syrian peace deal can be arranged.

From the day it came to office, the Obama administration clearly wanted to win an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. There has been no progress during its two years in office, mostly because the White House insisted on a 100 percent construction freeze in the West Bank settlements and Jerusalem

Elliott Abrams, senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, was a deputy national security adviser in the George W. Bush administration.

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as a precondition for negotiations. This was politically impossible in Israel, and also meant that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas could not come to the table lest he appear to be asking less from Israel than the Americans.

With negotiations frozen, the Palestinians turned to unilateral measures: seeking a United Nations vote admitting the State of Palestine to membership and getting dozens of countries to recognize a Palestinian state. Meanwhile, their delegitimization campaign against Israel continued apace, especially in Europe, where calls for boycotts and sanctions spread. On the pro-Israel side there was also consideration of unilateral measures—steps to head off the Palestinians diplomatically (several of which I described and supported in the April 11 Weekly Standard).

Some forlorn hope may still have existed inside the administration that a compromise on construction could bring the Palestinians back to the table with the government of Israel—until the agreement between Hamas and Fatah was signed on April 27. This agreement, unless and until it collapses, makes Israeli concessions or new flexibility in the West Bank impossible and puts paid to the entire "peace process." It brings Hamas into the Palestinian Authority government, ending a period of several years when Palestinian Security Forces have cooperated with the Israel Defense Forces against terrorism and against Hamas in particular. It will also bring Hamas—next year and for the first time—into the PLO, the body charged with negotiating peace with Israel. Even Yasser Arafat resisted that development when he headed the PLO, and it seems obvious that Israel cannot negotiate peace with an anti-Semitic terrorist group bent on its destruction.

So where can the White House turn if it wants some kind of peace process in the Middle East? Syria. After all, in his first term as prime minister, back in 1998, Benjamin Netanyahu did authorize indirect negotiations with Syria. And the IDF—and especially Ehud Barak, a former head of the IDF, Israel's defense minister, and a close adviser to Netanyahu—has long favored such a deal. The IDF theory was that if Syria made peace, so would Lebanon, and then Israel would be at peace with all four neighboring Arab states. And it can be argued now that Assad may see negotiations with Israel as a way to climb back from the pariah status he is earning, making him at this juncture truly open to a new peace process.

Such thinking, whether in Jerusalem or the White House, is foolish and even grotesque. There is no possibility that Assad would negotiate seriously and that an agreement could be attained. He is now clinging desperately to power, and his only true allies are Iran and Hezbollah. Yet Israel's (and, one hopes, our own) key precondition to any agreement would necessarily be a clean break in those relationships: an end to the Syrian alliance with Hezbollah and Iran. Otherwise Israel would be giving the Golan, in effect, to Iran—a suicidal act. No Israeli government would do it, which suggests that negotiations with Assad would have no purpose.

Assad may indeed be open to commencing a negotiation as a means to escape international isolation, but that's all the more reason not to give it to him. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's 2008 talks with Syria (via Turkey) allowed Syria to escape the partial isolation the United States had imposed on it in that decade, with zero gain for Israel. This is not an experiment worth repeating, for the Assad regime is today even more despicable than it was three years ago.

To react to the murders now taking place all over Syria by embracing the Assad regime would be morally indefensible. Whether Assad can be overthrown soon by the people of Syria is a fair question to ask. Will the army stay with him, or will Sunni units rebel? Will the Sunni business elites turn against him? How long can the regime survive? We do not yet know the answers. But surely we must avoid any step that could help Assad, rehabilitate his regime, or undermine the courageous struggle of peaceful demonstrators in the streets of Syria.

The peace agreements that Israel signed with Egypt and Jordan were real achievements, but there will be no such agreements with the Palestinians or with Syria in the foreseeable future. The Palestinians have taken themselves out of the game for now. We cannot turn from them to the Syrians while Assad's troops are using howitzers and sniper rifles against his people. This is the time not for diplomatic engagement with Assad, but for diplomacy aimed at quarantining his regime and helping bring it down. The White House should dismiss any remaining dreams of a "peace process" with Syria to substitute for the Palestinian version and face facts: There will be no peace with the butcher who rules Syria today. ♦

Rich Irony

On taxes, the president is all talk and no action.

BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

A mystery lies at the heart of America's budget politics. In the weeks since debate began on raising the debt limit, President Obama has faulted Republican budget plans as a way of giving favors to "millionaires and billionaires" at the expense of the poor and aged, just as he did during last winter's quarrel over retaining the Bush tax cuts. He does this because it places the public firmly on his side. In a time of sharp divisions on almost all policy questions, tax hikes on the rich are about the only tool of fiscal policy that the public professes to like.

It does not matter that by "millionaires" President Obama means those making over $250,000 a year—taxing them still wins broad assent. A *Washington Post* survey taken last month showed that Americans don't like *any* of the benefit-cutting options for balancing the budget. Fewer than half want to cut the military, fewer than a third would cut Medicaid, barely a fifth would cut Medicare. But when anyone asks about tax hikes on those $250k-a-year men, Americans pound the table, clench their teeth, and nod their collective head vigorously up and down. The *Post* found that almost three-quarters support soaking those who make $250,000 a year, and more than half support it *strongly*.

Talking about taxes allows the president to remind the public about the prosperity of the Clinton years, which was accompanied by a 10-percent surcharge on incomes over $250,000. He could even note that the 1993 budget act, which introduced those high rates the public likes so much, passed without a single Republican vote.

Hence the mystery. Every time Republicans offer President Obama the fight he claims to be spoiling for, he walks away from it. His policy is a strange combination of demagogy and inaction. Maybe the president knows something the rest of us do not.

Conditions for a tax on the well-off are not now as favorable as they were in Clinton's day. There has been inflation, for one thing. That quarter-million dollars that Clinton saw as the threshold of plutocracy bought two average houses in 1993; today it buys one. On top of that, many small businessmen file taxes as individuals. Raising rates would certainly cost the jobs of, say, stock boys at the corner pharmacy. And the amount of revenue that restoring the Clinton categories would raise—$80 billion a year—is a drop in the trillion-dollar-deficit bucket.

A tax on billionaires is a different story. Politically, there is no way it can lose. The traditional aim of taxation is to raise revenue for the state. In the wake of the financial crash, taxation has acquired a second aim: vengeance. As the *Post* poll makes clear, and as the 2009 scandal over bonuses paid to AIG employees makes clearer, Americans do not just want fairness. They want clawbacks. There are only about 400 billionaires in the country. But there would probably be little electoral downside to raising taxes on anyone making more than, say, $10 million a year. That is about the level where you can be sure you are no longer dealing with people who work at the corner pharmacy.

The political problem is that billionaires, as opposed to millionaires, are an Obama constituency. In the 2007-08 election cycle, 19 of the 20 richest ZIP codes gave the majority of their political donations—the *vast* majority in most cases—to Democrats, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

But that alone is insufficient to explain why Obama's attacks on millionaires and billionaires remain so purely rhetorical. Obama is giving up on tax hikes for some because fighting for them would raise the specter of tax hikes for all. The fate of Initiative 1098 in last fall's elections in Washington state shows how this happens.

The measure offered Washington state's rich people a means of "giving back" to a society from which they had drawn so much. This was to be done by introducing a state income tax of 5 percent, to be levied only on those making more than $200,000 a year. Sounds nice. Bill Gates Sr. championed the measure. Early polls showed it had the steady support of about two-thirds of Washington staters, just a little bit below the levels who support federal tax hikes on the rich.

But the more the measure was argued, the less people liked it. The money it raised from ordinary Washingtonians was supposed to go to education—a worthy enough goal, but it also happens to be the new family business of Gates's son, the second-richest man in the world. And while the tax hike was great for egalitarian symbolism, it was disappointingly short on revenue. If it was revenue you wanted, well then, the tax would need to be extended to people further and further down the income scale. Initiative 1098 established the principle and the infrastructure for a state income tax that could in time be levied on anyone. By the end of the campaign season, voters were talking of a "slippery slope," and 1098 was very unpopular. On Election Day, it was not just rejected but crushed, with two-thirds of voters opposing it.

That is why President Obama wants to avoid the issue. George W. Bush's tax cuts were reckless. Any serious budget-balancing plan must undo them. But to act to undo a few of them is to make it plain that even undoing *all* of them—raising taxes on rich and poor alike—will constitute the merest down payment on getting our fiscal house in order. And in the short term that is a political truth that no politician, not even President Obama, will benefit from acknowledging. ♦

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

The Crackdown Continues

The ongoing persecution of Christians in China.

BY MEGHAN CLYNE

Communist China has earned praise in the past few years for a perceived thaw in its strict opposition to religious observance—particularly Christianity. A visitor to China will see Christian churches out in the open; a printing facility in Nanjing is the largest Bible publisher in the world. There is the appearance, at least, of a faith that is free and tolerated.

This helps explain some of the shock over a series of brutal crackdowns that have come as startling departures. Over Easter, Chinese authorities escalated their campaign against a Protestant "house church," Shouwang, detaining dozens of believers and placing hundreds more under house arrest for the "crime" of worshipping in a public square. And late last month, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released its annual report, which flagged several incidents of horrific abuses of Christians in China—including "disappearances," beatings, the destruction of churches, and forced "re-education through labor."

But these two trends are not in fact contradictory. The "thaw" in China's treatment of Christians was nothing more than a savvy and sophisticated new twist on its longstanding assault on religious freedom. While scaling back on bloody crackdowns that stir international condemnation, China has found subtle ways of undercutting independent churches and quietly preempting the spread of free religion. Indeed, the commission's report notes that "Chinese officials are increasingly adept at employing the language of human rights and the rule of law to defend repression of religious communities."

This insidious approach to religious oppression is no less dangerous to Christians. In fact, it may be more so: As Joseph Cardinal Zen Ze-kiun, the former bishop of Hong Kong, said during a visit to Washington in April, "Torture, abuse—that is easier to shout about."

The state's policies weaken Chinese Christian institutions by dividing them. "Official" churches, managed by the government, operate in the open. Meanwhile, "underground" or "house" churches—those that refuse to, say, hand over the names and contacts of their worshippers or disavow all loyalty to foreign parties (e.g., the Vatican)—frequently operate in secret. When they are caught by the regime, brutal punishment is often the result. Religion is thus permitted only insofar as it advances the aims of the state. As the head of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, Wang Zuo'an, explained: "[T]he starting point and stopping point of work on religion is to unite and mobilize, to the greatest degree, the religious masses' zeal, to build socialism with Chinese characteristics."

Often, the main instrument in this campaign is money. The USCIRF report notes that Beijing is permitting certain religious communities to hold property and accept donations from overseas. The catch, however, is that these rules apply only to *registered* religious groups—those willing to affiliate with state-controlled churches. The Chinese government also subsidizes educational expenses and foreign travel for clergy—but again only for those who belong to "approved" churches. Even rebuilding after disasters is fair game: A Catholic who frequently works in China tells of how, in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, several Catholics in Hong Kong moved quickly to raise $900,000, with the aim of rebuilding Catholic churches. But "before the money could be deployed," this would-be benefactor explained, "the government had come in and more than fixed the churches, in fact making improvements. The results, while good, were undertaken in order to undercut the [Catholic] church and allow the PRC to push aside outside help."

The sum effect of these activities is to increase Christians' dependence on the state, and thus to increase the government's leverage. As a human-rights lawyer and director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, Nina Shea, notes, "It's a way of bribing and driving Christians to play the game according to Communist party rules."

Threats and intimidation, too, play a role. Cardinal Zen noted the case of Bishop Feng Xinmao, who resisted attending the Conference of Chinese Catholic Representatives convened in Beijing in December to select new leaders for the government-controlled Catholic "church." According to Cardinal Zen, "more than 100 police" were dispatched "to ensure that the bishop [went] to the meeting." The man selected at the conference to head the state-run Catholic organization was Ma Yinglin—a bishop named by the Catholic Patriotic Association (the "official" Catholic church) in 2006 without Vatican approval. The USCIRF notes that Ma was also at the center of a controversy surrounding the April 2010 ordination of another, legitimate bishop, Paul Meng. Bishop Du Jiang—who is recognized by the Vatican—resisted attending Meng's ceremony because Ma would be present. As the USCIRF report states, Bishop Du was later placed under house arrest.

And in January, the State Administration of Religious Affairs released its priorities for managing religious

Meghan Clyne is the managing editor of National Affairs.

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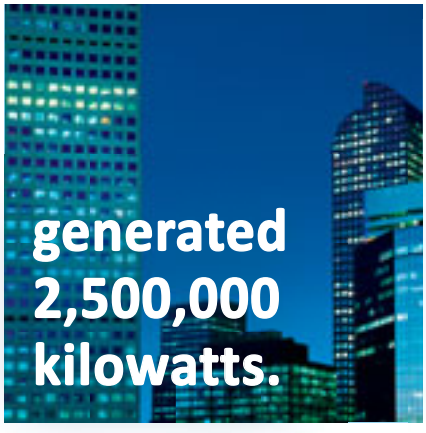

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activity in 2011. According to a translation and analysis made available by the Congressional Executive Commission on China, the objectives include "guiding" Protestants who "participate in activities at unauthorized gathering places" to worship instead at churches controlled by the state. How exactly that "guiding" would occur was left to the imagination.

China's restrictions on education and speech effectively snuff religious activity. Shea, who is also a USCIRF commissioner, describes a "web of regulations controlled by avowed atheists": restrictions on minors' being educated about faith; bans on preaching against abortion; prohibitions against teaching, discussing, or debating issues central to Christianity—topics like Creation or the Apocalypse. "When there's a conflict between the faith and morals of the Christian church and Communist government policy," Shea explains, "Communist government policy wins out."

The regime has also sought to interfere with church management and administration—especially in the case of the Catholic church. In 2007, Beijing and Rome reached an accord whereby the Holy See would be allowed to approve and ordain bishops who had been vetted and selected by the Catholic Patriotic Association, thereby allowing bishops to affiliate with Rome openly (an estimated 90 percent of CPA bishops and priests are believed to have been secretly ordained by the Catholic church). The upside, at least for Rome, was a reduced likelihood of schism. But in November 2010, the CPA named Guo Jincai as bishop of Chengde without Vatican approval—a move that has drawn considerable anger and concern. "I have seen it with my own eyes," Zen said. "Our bishops are being humiliated."

Yet even when the Holy See does condone ordinations, as long as the government controls who becomes a member of the clergy, there is always a risk of divided loyalties and a high danger of infiltration. During his visit to Washington, Cardinal Zen lamented measures that had been taken within the Vatican itself—particularly regarding a 2007 letter from Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Catholics. Zen says that a Belgian priest working in the Vatican, Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, played a role in mistranslating the letter into Chinese. The translation circulated in China urged Chinese Catholics to come out into the open and affiliate with the CPA; the pope's original intent in the letter, Zen says, was the exact opposite—he was issuing a warning to "underground" Catholics about the likelihood that joining the "official" church would require them to contravene Catholic teaching. Some within the Vatican, Zen says, have pursued a policy of *Ostpolitik*, being too willing to compromise with China, whatever the cost.

Such a policy is not without precedent, of course. In the second volume of his biography of Pope John Paul II, *The End and the Beginning*, George Weigel discloses that the Vatican reached a similar accord about the nomination of bishops with Communist Hungary in the 1960s. Its reward? For over two decades, the Hungarian bishops' conference in Rome became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Hungarian state, its clergy serving as agents of Budapest and Moscow. Representative Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican who works extensively on human rights in China, argues that Beijing is determined to go further. "The Chinese government did a 'lessons learned' from the demise of the Soviet empire," Smith says. "[They] saw what the backbone of democracy and freedom was—by and large it was church people." Shea adds that Beijing's harsh repression reflects the Chinese government's terror that the free exercise of faith could topple a regime without warning.

What's to be done? The USCIRF's staff expert on China, Scott Flipse, notes that the problem is likely to intensify in coming months: The regime is working to formulate a new policy on religion before China's presumptive president, Xi Jinping, takes over in 2012. What to do with China's estimated 60 million Protestants—who are growing both in number and in their perceived threat to the regime—will prove to be Beijing's major challenge.

The Holy See, too, is said to be mindful of China's 2012 leadership change, with some advocating a "wait and see" approach. Yet a few serendipitous leadership changes have already taken place. The previous head of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples—which oversees relations with China, and of which Cardinal Zen has been highly critical—submitted his resignation, as required, upon reaching the age of 75 last month. The pope swiftly replaced him, naming Archbishop Fernando Filoni, who is described as a "China expert," to the post last week. And late last year, Pope Benedict XVI appointed as secretary of the congregation Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai—whom Cardinal Zen praised as "a Chinese with very clear loyalty" to the Vatican.

For its part, the USCIRF recommends that Washington ratchet up political pressure. "Despite recent strong public statements, the [Obama] administration continues to be perceived as weak on human rights in China," the bipartisan commission notes. Its recommendations to the U.S. government include helping to develop free and secure email and high-speed Internet access via satellite, as well as the "immediate" distribution of counter-censorship programs. Shea advocates visa restrictions on those Chinese provincial leaders who are especially egregious abusers of religious freedom. Smith agrees, saying that the policy should be a "no-brainer." The congressman would also like to see sanctions that punish corporations aiding Beijing's repression, such as Internet companies that turn over information on users to the Chinese government.

But perhaps the most important thing is not to mistake China's new savvy for tolerance. "It's right out of the 101 book of how dictatorships get rid of religion: They co-opt it or they destroy it," Smith says. Fewer bloody crackdowns is always a good thing—but more sophisticated repression is a poor substitute for religious freedom.♦

Converting Mamet

A playwright's progress

By Andrew Ferguson

Santa Monica

Three decades ago David Mamet became known among the culture-consuming public for writing plays with lots of dirty words. "You're f—ing f—ed" was a typically Mamet-like line, appearing without the prim dashes back in a day when playwrights were still struggling to get anything stronger than a *damn* on stage. Mamet's profanity even became a popular joke: So there's this panhandler who approaches a distinguished looking gentleman and asks for money. The man replies pompously: "'Neither a borrower nor a lender be' —William Shakespeare." The beggar looks at him. "'F— you' —David Mamet."

Some critics said his plays were pointlessly brutal. As a consequence he became famous and wealthy. It didn't hurt when it dawned on people that many of his plays, for all the profanity and brutality, were works of great power and beauty, and often very funny to boot. When people began to say, as they increasingly did by the middle 1980s, that the author of *Speed-the-Plow* and *American Buffalo* and *Lakeboat* had earned a place in the top rank of the century's dramatists, no one thought that was a joke. He took to writing for the movies (*The Verdict*, *The Untouchables*, *Wag the Dog*), won a Pulitzer Prize for one of his masterpieces (*Glengarry Glen Ross*), and moved to Hollywood, where he became a respected and active player in the showbiz hustle.

His fame was enough to fill the stalls of Memorial Hall at Stanford University when he came to give a talk one evening a couple of years ago. About half the audience were students. The rest were aging faculty out on a cheap date with their wives or husbands. You could identify the male profs by the wispy beards and sandals-'n'-socks footwear. The wives were in wraparound skirts and had hair shorter than their husbands'.

Mamet had been brought to campus by Hillel, and the subject of his talk was "Art, Politics, Judaism, and the Mind of David Mamet." There wasn't much talk of Judaism, however, at least not explicitly. He arrived late and took the stage looking vaguely lost. He withdrew from his jacket a sheaf of papers that quickly became disarranged. He lost his place often. He stumbled over his sentences. But the unease that began to ripple through the audience had less to do with the speaker's delivery than with his speech's content. Mamet was delivering a frontal assault on American higher education, the provider of the livelihood of nearly everyone in his audience.

Higher ed, he said, was an elaborate scheme to deprive young people of their freedom of thought. He compared four years of college to a lab experiment in which a rat is trained to pull a lever for a pellet of food. A student recites some bit of received and unexamined wisdom—"Thomas Jefferson: slave owner, adulterer, pull the lever"—and is rewarded with his pellet: a grade, a degree, and ultimately a lifelong membership in a tribe of people educated to see the world in the same way.

"If we identify every interaction as having a victim and an oppressor, and we get a pellet when we find the victims, we're training ourselves not to see cause and effect," he said. Wasn't there, he went on, a "much more interesting . . . view of the world in which not everything can be reduced to victim and oppressor?"

This led to a full-throated defense of capitalism, a blast at high taxes and the redistribution of wealth, a denunciation of affirmative action, prolonged hymns to the greatness and wonder of the United States, and accusations of hypocrisy toward students and faculty who reviled business and capital even as they fed off the capital that the hard work and ingenuity of businessmen had made possible. The implicit conclusion was that the students in the audience should stop being lab rats and drop out at once, and the faculty should be ashamed of themselves for participating in a swindle—a "shuck," as Mamet called it.

It was as nervy a speech as I've ever seen, and not quite rude—Mamet was too genial to be rude—but almost. The students in Memorial Hall seemed mostly unperturbed. The ripples of dissatisfaction issued from the older members of the crowd. Two couples in front of me shot looks to one another as Mamet went on—first the tight little smiles, then quick shakes of the head, after a few more minutes the eye-rolls, and finally a hitchhiking gesture that was the signal to walk out. Several others followed, with grim faces.

It was too much, really. It's one thing to titillate

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progressive theatergoers with scenes of physical abuse and psychological torture and lines like "You're f—ing f—ed." But David Mamet had at last gone too far. He'd turned into a f—ing Republican.

Next month a much larger number of liberals and leftists will have the opportunity to be appalled by Mamet's Stanford speech. Passages from it form the bulk of a chapter in his new book of brief, punchy essays, *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*. The book marks the terminal point of a years-long conversion from left to right that Mamet-watchers (there are quite a few of these) have long suspected but hadn't quite confirmed. It's part conversion memoir, part anthropology, part rant, part steel-trap argument—the testimony of a highly intelligent man who has wrenched himself from one sphere and is now declaring his citizenship in another, very loudly.

Mamet himself has never been a political playwright or a dramatist of ideas, being concerned with earthier themes—how it is, for example, that everyday conflicts compound into catastrophe. His plays were heavy with a tragic view of human interaction. They depicted, as he put it, people doing despicable things to each other, moved by greed or power lust or some nameless craving. Still, politically minded critics were pleased to divine a political intent: *American Buffalo*, set in a junk shop, or *Glengarry Glen Ross*, set in a real estate office, were allegories of the heartlessness of a country (ours) ruled by markets and capital. Their invariably unhappy or unresolved endings drove the point home. And the critics had a point. The world Mamet created was one-half of the leftist view of life, anyway: the Hobbesian jungle that Utopians would rescue us from, liberal idealism with the sunny side down.

The Secret Knowledge begins with a parricide—a verbal throat-slitting of the leftwing playwright Bertolt Brecht, father to three generations of dramatists, especially those who, like Tony Kushner or Anna Deavere Smith or Christopher Durang, make agitprop the primary purpose of their art. For most of his career Mamet revered Brecht too: It was the thing to do. The reverence came to an end when he finally noticed an incongruity between Brecht's politics and his life. Although a cold-blooded—indeed bloody-minded—advocate for public ownership of the means of production and state confiscation of private wealth, he always took care to copyright his plays. More, he made sure the royalties were deposited in a Swiss bank account far from the clutches of East Germany, where he was nominally a citizen.

"His protestations [against capitalism] were not borne out by his actions, nor could they be," Mamet writes. "Why, then, did he profess Communism? Because it sold. . . . The public's endorsement of his plays kept him alive; as Marx was kept alive by the fortune Engels's family had made selling furniture; as universities, established and funded by the Free Enterprise system . . . support and coddle generations of the young in their dissertations on the evils of America."

As the accelerating sequence of that last sentence suggests—from Brecht to Marx to the entire system of American higher education—one wispy *aha!* leads the convert to a larger revelation and then to one even broader and more comprehensive. That's the way it is with conversion experiences: The scales fall in a cascade. One light bulb tends to set off another, until it's pop-pop-pop like paparazzi on Oscar night.

And then Mamet thought some more, and looked in the mirror.

"I never questioned my tribal assumption that Capitalism was bad," he writes now, "although I, simultaneously, never acted upon these feelings." He was always happy to cash a royalty check and made sure to insist on a licensing fee. "I supported myself, as do all those not on the government dole, through the operation of the Free Market."

He saw he was Talking Left and Living Right, a condition common among American liberals, particularly the wealthy among them, who can, for instance, want to impose diversity requirements on private companies while living in monochromatic neighborhoods, or vote against school vouchers while sending their kids to prep school, or shelter their income while advocating higher tax rates. The widening gap between liberal politics and liberal life became real to him when, paradoxically enough, he decided at last to write a political play, or rather a play about politics. It was the first time he thought about partisan politics for any sustained period.

"This was after the 2004 election," he told me in an interview last month. "I'd never met a conservative. I didn't know what a conservative was. I didn't know much of anything.

"But I saw the liberals hated George Bush. It was vicious. And I thought about it, and I didn't get it. He was no worse than the others, was he? And I'd ask my liberal friends, 'Well, why do you hate him?' They'd all say: 'He lied about WMD.' Okay. You love Kennedy. Kennedy didn't write *Profiles in Courage*—he lied about that. 'Bush is in bed with the Saudis!' Okay, Kennedy was in bed with the mafia."

His play about politics, a comedy called *November*, opened on Broadway in January 2008 to middling reviews and ran till mid-July. He called it a "love letter to America." The last line, uttered by a preposterously corrupt but strangely endearing president, is "Jesus, I love this country"—and the irony was only meant to go so far. One of the

themes of the play was that the country itself is much too good for politics, especially when politicians seek to govern it by serving their own selfish ends.

"I wondered, How did the system function so well? Because it does—the system functions beautifully." How did the happiest, freest, and most prosperous country in history sprout from the Hobbesian jungle?

"I realized it was because of this thing, this miracle, this U.S. Constitution." The separation of powers, the guarantee of property, the freedoms of speech and religion meant that self-interested citizens had a system in which they could hammer out their differences without killing each other. Everyone who wanted to could get ahead. The Founders had accepted the tragic view of life and, as it were, made it pay. It's a happy paradox: The gloomier one's view of human nature—and Mamet's was gloomy—the deeper one's appreciation of the American miracle.

Mamet with his daughter Clara and wife Rebecca Pidgeon, 2007

RYAN MILLER / GETTY IMAGES

"As an American, I don't think that my politics are any better than anybody else's politics," Mamet told the TV interviewer Charlie Rose when *November* opened. "I'm a gag writer." Even so, he agreed to write an essay on the play's politics for the *Village Voice*. In the essay Mamet confessed that many of his previous political beliefs now struck him as reflexive and unthinking: The country that existed in his once-fevered liberal imagination—a dystopia crippled by crises that required the immediate deployment of the federal government—bore little resemblance to the country in which he actually lived, where people interacted smoothly in the marketplace to their mutual benefit. He had come to realize that corporations were good for providing the necessities of life. The "Big Bad Military" of his youthful fancy was, he discovered, an organization built on courage and honor.

For the moment, he told *Voice* readers, he was searching for "a human understanding of the political process . . . in which I believe I may be succeeding."

Voice editors hyped Mamet's piece with an attention getting headline, "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal.'" The essay was much milder than its title. It was the work of a man in mid-conversion. Mamet's politics at the time were best expressed in a speech at the end of *November*'s second act, perhaps the most—maybe the only—innocent paragraph Mamet ever wrote. The speaker is the crooked president's idealistic speechwriter (a lesbian who has unknowingly brought the avian flu virus from France and infected the Thanksgiving turkeys that the president is supposed to pardon, though he'll only issue the pardon if he's bribed by an Indian chief. . . . It's a comedy).

"The fellow or the woman at the water cooler?" the speechwriter says. "We don't know their politics. We judge their character by the simple things: Are they respectful, are they punctual, can they listen. . . . If you look at the polls it seems we are 'a nation divided.' But we aren't a nation divided, sir. We're a democracy. We hold different opinions. But we laugh at the same jokes, we clap each other on the back when we made that month's quota, and, sir, I'm not at all sure that we don't love each other."

Given the inherent corruptions of partisanship, Mamet refused to believe that one side of our public disputes was truly superior to the other.

"The right is mooing about faith," he wrote at the end of the *Voice* essay, "the left is mooing about change, and many are incensed about the fools on the other side—but, at the end of the day, they are the same folks we meet at the water cooler."

It was a lovely sentiment, especially comforting to people who desperately don't want to take politics seriously.

The belief that government is essentially a con job run by con artists comes naturally to Chicagoans. In Chicago, where Mamet was born not long after the Second World War, the natives simply assumed that politicians were in the game to enlarge their own power—which was fine, so long as everyone else got his piece too: a ham at Christmas, a fixed parking ticket, a job in the Department of Sanitation for a dipso brother-in-law. For Mamet this bit of innate Chicago wisdom has only been reinforced in Santa Monica, the leftwing, paradisiacal community where he has lived since 2003. It's the

same game in Santa Monica as in Chicago, except with an unappetizing lacquer of self-regarding piety from the pols. Not long after moving to the city, Mamet undertook his first foray into civic activism, when the City Council revived a 60-year-old ordinance and tried to force Mamet and his neighbors to cut the hedges around their homes, in accordance with a newly articulated "public right to the viewership of private property."

"They just made it up," he told me. We were having lunch at his usual noontime haunt a few blocks from his office and a mile from the beach. The Hedge Wars, as the local press called the controversy, were the first thing he mentioned when I asked about his move rightward. It prompted Mamet's first and so far only recorded foray into civic activism. He joined protests, testified at hearings, and wrote an op-ed in the *L.A. Times*. His side eventually won. The ordinance was amended, but not before the city got to impose a raft of new foliage regulations and create a new hedge commission to enforce them.

"It made no sense," he said. "But this is how government works—all government. I saw there's no difference between the hedge commission and the U.S. government. It's all the same principle."

Mamet's parents were divorced when he was young, and he spent most of his childhood after the breakup with his father, a highly successful labor lawyer. The faith in unions that his father instilled in him didn't survive the screenwriters' strike of 2007-08—one of the most heavily publicized events in Hollywood history and the most quickly forgotten, so abject was the ineptitude and ultimate failure of the writers' union. For Mamet it was another turn of the ratchet away from the left.

"They were risking not only their own jobs but the jobs of everyone who had nothing to gain from the strike—the drivers and scene painters and people who are on set 14 hours a day working their asses off. These working people were driven out of work by the writers—10,000 people losing their jobs at Christmastime. It was the goddamnedest thing I ever saw in my life. And for what? They didn't know what they were striking for—just another inchoate liberal dream.

"The question occurs to me quite a lot: What do liberals do when their plans have failed? What did the writers do when their plans led to unemployment, their own and other people's? One thing they can't do is admit they failed. Why? To admit failure would endanger their position in the herd."

One of Mamet's favorite books has been *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, published during the First World War by the British social psychologist Wilfred Trotter, inventor of the term "herd instinct."

"Trotter says the herd instinct in an animal is stronger even than the preservation of life," Mamet said. "So I was watching the [2008] debates. My liberal friends would spit at the mention of Sarah Palin's name. Or they would literally mime the act of vomiting. We're watching the debates and one of my friends pretends to vomit and says, 'I have to leave the room.' I thought, oh my god, this is Trotter! This is the reaction of the herd instinct. When a sheep discovers a wolf in the fold, it vomits to ward off the attacker. It's a sign that their position in the herd is threatened."

Mamet runs into the herd instinct every day.

"I've given galleys of *The Secret Knowledge* to some friends. They say, 'I'm scared to read it.' I say, 'Why should you be afraid to read something?'

"What are they afraid of? They're afraid of losing their ability to stay in the herd. That's what I found in myself. It can be wrenching when you start to think away from the herd."

His rabbi said of Mamet, 'That's one thing he began to see: The left flattens people, reduces people to financial interests. Dave's an artist. He knew people are deeper than that.'

Mamet's disdain for consensus, for received wisdom of any kind, has been evident in nearly every aspect of his career. Celebrated by academics and critics as a major American artist, he despises talk of Art, especially when it comes from critics and academics. As a sought-after acting teacher, he wrings from his students the last drop of introspection and Stanislavskian pomposity. "You don't need to dig into your character," he tells them. "Just read the words." As a respected movie director and screenwriter he is self-consciously conventional—his movies fit neatly into familiar genres: war movies, detective movies, adventure movies, and a heist movie called *Heist*—just when his admirers might have expected fireworks and experimentation. "All movies are genre movies," he says. "If they talk about the 'artiste,' you know you're hearing bulls—." When he had become a highly paid fixture in Hollywood he produced for the stage the most merciless Hollywood satire ever written, *Speed-the-Plow*.

But thinking differently about politics was . . . different.

'Dave is a very thorough thinker," Mordecai Finley told me, "but it never occurred to him that there might be another way to think about politics."

Finley is rabbi at Ohr HaTorah in Los Angeles, where

Mamet attends services with his wife, the actress Rebecca Pidgeon, who converted to Judaism after their marriage in 1991. Mamet's religious practice, along with his sensitivity to Israel, has deepened since he moved to Southern California and joined Ohr HaTorah. In 2006, he published a scorching book of essays, *The Wicked Son*, rebuking secular Jews for their (alleged) self-loathing and reluctance to defend Israel.

The Wicked Son is dedicated to Finley. He is a creature who is not supposed to exist in nature: the Republican rabbi of a liberal congregation packed with show people.

"For most of my congregants," he said, "I'm the only Republican they know."

Finley recalls a conversation with Mamet and Pidgeon during the California Democratic presidential primary in 2004. They asked the rabbi and his wife which Democrat they were going to vote for.

"We said, 'None of them.'

"Dave said, 'Oh no—you're not going to vote for Nader!'

"I said, 'No.'

"And then you could see it hit him. 'Not Bush!'

"'Well, yes. Bush.'

"Dave was apologetic. He thought he'd embarrassed us! He said, 'Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to pry! I shouldn't have asked!'

"I said, 'No, no, it's really not a problem. It's not like we try to keep it secret.'"

Still safely with the herd, Mamet undertook to pry his rabbi away from his heretical politics. He began sending Finley books, potboilers of contemporary liberalism like *What's the Matter with Kansas?*

"They were highly polemical, angry books," Finley said. "They were very big on sympathy and compassion but really they weren't"—he looked for the word—"they simply weren't logically coherent. And Dave is very logical in his thinking. Dave thought *What's the Matter with Kansas?* had the answer for why people could even think to vote for a Republican—it's because they're duped by capitalist fat cats. I tried to tell him that people really weren't that stupid. They just have other interests, other values. They're values voters.

"That's one thing he began to see: The left flattens people, reduces people to financial interests. Dave's an artist. He knew people are deeper than that."

Before long, when Finley didn't budge, the books from Mamet stopped arriving, and Finley asked if he could send Mamet some books too. One of the first was *A Conflict of Visions*, by Thomas Sowell of the Hoover Institution. In it Sowell expands on the difference between the "constrained vision" of human nature—close to the tragic view that infuses Mamet's greatest plays—and the "unconstrained vision" of man's endless improvement that suffused Mamet's politics and the politics of his profession and social class.

"He came back to me stunned. He said, 'This is incredible!' He said, 'Who thinks like this? Who are these people?' I said, 'Republicans think like this.' He said, 'Amazing.'"

Finley piled it on, from the histories of Paul Johnson to the economics of Milton Friedman to the meditations on race by Shelby Steele.

"He was haunted by what he discovered in those books, this new way of thinking," Finley says. "It followed him around and wouldn't let him go."

For years Mamet and Finley talked by phone at least once, sometimes twice a day. He became friends with Sowell and Steele, another Hoover Institution fellow. Mamet dedicated his most popular recent play, *Race*, to Steele.

A former literature professor, Steele told me he'd been an admirer of Mamet's work since the 1970s and thought he'd detected signs of incipient conservatism in the plays.

"I think he has the same values today that he did before," Steele said. "He's said to me he thinks he might have always been conservative without knowing it. All that happened was, he finally found a politics that suited his values."

Listening to Mamet talk, swept along with his tidal fluency, you find it hard to imagine him groping toward a moment of intellectual catharsis. As a rule Mamet avoids soliloquies in his plays, and the blunt back-and-forth rhythms of his characters' speech, bitten off with awkward hesitations, then rebooted in a headlong rush, became a trademark that unimaginative critics took to calling "Mametspeak." It's a heightened artistic effect that can, after two hours in a darkened theater, retune the ear, rearrange the way a person hears speech—just as a great painter can force you to take in color and light with a new attention and intensity.

Mamet doesn't speak in Mametspeak himself. Ask him a question and he just barrels on through, often at length. He's got the bluff self-confidence of the macho writer—there are a few of these hairy-chested scribblers in the American tradition, from Jack London and Ambrose Bierce through Hemingway to James Jones and Irwin Shaw. Of course he swears as freely as any Chicagoan, with special affection for the F-bomb and its many variants. When the battery of his hearing aid failed during our lunch, he yanked the earpiece from his ear, looked at it sternly, and said: "F— you."

Then again, he's still showfolk. He's the only gruff, straight-talking Southsider I've ever met who wears eyeglasses with yellow translucent frames. At lunch we were interrupted often by supplicants wanting a word with

him—a tribute to his kindliness and his professional pull: He reportedly fetches $2 million for a finished script, and is the only American playwright who can open a show on Broadway merely on the strength of his name. He listened to each visitor with patient solicitude. Not only have I never heard a cross word about him, after talking to colleagues and acquaintances; I've never talked to anyone who's heard a cross word about him.

The two personal attributes that come through most notably in conversation, and in *The Secret Knowledge*, are gratitude and modesty, both regarded as conservative virtues. His modesty is of the epistemological kind, reinforced in politics and economics by his reading of Friedman and Hayek, the great critics of central planning. His gratitude is comprehensive. In our long afternoon talking about politics, he kept returning to how grateful he was for his general good fortune in life, but especially for being an American.

"My grandmother came to this country and she and her two boys were abandoned by her husband," he said. "She couldn't speak English. No education. And during the Great Depression she was able to work hard and save and she put them both through law school." His voice had a tone of wonder to it, as though still awed by a fresh discovery. "I mean, what a country. That's a hell of a country."

After lunch we walked back to his office, and on the way he told me of new projects. I wondered how Mamet's about-to-be-exposed rightwingery will affect his work—and, among critics and colleagues, the reaction to his work. Show business, like all of popular culture these days, is ostentatiously politicized. Actors, directors, producers, and the writers who write about them—all behave as though they received a packet of approved political views with their guild card. They'll be alert for signs of ideological deviationism in Mamet's stuff from now on. They may not have to look too far.

Mamet mentioned a screenplay that he hopes will soon be produced involving a young rich girl who applies to Harvard. When she's rejected she suddenly declares herself an Aztec to qualify for affirmative action. Presumably high jinks ensue. A new two-character play opening in London this fall, *The Anarchist*, is a "verbal swordfight" between two women of a certain age, one a veteran of 1960s radicalism, jailed for life on a bombing charge, and the other a reactionary prison governor from whom the aging radical hopes to receive parole. Regardless of the play's true merits, we can expect the word *didactic* to get a workout from critics.

After reading *The Secret Knowledge* in galleys, the Fox News host and writer Greg Gutfeld invented the David Mamet Attack Countdown Clock, which "monitors the days until a once-glorified liberal artist is dismissed as an untalented buffoon." Tick tock.

'All I do is write every day," he said, as he unlocked the door to the townhouse that serves as his office. "I sit in here and write. I don't see anybody. I don't socialize. I read, and I write, and then I go home to my wife."

And the essays in *The Secret Knowledge* do occasionally have the tone of a man locked alone in an office, talking to himself. "I was a monomaniac," he said of the period he was writing the book. "Crazed."

The prose moves very fast, and some of the arguments seem to be missing a few essential steps; premises rocket to conclusions on the strength of sheer outrage. The conversion is complete: This is not a book by the same man who told Charlie Rose he didn't want to impose his political views on anybody. At some moments—as when he blithely announces that the earth is cooling not warming, QED—you wonder whether maybe he isn't in danger of exchanging one herd for another. He told me he doesn't read political blogs or magazines. "I drive around and listen to the talk show guys," he said. "Beck, Prager, Hugh Hewitt, Michael Medved."

Even so, for anyone who admires Mamet and his work—and who agrees with most of his newly discovered political views—there's something thrilling about seeing a man so accomplished in an unforgiving art subject his ideas to pitiless examination and, as he put it, "take it all the way down to the paint." When Mamet recognized himself as a conservative, Shelby Steele told me, "it made him happy."

He doesn't freely talk about what it cost him psychologically, however, and he says he hasn't thought about what it might cost him professionally.

When I pushed him on the subject, he started talking about Jon Voight, another show business Republican.

One day Voight handed him *Witness*, the Cold War memoir by the Communist-turned-anti-Communist Whittaker Chambers.

"This book will change your life," Voight told Mamet.

"And he was right," Mamet said. "It had a huge effect on me. Forcing yourself into a new way of thinking about things is a wrenching experience. But first you have to look back and atone. You think, 'Oh my god, what have I done? What was I thinking?' You realize you've been a co-dependent with the herd. And then, when you decide to say what you've discovered, out loud, you take the risk that everyone you know will look on you as a fool."

Sitting on an overstuffed sofa in his office, he threw up his hands.

"But what the hell," he said. "I'm the troublemaker. That's my role in life. I'm the class clown."

Starting next month we'll find out who's laughing. ♦

What I Saw at the Revolution

With a Libyan conservative in free Benghazi

By Ann Marlowe

Benghazi

"How are they going to get all these guns off the street?"

Mohamed El Senussi, a grandnephew of Libya's first and only king, may be the only Burkean conservative in Benghazi's newly dubbed "Freedom Square."

It's April 8, our first day in Benghazi, and we're walking around Free Libya's ground zero, the square in front of the seaside courthouse, slightly dazed by the endless options before us. We catch a women's demonstration, receive cappuccinos from an impromptu food stand that provides free sandwiches and drinks, pick up leaflets from booths representing a variety of newborn magazines (Libya may be the only country in the world where publishing is a growth industry), and shop at pushcarts cashing in on the local passion for the red, green, and black of the flag of Libyan independence on articles ranging from the expected buttons, baseball caps, and T-shirts to espresso cups, which make sense once you realize the average Libyan consumes 10 to 15 cups a day.

A few of the repatriated

ABDAL KAREEM

And, yes, maybe one in a hundred men is carrying an assault rifle. When Qaddafi's forces abandoned Benghazi after the massive demonstrations of February 17 and 18, they left a weapons stockpile open. They also freed the common criminals from the jail. Supposedly Qaddafi hoped citizens would use the weapons to kill each other. Under Qaddafi, of course, only the regime had guns. But it hasn't worked out that way.

So far, social solidarity has triumphed. Ahmed Gebreel, the foreign policy adviser to Mustafa Abdul Jalil, one of the two chiefs of the Transitional National Council ruling Free Libya, tells me that ordinary crime is down. Essan Gheriani, a U.S.-educated psychologist in the revolution's inner circle, says that once the fighting ends, people may be allowed to keep one weapon each, as long as it's registered.

During our 16-day trip, El Senussi is just about the only one here, including foreign diplomats, who doesn't give in to the euphoria that grips much of the population of eastern Libya. I drink the Kool-Aid. The atmosphere in Benghazi is electric, and I've never met so many people eager to take responsibility for their own lives and do something for their fellow citizens. Senator John McCain will say at a Benghazi press conference on April 22 that his 24 hours here has been "one of the most exciting and inspiring days of my life," and I believe him. (I met the senator briefly through the thoughtfulness of his national security adviser, sometime Standard contributor Christian Brose.) But El Senussi is cautious, skeptical, worried about what comes next.

He hates Qaddafi—his family were the biggest losers from the 1969 coup in which Qaddafi and other junior military officers seized power from King Idris—but he is not a man of sudden enthusiasms.

A genial, cultivated, 55-year-old Cairene who wears elegant Western suits and sportswear, El Senussi was born in Benghazi and attended kindergarten here, but his father died when he was two, and his mother took him to Cairo. Over the decades of Qaddafi's seemingly impregnable rule,

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El Senussi refused to take out Egyptian citizenship. He clings proudly to a weatherbeaten Egyptian travel document that states his nationality as Libyan.

Yet El Senussi was never involved with the ineffectual Libyan opposition parties that tried to overthrow Qaddafi from outside the country.

"My great-uncle, King Idris, said to me, 'We Senussis should only live in Libya if the people want us there. Otherwise we should live in Saudi Arabia.'" And indeed, next to no resistance was put up even by King Idris's circle when Qaddafi deposed him. But throughout a career devoted mainly to managing substantial family properties in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, El Senussi has watched Libyan politics with an eagle eye.

On a two-day road trip from Cairo, El Senussi and I talk about the Transitional National Council, the 31-member, self-appointed group of lawyers, former cabinet ministers, and military men who are governing Free Libya. The council originated in a group of Benghazi lawyers who were trying to unionize this winter. When one of their number, Fathi Terbel, was jailed by the Qaddafi government, they planned the tamest of responses, a standing protest on February 17 in front of the courthouse. Qaddafi's forces responded immediately with lethal violence. By the end of the 18th, youthful protesters had turned the objective of the demonstrations to regime change. And Qaddafi's forces fled—leaving the lawyers, much to their surprise, in control.

Time and again, when I interview Libyans about the situation, they return to the events of the revolution, recounting them as if they can't quite believe what happened. Salwa Bugaighis, one of a few women on the council, told me, "On the 18th and 19th, people were just watching us demonstrate, though they came closer and closer. On the 21st, the army went over to our side." She explained that now that the council is in touch with the United States, they are being asked for an almost daily schedule of what they will do post-regime change. The United States wants to avoid chaos. And the council wants to move toward a real government.

"We know it is not democracy. Nobody on this council will be in the next government," she promised. Bugaighis explained that part of the reason for the power vacuum is that there were no political parties in Qaddafi's Libya. Libya has barely any experience with multiparty politics—just one parliamentary election, in 1952. After the country gained its independence from Italy in 1951, it promptly got rid of parties on the ground that they would be destabilizing. After January 1952, the government nominated all candidates for the lower house of parliament.

Right now some members of the council are not publicly named, either because they are living in areas still controlled by Qaddafi or because their families are. But they have organized a Crisis Management Team, headed by Mahmoud Jibril, which will be the executive branch of this fledgling government, while Mustafa Abdul Jalil will be the equivalent of the head of parliament. Or something like that.

"Most of them have no experience with the outside world," El Senussi says. "Sometimes their words touch your heart. Other times they make mistakes. It is not their fault."

El Senussi worries about the writing of a constitution, to make sure that the newborn "Revolution of the 17th of February," as it is known here, isn't hijacked by a new strongman or by Islamists. A committee of the council is working on a constitution, but behind closed doors; El Senussi would like to see more transparency, both in this process and in general. Amina Megheirbi, a professor of English at Garyounis University, struck a common theme among the revolutionary activists I met, saying the Transitional National Council "is an emergency situation, not an ideal situation. Everybody wants to do it the right way."

El Senussi wants to meet with the council to urge them to use Libya's 1951 independence constitution—a United Nations-aided document—as the basis for a new constitution, minus the monarchy. Since "Libya is a creation of the U.N.," he says, the council will have more chance of gaining international recognition and support if it works from a U.N.-approved document. Currently, only France, Italy, Qatar, Kuwait, Gambia, and the Maldives have recognized the Transitional National Council as the legitimate government of Libya, though John McCain has urged the United States to follow suit.

One of El Senussi's cousins, Ahmed Zubair El Senussi, 77, is a council member representing the interests of political prisoners, of whom he was one for 31 years. But on the whole the Senussi family—which even today owns large amounts of land in Egypt, a charitable trust in Saudi Arabia, and had property returned to them in Benghazi a few years ago—has been sidelined in the dialogue on Libya's future.

I first encountered El Senussi through his March 17 op-ed in the *Washington Times*, "The Libyan Tea Party." He wrote of the inspiring bravery of the revolutionaries:

> I've met young people in their teens and twenties who left behind comfortable lives in London and Manchester, England, to go to North Africa and fight for the liberation of our country. These young heroes are motivated by and have grown up accustomed to Western notions of freedom, equality and opportunity and want to be part of the movement that brings those universal values to Libya.

I wrote him at the email address listed about my plan to visit Libya, and El Senussi offered to take me with him on his next trip.

Speaking on the phone while I was in New York, El Senussi quickly volunteered that he does not want to revive Libya's monarchy, which lasted only 18 years, from 1951 to 1969. (A London-based cousin, by contrast, also named Mohammed, is seeking to revive the monarchy and pretends to the title "crown prince.") While the El Senussis have been prominent in Libya for 300 years, the roots of the monarchy are shallow. Idris was emir of Cyrenaica, or Eastern Libya, but fled to Cairo in 1922 when threatened by the Italian occupiers. He spent nearly 30 years in exile in Egypt prior to taking the throne at the age of 62. Idris is widely viewed as a pious, well-intentioned, but ineffective ruler who allowed his entourage to despoil Libya's new oil wealth. (Some of the despoilers were El Senussi's El Shalhi uncles on his mother's side, he acknowledges. The El Shalhis are a prominent Berber clan originally from Algeria.)

El Senussi laments that his great-uncle's role in the resistance to the Italian occupation has been slighted. "King Idris appointed Omar Mukhtar leader of the Senussi movement when he left for Egypt. He provided him with funding and arms from Egypt." Mukhtar, a tribal sheikh who was captured by the Italians and executed in 1931, has been a national hero ever since, and the February 17 revolution has made a totem of his likeness. "What hurts me," El Senussi comments, "is that there are no photographs of my great-uncle."

But leaving aside his family, El Senussi hopes that his connections in the highest reaches of Egyptian society can be of use to the Transitional National Council. It was the Sadat family who invited the Senussis to live in Egypt after Qaddafi's coup, and El Senussi is friends with Gamal Sadat, a former schoolmate, now the head of Etisalat, a mobile phone provider in Egypt. Egypt has not yet recognized the council, nor has it frozen Qaddafi's assets. A large but uncertain number of Egyptians, many illegal, work in Libya, and in the areas under Qaddafi's control, like Tripoli, they are de facto hostages.

Predictably, El Senussi is concerned about postrevolutionary Egypt, too. "I know that Egypt will not be a democracy. The population will be a hundred million in 10 or 15 years. What happened with Iraq and Kuwait can happen here." And El Senussi worries not only about a possible land grab by Egypt but also about Libya's borders with Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria, and Tunisia. None of these six neighbors, he points out, "is a democracy. All hold extremists. They are not going to sit still. They are going to try to destabilize us."

El Senussi adds, "When Qaddafi falls, Libya needs both the U.N. and the United States to replay the role they played back in 1949 and in 1951, and Libyans should feel no shame in asking benevolent powers to please help us help ourselves."

Volunteer cleanup on the streets of Benghazi

MABROUKA ELSMARI

For the moment, we soak up the atmosphere of Freedom Square. I buy a handmade tricolor wristband for 70 cents. Mohamed is not the wristband type. But both of us are trying to decode what we're seeing. Many of the women demonstrators are wearing the *niqab* (full-face veil) that marks them as fundamentalists, even though taking part in a march is a radical act for a woman in this traditional society. Are the funds from the sale of the tricolor buttons and hats going to the salesmen or the cause? Who is paying for our free coffee? Revolutionary Benghazi is not, for the moment, very concerned about money. Hundreds of people are milling around; Garyounis University, Libya's oldest and largest, closed on February 17, and few government workers are going to their offices. Their salaries are being advanced to them by the Transitional National Council even though the funds aren't coming from Tripoli—but workers can withdraw only 200 dinars (about $140) a month. Since most Libyans work for the government, that's a big blow to the local economy. Almost no shops or restaurants are open when we arrive, perhaps because few people have the money to patronize them, perhaps out of fear, though more opened every day of our stay. There are plenty of small groceries—many have cut prices to cost in the spirit of solidarity that has gripped the city—and on every block, shabby cafés offer the espresso that, along with cigarettes, fuels Benghazi's population.

The schools are closed too; many teachers are on the endless committees that provide social services for displaced families, publish newspapers, make videos, or organize demonstrations. One women's activist, Fairouz Naas, tells me

that no one wants the schools to open until Qaddafi is gone. To resume normal life while Qaddafi is shelling civilians in Misurata and the Western Mountains and terrorizing Tripolitanians would be a betrayal of their fellow Libyans.

Normal life is indeed only slowly returning to Benghazi. Qaddafi's troops penetrated Benghazi on March 19 and 20, killing and wounding hundreds. Some people fled, but those who have returned from overseas or from Tripoli want to help to rebuild their society. Naas, a strikingly attractive forty-something mother of two, was an accounting professor in Tripoli until she and her family came here on February 20. Now she organizes demonstrations—and leads the women marchers, too.

Fairouz Naas and her daughter Shadda flashing victory signs

Another activist, Iman Bugaighis, a professor of dentistry and the sister of Salwa, tells me that the Libyan people need to work on themselves. "We don't know how to be democratic on the individual level. We will have a dictator if we don't develop this." Dr. Bugaighis is one of a handful of women, mainly from her prominent family, who were present at the demonstrations from the start.

While women received equal pay for equal work and entered the professions under Qaddafi's bizarre brand of state socialism, they are by no means socially equal. In the small city of Tobruk, where we stopped on our drive from Egypt, the situation reminded me of Afghanistan, with next to no women on the street.

Nor is the town much more prosperous than an Afghan city. Indeed, in 1951, when Libya was granted its independence by the United Nations, the two countries were not so different.

Back then, Libya had barely a million citizens and combined "within the borders of one country virtually all the obstacles to development that can be found anywhere: geographic, economic, political, sociological, technological," according to the economist appointed by the U.N. to plan Libya's future, Benjamin Higgins. The country had a very high birth rate and an infant mortality rate of 50 percent in the first year of life. Ninety percent of Libyans were illiterate, and a per capita annual income of $25-$35 made Libya one of the world's poorest countries.

Now, Benghazi, though it has obviously suffered from the neglect of a dictator who knew he was disliked here, is recognizably part of the modern world. Libya had an estimated per capita GDP of $13,800 in 2010, according to the CIA World Factbook, about $13,000 higher than Afghanistan's. The Qaddafi regime is known for its neglect of statistics, and the number may be higher—especially counting the billions Qaddafi and his cronies stole.

Economically, eastern Libya is a mixed bag. The agricultural areas inland seem to be farmed using modern methods, the roads are good, and there are modern buildings everywhere. Yet the disrepair in the cities is shocking. There is a sense that civil society exists: There is a café life. People read for pleasure. They own laptops and check their email. Women drivers are legion (in part because public transport barely exists). Unlike in Afghanistan, I never have the sense that I'm doing anthropology fieldwork. That said, Kabul's business life is far more vital than Benghazi's—even if all the shuttered storefronts were open. The goods on offer in the clothing stores are no better than those found in Kabul, and the prices, oddly, are lower. It's obvious that Qaddafi's anti-capitalist policies blighted his nation.

Today's Benghazi is new to El Senussi, too. In early March he made his first trip to Libya since childhood. For three days, he visited old friends and relatives in Tobruk and Al Baydah, smaller cities between here and the Egyptian border. There, in its ancestral heartland, the Senussi family is still a big deal.

The Grand Senussi, Muhammad Ali Al Senussi (1787-1859)—a *sayeed*, or descendant of Muhammad—was originally from Algeria. He founded, and his son Mahdi expanded, a purist Sufi order that spanned North Africa. It began with a lodge in Al Baydah in 1842, and by 1911 there were over 100 lodges in Cyrenaica and the Sahara. Later they reached India and Saudi Arabia.

Now the lodges are gone, but the Senussis are still revered by the *ikhwan* or brothers of the Senussi Order—the descendants of the original followers—and the *ikhwan* "are very dear to us," in my companion's words. Idris was

ANN MARLOWE

a grandchild of the Grand Senussi. Idris's sister Fatima was El Senussi's paternal grandmother. In Tobruk and Al Baydah, when El Senussi introduces himself, people show him deference. But in Benghazi, where a good percentage of the population comes from other parts of Libya, the Senussis are regarded with less awe.

Still, El Senussi displays a paternalistic concern for the young men wounded in the fighting, most of whom are from humble backgrounds very different from the demonstrators and videomakers and council lawyers. In Cairo, El Senussi took me to visit a recovering fighter who had traveled some 600 miles from the remote southeastern oasis town of Al Kufra to join the rebel army. He had severe burns on his hands and had lost two toes. A Libyan businessman was paying for the treatment of this young man and 14 others. El Senussi noted that until two months ago, this benefactor was a Qaddafi supporter who made millions through his connections.

"The council has to take care of our boys. This is a rich country. We can pay for it. We have to provide treatment for all of these guys."

El Senussi's concerns were seconded by a neurosurgeon I spoke with at Benghazi Medical Center, Talahma Imad. Part of a foreign team brought in to run this new hospital—he's a Palestinian educated in Milan—he says flatly that Qaddafi "didn't want highly qualified Libyans." Hajer al Jahmi, 27, a third-year resident at Benghazi Medical Center, says that medical education was "completely corrupted" by the regime, with connections and politics trumping academic results. She cannot depend on Libyan-trained nurses even to do blood work.

Only eight war-wounded patients remain in intensive care at Benghazi Medical Center. Many have been discharged to outpatient care, while others were taken to Egypt, Qatar, or Turkey for treatment. Those in Qatar will have been very well cared for, according to Dr. Imad, but care can be spotty in Egypt or Turkey. He says he is in touch with the "highly competent" minister of health on the Transitional National Council, Dr. Bereket, about organizing a system for managing and eventually paying for the fighters' and civilian victims' care.

With his caution about human nature and his insistence on looking at the worst case rather than the best, El Senussi strikes me as someone who would be at home in America's conservative conclaves. But it still stunned me when he volunteered, "I've been following George W. Bush since he was governor of Texas. That's a strong man, I thought, and when he became president I told the Libyan opposition, Get on that train."

Yet El Senussi is critical of the United States' handling of the Lockerbie bombing tragedy. As we join a crowd watching Al Jazeera's coverage of Qaddafi's forces firing cluster bombs on the civilian population of Misurata, he comments, "If justice had been served at the time of the Lockerbie bombing, Qaddafi wouldn't be doing what he's doing today. Look at the deal they made with Al Megrahi. He was a fall guy."

El Senussi is referring to the April 1999 agreement between Libya and the United States by which Libya turned over two suspects for trial in a neutral country. Only Al Megrahi was convicted.

"The message that the United States was sending is, If you have a lot of money you can blow up a civilian aircraft and get away with it. Qaddafi should have been put in criminal court for that. There should be a new investigation of the Pan Am bombing—Moussa Koussa [former Libyan foreign minister, now in exile] knows all about it. He was on a red list by the French for the UTA [airline] bombing."

Over the course of my trip, it becomes clear just how little we in the West have known of Qaddafi's destructiveness towards his own people. Essam Gheriani, who is married to council member Salwa Bugaighis, got a degree from Indiana University in psychology and returned to Benghazi in 1986 to help his widowed mother. He found an economy ruined by Qaddafi's crackbrained theories. People who once had been upper-middle class would try to bring back a few bananas or tubes of toothpaste when they were lucky enough to go abroad. Some months after his return, he was watching TV one night when the regular program was preempted by a public hanging.

Amina Megheirbi, the professor of English, recalls seeing two students she knew from her undergraduate days at Garyounis hanged in public on April 7, 1977, the year after she graduated. A cousin of hers was sentenced to life in prison and amnestied in 1980. In the '80s, she said, Qaddafi's revolutionary committees took charge of the universities, with the power to fire professors. "They might do anything."

The stakes will be high in Libya even after Qaddafi goes. "We have a mountain to climb," says El Senussi. But I am betting on the optimists, like Professor Megheirbi. She points to the egalitarianism of Libyan culture. "Our society differs from other societies. Rich and poor, we live together, we love the same activities, we have friends from different classes. I lived in the Emirates and was surprised at how they behave with people of high status. We don't have VIPs in Libya."

The democracy activists I spoke with were hopeful not just for Libya, but for the whole Arab world. Dr. Bugaighis spoke for many when she said, "Now something has changed in us from inside. I don't think there will be any more dictators in the Arab world." ♦

The Kingston Trio, ca. 1970

Folk Wisdom

The acoustic sound of midcentury America.

BY RONALD RADOSH

Reading Lawrence J. Epstein's wonderful, lively, and politically incorrect survey of political folk music, a reader cannot help but think of the sarcastic old lyrics of Tom Lehrer's "Folk Song Army," written in the heyday of the sixties folk revival.

Ronald Radosh, an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute, is coauthor of The Rosenberg File *and blogs on PajamasMedia.com.*

Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan
by Lawrence J. Epstein
McFarland, 213 pp., $35

Remember the war against Franco?
That's the kind where each of us belongs.
Though he may have won all the battles,
We had all the good songs.
So join in the Folk Song Army,
Guitars are the weapons we bring
To the fight against poverty, war, and injustice.
Ready! Aim! Sing!

Many others have attempted to write in mordant, respectful tones of the folkies' desire to inspire left-wing activism through song, but Epstein presents a different take. The academic-sounding title of his book does not do justice to the lively, informative writing and the spirit he reflects of the singers he writes about and the music they wrote and performed. What Epstein says is that the effect the singers had was precisely the opposite of what they intended. Singers like Pete

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY IMAGES

Seeger may have wanted to rally the working-class, but as Epstein writes, "the Left had simply very little support from the proletarians they sought to organize." Instead, their audience was a new generation of middle-class radical students, those entering the university surroundings on their parents' dollar, at a time of rising postwar prosperity.

As this new student generation moved to create a New Left, coming together in large auditoriums with like-minded friends gave them a feeling of solidarity and superiority to their parents' generation, who, they believed, liked an older, bland, nonpolitical pop culture. But the truth was, as Epstein puts it, that they were producing music that "let teenagers rebel safely," as the folk music they loved also became "pure entertainment or safe and contained rebellion." It, too, had become "purely American, but not at all in the way that Alan Lomax or Pete Seeger had hoped it would be."

Indeed, the alternative to rock 'n' roll—which quickly became the real mass music of the age—was shadowed by scores of new folk pop groups, the biggest seller of which was the Kingston Trio, three college students with a clean-cut image who were privately all leftists but who carefully hid the message they believed in to achieve commercial success. "Their politics," Epstein notes, "were carefully coded."

It all began, not in the 1960s, but in the early '30s, when the Communist cultural movement began to argue that, to reach the masses, they had to turn away from European classical forms to discover the authentic rural music of the poor in Appalachia and mining locales like Harlan County, Kentucky. The music from the mountains captivated people like Lomax, son of the folklorist John A. Lomax and a secret member of the Communist party. They saw themselves as all part of a cohesive musical and political tradition, and hoped that the link to the music of authentic America would become the byway through which they could advance the transformation of the United States to socialism.

Epstein begins with Woody Guthrie and ends with an appreciation and new assessment of Bob Dylan, who began as a folkie and ended up transcending the genre that gave him his start. Guthrie (actually a middle-class Oklahoman) grew up on the music of Jimmie Rodgers (the Singing Brakeman) and A.P. Carter and his family—who were not rebels but religious folks and patriots who suffered in "quiet dignity because of their optimism that each day would be better and their certainty of reaching Heaven as a final reward after their hardscrabble life." God and family were enough; they did not need politics, especially of the leftist variety.

Woody Guthrie, 1943, above, and Pete Seeger, 1955

Their music was personal, familial, and communal. They sang of the woes of the heart, not of the economic and political system. But Guthrie, hit hard by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, found that the music of his mentors was not enough. He discovered the didactic yet influential music of the Wobblies—the Industrial Workers of the World—and their martyred songwriter, Joe Hill. The legend of Hill was made especially famous when Joan Baez sang the Earl Robinson and Alfred Hayes song "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night" at Woodstock—in retrospect, a highly retro note at America's biggest rock festival. But as Epstein points out, legend it was: The truth was that Hill's didactic antireligious themes did not resonate well with those he was trying to reach. Moreover, rather than an innocent martyr falsely executed by a Utah firing squad in 1915 because of his Wobbly politics, Hill was more than likely guilty of the murder of which he was convicted. While many like Joan Baez would invoke Hill's myth and songs, years later Bob Dylan wrote his own takeoff—"I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine"—which, Epstein points out, "was a direct slap at Hill's antireligious attitudes and the legacy of the song among leftists."

Hill did succeed in creating the image of the songwriter as rebel hero, and Guthrie was ready to inherit the mantle. At a time when labor struggles got headlines, and the Depression seemed to presage the coming doom of American capitalism, it became easy to see America as two nations: one of the ruling class, the other of the oppressed people. The result was that Guthrie, Seeger, and

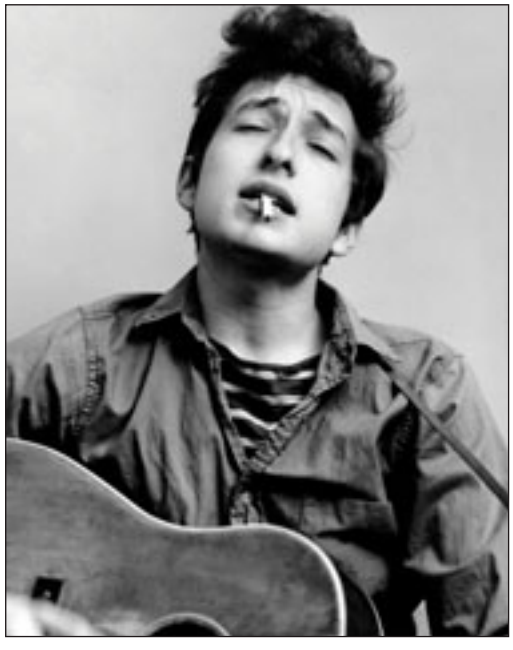
others could sing "Which Side Are You On?" and find a response among industrial workers busy forging the new industrial union group, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). With Guthrie and Seeger teaming up with others to create the first labor folk group, the Almanac Singers, the path was set, and it all coincided with the central role in the folk revival being played by those who were members of, or close to, the Communist Party USA.

Their success can be attributed to the new policy adopted by the Comintern in 1935, the Popular Front, in which revolution was downplayed as something for the far future, and the emphasis was put on unity in the struggle of all against the new fascist threat. Folk music became the vehicle for attaining unity since it was seen as both authentic and noncommercial, avoiding the poison of capitalism. The antidote to Tin Pan Alley-manufactured music, folk music was seen by Seeger and others as a way in which art could be used as a weapon in alliance with liberals and social democrats against fascism.

The Communist ties, however, proved problematic at key junctions. Ever loyal to the party, the Almanacs recorded "Songs for John Doe" after Stalin and Hitler signed their nonaggression pact in August 1939. They dropped anti-fascism and now mocked Franklin Roosevelt as a warmonger, attacked the draft, and recorded a new album of union songs. But when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, putting support for the Soviet Union first, they began to write on behalf of intervention and foreign war. Guthrie, returning to New York from the West Coast, immediately told Seeger that they would no longer be singing about peace or singing union songs that might encourage strikes. Now it was songs like "Reuben James," written to the tune of the Carters' "Wildwood Flower," which praised the crew of the first American ship torpedoed by the Nazis in the north Atlantic.

The second time around took place during the blacklist years. World War II found folksingers welcome: Josh White was a frequent visitor to the Roosevelt White House, where he was asked to give a command performance; the Almanacs sang "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" on national radio the day the war ended. But as the Cold War arrived, Seeger and his associates formed a new national group, People's Songs, and contributed their efforts to the 1948 campaign of Henry Wallace for president—and on behalf of a pro-Soviet foreign policy. When the CIO pushed Communist-led unions out, folksingers lost one of the key audiences they had counted on.

The Weavers, 1957, above, and Bob Dylan, 1961



The only path left was, ironically, the one they disdained at the start: making folk music commercial and joining the music business they once scorned as bourgeois. The Weavers—who became the first mega-selling folk group in the 1950s—had scores of number-one hits before the blacklist reached its height. They may have sung the right songs but, as Epstein notes, "in a perfectly awful political time for them." What eventually saved them, and led to the sixties folk revival, was the emerging crop of college students. Seeger's ample progeny—Peter, Paul and Mary, and others—would carry on the torch for a new set of admirers.

The good years came to an end with Bob Dylan, who singlehandedly changed the music industry and burst the boundaries established by the folkies, rejecting "finger-pointing songs," as he called them, and writing introspective, poetic ballads in which he paid homage to his folk roots but went way past them into new, and sometimes strange, territories. It would be a long road from "Song to Woody" to "Queen Jane Approximately" and the power and beauty of his "Blonde on Blonde" album.

No longer a rebel or blacklisted, Pete Seeger enjoys honors galore and appears, instead, as an "adherent of an old ideology." Bob Dylan sought answers in spirituality and individuality, not in political utopianism. None of the folkies created a new political vision, and no leftist successor ever emerged to replace Woody Guthrie. Indeed, the folksingers were (in Epstein's words) "sad-eyed prophets" who proved unable to "foresee the future." Their songs may live on, but the age of a political song movement is gone forever. ♦

DYLAN: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY IMAGES

B&A

Ideas Matter

One Englishman's adventures in the life of the mind.

BY EDWARD SHORT

"One day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its spine *Kant's Theory of Ethics*," the philosopher R.G. Collingwood recalled in *An Autobiography* (1939), "and as I began reading it . . . I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. . . . Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business."

Other English boys might have dreamed of being cricketers or engine-drivers, but Collingwood wanted to do something different: "There came upon me by degrees . . . a sense of being burdened with a task whose nature I could not define except by saying, 'I must think.'"

Thinking was, indeed, the governing passion of Collingwood's life, and Fred Inglis, professor emeritus of the University of Sheffield, takes up that passion here with something of his subject's irrepressible brio. Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943) was born at Cartmel Fell, Lancashire, the only son of the four children of W.G. Collingwood and his wife Edith Mary, the daughter of Thomas Isaac, a corn merchant. His delight in the life of the mind came from his father, a painter, archaeologist, and writer, who later became John Ruskin's secretary and biographer. After being educated at home, where his father taught him Greek and Latin and included him in archaeological digs in the Lake District, Collingwood, thanks to a rich patron, entered Rugby.

History Man
The Life of R.G. Collingwood
by Fred Inglis
Princeton, 400 pp., $39.50

There, his precocity set him apart. "The boys were nothing if not teachable," he recalled.

> They soon saw that any exhibition of interest in their studies was a sure way to get themselves disliked, not by their contemporaries, but by the masters; and they were not long in acquiring that pose of boredom towards learning and everything connected with it which is notoriously part of the English public school man's character.

If Collingwood took learning seriously, he had interests outside his academic work. He was an accomplished pianist and took a lifelong interest in art, about which he wrote with discriminating panache. A fan of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, he also had a sense of fun, which often enlivened his otherwise abstruse philosophical musings. It certainly gave his prose a playful elegance: "Going up to Oxford," he wrote in his autobiography, "was like being let out of prison. In those days . . . a candidate for honours was expected to read Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, and the speeches of Cicero more or less entire. . . . This was not only leading a horse to water, but . . . leaving him there. The happy beast could swill and booze on Homer until the world contained no Homer that he had not read." At University College, he also made time for "many long walks in the country, many idle afternoons on the river, many evenings spent playing and hearing music, many nights talking until dawn." After obtaining a First in classical moderations in 1910, he turned to Greats, in which he duly received another First. In 1912 he was elected to a fellowship and tutorship in philosophy at Pembroke College.

During the First World War Collingwood worked with the intelligence department of the Admiralty, after which he taught philosophy at Pembroke and Lincoln College. In 1918 he married, and had two children. In 1927 he became university lecturer in philosophy and Roman history. In 1941 his wife dissolved their marriage, and in the same year, he married one of his former students, with whom he had a daughter. He died two years later of pneumonia.

Throughout his career, Collingwood set himself one goal: "to bring about a rapprochement between philosophy and history," which would culminate in his best book, the posthumous *The Idea of History* (1946). Although the thesis is not entirely persuasive—all history is *not* the history of thought—its insights into the way history animates philosophy are still compelling. (Other notable works include *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, 1933, and *The Principles of Art*, 1938.)

Better than most historians, Collingwood recognized how "we all approach history infected with tendentiousness." Accordingly, he was convinced that "our actual historical labor must consist largely in overcoming it and . . . endeavoring to bring ourselves to a frame of mind which takes no sides and rejoices in nothing but the truth." For Collingwood, to give way to tendentiousness meant "ceasing to be an historian and becoming a barrister; a good and useful member of society, in his right place, but guilty of an indictable fraud" if one claimed to be an historian. Of the tendentiousness that first arose in the histories of the

Edward Short is the author of Newman and his Contemporaries.

early 20th century, Collingwood was profoundly prescient.

> It is said, and widely believed, that history has hitherto been written by capitalists, and from a capitalist point of view. It is time, therefore, to take it out of their hands and write it deliberately from a proletarian point of view, to construct a history of the world in order to show the proletariat as the permanently oppressed hero and the capitalist as the permanent villain and tyrant of the human drama. This proposal, however strange it may seem in an Oxford lecture-room is today [1926] a matter of practical politics; numerous people are acting on it, and are manufacturing the literature which it demands. The result is a type of history somewhat recalling the anti-religious histories of the eighteenth-century—a history inspired by hatred and endeavoring to justify itself by, most anachronistically, projecting the object of that hatred, by an obsession that partakes of the nature of madness, into the whole course of human development.

The acuity of Collingwood's work came at a cost. Unremitting writing, lecturing, and tutoring left him frazzled, and before he was out of his forties he had had two strokes. It was to help him recuperate that an inspired doctor ordered him to take a six-month cruise to Java, during which Collingwood wrote his sprightly autobiography. If not his best book, it is certainly his most enjoyable.

The rise of the dictators in the 1930s confirmed Collingwood's belief in the power of history to inform and rouse moral action. At the end of his autobiography he made a pledge that few intellectuals of the time could echo: "I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight."

That philosophy could learn from history was not an approved conviction in the philosophical circles of Oxbridge between the wars. If Collingwood was convinced that "we might very well be standing on the threshold of an age in which history would be as important for the world as natural science had been between 1600 and 1900," Bertrand Russell distrusted history, seeing it merely as Gibbon's "register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." Indeed, in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), Russell repudiated history, arguing that a new civilization needed to be built to replace the one that was being obliterated in the trenches. Collingwood disagreed: "Destroy history, and you destroy the nourishment on which philosophy feeds; foster and develop a sound historical consciousness, and you have under your hand all . . . that philosophy needs."

R. G. Collingwood

The Great War proved Collingwood's point. Afterwards he looked back on "the characteristic theory of the state which we have learnt to call Prussianism" and saw a theory which "starts from the undoubted fact that the individual man is by himself powerless for good or evil, that as he owes his literal, physical life to a social fact—the union of his father and his mother—so he owes his economic, political, and spiritual life to the society into which he is born." From this, it followed that "all originative and creative power is vested in the state, and that the state is, therefore, so to speak, God."

In our own time, we have seen this conception gain new ground, though its import remains the same. It is still a conception which imagines the state "as responsible to nothing higher than itself . . . [with] no responsibilities, no duties, no obligations, no responsibilities to anyone except itself." And Collingwood had no hesitation in concluding that, if "in framing this conception, [the Prussian state] was attempting to conceive the state in the likeness of God . . . it succeeded in creating a state that was rather an incarnation of the devil."

Here is a reading of the philosophical genesis of the Great War that one will not find in military historians. But it is a reading that offers a powerful corrective to our own growing statism. When Pope Benedict XVI visited England last fall to beatify John Henry Newman, he warned his hosts (on the anniversary of the Battle of Britain) that it was precisely this deification of the state that had led to the horrors of Nazism in the Second World War and might lead to more ghastly mischief in the future.

Since Inglis was not given access to Collingwood's personal papers, *History Man* is more commentary than biography. Nevertheless, while he is good on Collingwood's feel for the richness of history, he overlooks his greatest accomplishment, which was to show how bad ideas wreak havoc beyond the academy. In this, Collingwood paved the way for one of our own most caustic historians, Theodore Dalrymple, who observes in *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass* (2001), his collection of essays about his experiences as a doctor in an English slum hospital and prison, how irresponsibility, bred of fashionable notions of determinism, now define the underclass:

> Here the whole gamut of human folly, wickedness, and misery may be perused at leisure . . . abortions by abdominal kung fu; children who have children, in numbers unknown before the advent of chemical contraception and sex education; women abandoned by the father of their child a month before or a month after delivery; insensate jealousy, the reverse coin of general promiscuity, that results in the most hideous oppression and violence; serial stepfatherhood that leads to sexual and physical abuse of children on a mass scale; and every kind of loosening of the distinction between the sexually permissible and the impermissible.

In this catalogue Collingwood would have seen the harvest of what he called "the modern pretense that psychology can deal with what once were called the problems of logic and ethics." For Collingwood, such pretense required "the systematic abolition of all those distinctions, which, being valid for reason and will but not for sensation and appetite, constitute the special subject-matter of logic and ethics: distinctions like that between truth and error, knowledge and ignorance, science and sophistry, right and wrong, good and bad, expedient and inexpedient." And since these distinctions "form the armature of every science," psychology "regarded as the science of the mind, is not a science. It is what 'phrenology' was in the nineteenth century, and astrology and alchemy were in the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century: the fashionable scientific fraud of the age." ♦

B&A

Lincoln's Mantle

Claiming the legacy of the first Republican president.

BY JOHN B. KIENKER

When Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign in 2007, he did so just two days shy of Abraham Lincoln's birthday, standing in front of the old Illinois State Capitol where Lincoln had delivered the "House Divided" speech that helped propel him to the White House. Two years later, Obama rode to Washington following Lincoln's same train route, ate an inaugural luncheon menu reminiscent of Lincoln's favorite foods, was sworn in on the same Bible Lincoln used, and chose "A New Birth of Freedom" as his inaugural theme. In short, the new president did everything but grow a beard to signal to the American public that a new Emancipator had arrived. (Though what Obama wishes to emancipate us from remains hazy. Solvency, perhaps?)

As Jason Jividen shows here, progressives have been trying for a century to reinterpret the 16th president's words and deeds in order to claim him as their predecessor. This progressive sleight-of-hand has been so effective that even some on the right have fallen for it, denouncing Lincoln as the first big-government liberal. Such grousing, mercifully, is limited largely to neo-Confederates at the margins of American politics; for the rest of us, Senator Everett Dirksen's words remain as true, and challenging, as they were 50 years ago: The first task of an American politician is "to get right with . . . Lincoln."

Claiming Lincoln
Progressivism, Equality, and the Battle for Lincoln's Legacy in Presidential Rhetoric
by Jason R. Jividen
Northern Illinois, 243 pp., $38

Jividen makes his case simply by contrasting Lincoln's words with those of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Barack Obama. Far from anticipating progressives' "faith in the perfectibility of human nature through social planning," Lincoln's idea of equality was drawn from the American Founders: All men are created equal in their natural and inalienable rights and not, as he put it, "in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity." His belief in giving all men an equal opportunity to use their unequal talents is captured by his admonition: "Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him work diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built." No class warfare here.

Although TR and Wilson were early promoters of wealth redistribution and a living Constitution, it was Franklin Roosevelt who would set the successful pattern for later progressives. A master politician, FDR didn't frame his arguments (as Wilson had) in what Jividen terms "a self-conscious and deliberate break with the principles Lincoln sought to restore." Instead, he clothed his New Deal in the Founders' language of rights and liberty: His rhetoric was a "serious effort," according to David Donald, to "raid the Republican closet and steal the stovepipe hat." Liberals have made tremendous headway ever since by following the same script, as if a limitless welfare state were part of the "unfinished work" Lincoln had spoken of at Gettysburg.

A century after Lincoln's death, Lyndon Johnson proclaimed at Howard University that "equal opportunity is . . . not enough." Instead of an equality of rights—"equality as a fact"—government would seek "equality as a result." On another occasion, LBJ admitted that Lincoln's "importance to us is not in the facts of his life, but in what he has come to mean." The bottom line, writes Jividen, is that "progressive and modern liberal presidents have misinterpreted, misrepresented, and distorted Lincoln's equality in their rhetorical attempts to claim Lincoln's legacy."

Perhaps Jividen's next book should explore how, and how well, conservatives have borne this legacy into the 21st century. For now, it is worth pointing out that, although some conservatives lament that the right has sacrificed serious intellectual efforts for crass populism, there has been at the same time a remarkable renaissance of conservative scholarship. Recent books by Ronald J. Pestritto, Bradley C.S. Watson, Jonah Goldberg, and William Voegeli have added depth and subtlety to our understanding of modern liberalism's roots in the progressive movement, occupying a shelf to which *Claiming Lincoln* is a welcome addition. ♦

John B. Kienker is managing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

B&A

Giant Yankee

Sometimes a great ballplayer is just a great ballplayer.

BY JOHN C. CHALBERG

Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, 1951

AP IMAGES

Say it ain't so, Jane.

The trouble is, she already has. It's right there in the title. America's "last boy" has come and gone, and our childhood is finally over. But it's even worse than that. It appears that Mickey Mantle, "tragic hero" and "proof of America's promise," was also just another victim.

The Last Boy
Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood
by Jane Leavy
HarperCollins, 480 pp., $27.99

Mantle, we learn, was a victim at least twice over. As a young boy, he was sexually abused by a half-sister and later seduced by a high school teacher. And as both a Yankee great and ex-Yankee great, he was a victim of what might be called celebrity abuse, courtesy of adoring fans who sought to preserve their own childhood by keeping him in a similar state. Or so Jane Leavy wants us to believe. Mantle, she tells us, was not just the "last boy" but the "last boy in the last decade ruled by boys." Was that the 1950s, when a boyish Mantle and his "coltish" smile burst on the American scene and became the "unwitting antidote" to the menacing Elvis and his signature sneer? Or maybe it was the boys-will-be-boys decade of Bill Clinton by which time Mantle had morphed into an "avatar of the confessional nineties" just before his death in 1995.

Or maybe it was some other last boy and any decade in between—or before—or beyond. That's because America always seems to be producing one more "last boy" and forever winding up her childhood one more time. And that's because there always seems to be yet another writer determined to tell us that American innocence is not just a curse, but the curse that must be conquered, if we're ever going to act (and be treated) like adults, whether as individuals or as a nation. As a result, countless generations of Americans have grown up and grown old being told that they have never quite grown up—at least not until now, whenever "now" might be.

In any case, if Leavy's time frame is uncertain, her intentions are not. Her account of Mantle's life is surely a sad tale, but it is an indictment less of his excesses and failings than it is of the culture that first celebrated him and then victimized him. Fan that she is, Leavy doesn't pretend to deny Mantle's greatness as a ballplayer. Good for her. Pop psychologist that she claims to be, she can't resist taking shots at those Baby Boomers who wasted their childhood by idolizing Mantle the ballplayer before taking pity on them for trying to restore their lost youth by venerating Mantle, the icon. Not so good for her.

It is Leavy's contention that Mantle, in retirement, played a second unwitting role: The accidental anti-Elvis contributed to the "ultimate boomer entitlement" by enabling his aging fans to maintain their "fond illusions" of perpetual childhood. And if all of that isn't bad enough, America's "last boy" now becomes the unwitting tool (victim?) of a biographer who is less interested in putting America's childhood to bed than in perpetuating her own myth, namely that her countrymen (or at least its Baby Boom males) have been perpetual adolescents and doomed to remain just that, at least until they get their hands on this book and finally discover what fools they have been.

To be sure, Leavy doesn't ignore Mantle's greatness as a player. How could she? After all, who would want to read page after numbing page about just any old serial philanderer who also happened to be a helpless drunk, a certifiable and belatedly certified alcoholic, an absentee father, not to mention a troubled soul doomed to lead an aimless life? What makes *The Last Boy* half worth reading is that it's

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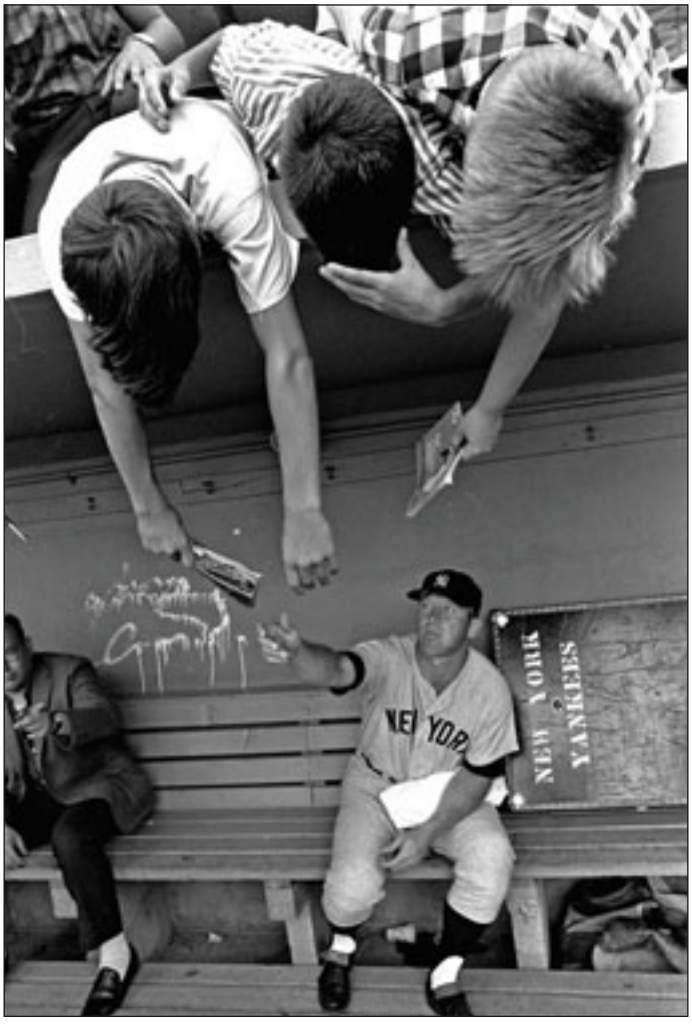
the Mickey Mantle we're talking about here: This would be the baseball half of this book, which thankfully isn't a chronological account of his 18 Yankee campaigns but, rather, a wisely conceived series of episodes chronicling various Mantle baseball highs scattered among a few Mantle lows. The somewhat longer half deals with Mantle's pre- and post-baseball lives, especially the nearly three decades that he spent trying and failing to find a meaningful role in life besides, well, besides playing the role of ex-Yankee great at card shows and casinos, on golf courses or Old Timer days, or in too many beds and bars.

The baseball career of this Yankee great surely would have been even greater had it not been for a near-collision with another Yankee legend in the second game (as opposed to Game Two) of the all-New York 1951 Yankee-Giant World Series. After another young outfielder of some promise lofted a lazy fly to right-center field, three once and future baseball greats were caught in a moment of history: With Willie Mays charging to first, Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle headed for the ball. Consensus has it that the ball was Mantle's to catch, but DiMaggio called the rookie off at the last instant. Mantle gave way abruptly, only to catch his spikes in a sewer drain. His badly-injured right knee would never be the same.



Mantle, 1961

GETTY IMAGES

While Mantle never publicly blamed DiMaggio for his injury, he did so privately to his wife and teammates. Luckily for both of them, 1951 was the only Yankee season that DiMaggio and Mantle shared. The two really were very different men, and the Yankee shortstop Tony Kubek captured a key difference this way: "People have always placed Joe and Mickey on a pedestal. The difference is Joe always liked being there and Mickey never felt he belonged." Perhaps that's because Mantle, unlike DiMaggio, never ceased reminding himself and anyone within earshot that he was "just a f— ballplayer."

As a young man, Mantle also assumed that he would die young. His miner-father, Mutt Mantle, was dead at 40—and if only his son had been so lucky. E.B. White once offered these cautionary words to non-New Yorkers with dreams of conquering the city: "No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky." Well, Mantle, Oklahoman and New Yorker, was (and was not) lucky. Born with incredible physical talents, and to a father who loved baseball and wanted his son to be a big league ballplayer, Mantle was also fortunate to have been a New York Yankee with a Hall of Fame career and to have shared that city and his time in it with two other notable center fielders, all of whom would be immortalized as "Willie [Mays], Mickey, and the Duke [Snider]."

But in the end, Mantle wasn't lucky enough. If he had died young, perhaps no more than his father's two score years, he would be remembered very differently: for his wondrous baseball exploits, the "amphibious" switch-hitting slugger who Yogi Berra marveled at, for his 1956 Triple Crown MVP season, for 1961 when he had a great (54 home run) season and was a great teammate to Roger Maris, who was having a greater one, and for much more than all of that. Dead at his father's 40, son Mickey would also be remembered for playing a boy's game in a manful way, for fighting through innumerable injuries, for not just playing hurt but for playing hurt cheerfully and manfully, and for never forgetting that he was "just a f— ballplayer."

If Mickey Mantle had fallen well short of, rather than slouched and staggered toward, his biblical three score and ten, he would have been spared a lot. In the short run, he would not have suffered the indignities that he brought on himself, and in death, he would not still find himself being asked to shoulder a burden that he need not bear. There will always be more "last boys" rising and falling among us only to stand accused of contributing to our perpetual childhood, as well as more Jane Leavys on hand to assure future readers that that cursed state of American innocence is once again finally on the verge of coming to an end. ♦

B&A

The Will to Give

You can't take it with you, but . . .

BY MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER

For decades, professional grantmakers have offered donors the following deal: Give us all your money forever, and we'll do respectable things with it, polite projects that will be praised by our luncheon companions at the Cosmos Club or the Century Association. These projects won't have anything to do with what you believe in, but *good* people—editorial writers at the *New York Times*, National Public Radio reporters—will remember your last name. We promise to keep your portrait somewhere in the office, and an intern will dust it every once in a while.

This deal is one that a rising number of today's philanthropists reject. Rather than creating a perpetual foundation that will annually dole out 5 percent of its endowment forever, donors such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Michael Bloomberg want to put their fortunes to work now, and carefully control how their wealth is used. But with all the potential projects to choose from, how do you know your money is being spent wisely? How do you ensure results? CEOs of large corporations constantly have the market and quarterly earnings reports to signal what strategies work and which don't. The heads of large nonprofits have no comparable feedback mechanisms.

There are, however, a rising number of consulting firms in the philanthropic world ready to offer their management expertise. Of these, the Bridgespan Group, cofounded and headed by former Bain and Company executive Thomas J. Tierney, is among the most important, and *Give Smart*, written with Duke Law School professor Joel L. Fleishman, turns case studies that Bridgespan has prepared over the years into a short book on the art and science of giving.

Give Smart
Philanthropy That Gets Results
by Thomas J. Tierney
and Joel L. Fleishman
PublicAffairs, 272 pp., $23.99

Give Smart will be avidly read in the nonprofit world, in part because the Gates Foundation has given Bridgespan a $5 million grant to promote the ideas here, which is a management book for philanthropists. There's occasional management jargon; the book's acknowledgments credit a "thought leader" at Bridgespan as well as a "head of Bridgespan's knowledge efforts." But Tierney and Fleishman largely avoid the pseudo-scientific argot that ensures that outsiders cannot understand most philanthropic discussions.

Much of the advice here is sensible. Tierney and Fleishman counsel donors to avoid what earlier generations called "scatteration" and they call "peanut butter philanthropy." Donors, they feel, shouldn't spread themselves too thin, and ought to find niches that no one else is in. They commend the Durfee Foundation, which gives grants to artists who are less than six months from finishing a project enough money to complete a composition or painting in time for a performance or exhibition. But in their consultants' desire not to scare off any potential clients, they often offer stories that are enticingly vague. For example, they describe "one prominent national funder" who decided to use annual grants of $5-10 million to end child poverty in a medium-sized American city. They got local nonprofits excited by the prospect of receiving what, for them, would be hefty grants.

But the donor realized that it needed "a deep understanding of the community (which this foundation did not have)" as well as strong connections with state and local welfare agencies. The funder gave up when they discovered that, for $10 million each year, they could barely feed the city's low-income children, much less end child poverty. It's a compelling story that would be better if the authors had had the courage to name the donor—or the city.

But the major fault of *Give Smart* is the strong emphasis on credentialing. Tierney and Fleishman like the idea that foundation staff should have master's degrees in nonprofit management, a relatively new degree that many nonprofit types hope will be as essential as MBAs in the corporate world and master's in public policy for government managers. But there's little evidence that this degree helps program officers do a better job, and a rising suspicion that the nonprofit management degree is like teacher training, where recipients know *less* than they did before entering graduate school.

The authors are also strong believers in evaluating programs. Evaluations succeed in hard sciences—either a vaccine works or it doesn't—but there are many worthy forms of philanthropy whose success can't be quantified. Donors who build great museums by purchasing works they like shouldn't be judged solely on the number of visitors who attend an exhibition. Nor should Christian poverty fighters who want to win souls be judged exclusively by counting the meals a mission serves the homeless or the number of job-training classes mission residents attend. ♦

Martin Morse Wooster is a senior fellow at the Capital Research Center and the author, most recently, of Great Philanthropic Mistakes.

B&A

Getting to No

Why 'Win Win' fails.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Like all warmly received slice-of-life movies made with small budgets, *Win Win* is being compared to *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno* even though it bares little resemblance to either—save, perhaps, for the fact that its producers would dearly love it to make enormous sums of money and be nominated for many Oscars.

What it shares with them is a grainy photographic style and no-frills art direction intended to suggest that what we are seeing is a realistic depiction of the quotidian details of American life among the just-getting-by. But where the sociological ambition and satirical sharpness of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno* caught you unawares and thereby magnified their effectiveness, *Win Win* turns out to be extraordinarily slight and unbelievable.

Mike Flaherty (Paul Giamatti) is a New Jersey lawyer in his forties with a modest practice who is sinking deeper into the financial mire. Mike is nothing special, though he seems like a decent if pretty schlubby guy. He lives in an ordinary house, has a pleasant wife and a couple of little kids with whom he attends church every Sunday, and has a part-time job as a high-school wrestling coach.

A dead tree threatens to topple onto his house, but Mike can't afford to pay someone to cut it down. The boiler in the little building housing his office is about to explode, but his partner won't put up the money to fix it because "my stepson wants the Lasik." Mike is having anxiety attacks during his morning jogs—and he only goes jogging because a doctor suggested it would help with the stress. The only person who knows about the depth of his woes is his high-school buddy Terry Delfino (Bobby Cannavale). Mike won't share them with his wife Jackie (Amy Ryan).

Win Win
Directed by Thomas McCarthy

Paul Giamatti, Alex Shaffer

As *Win Win* begins, a judge has named Mike the state-appointed counsel to a well-to-do Alzheimer's sufferer named Leo Poplar (Burt Young). Poplar's only relative, a daughter he hasn't seen in decades, is nowhere to be found. Mike tells the judge he will serve as Poplar's legal guardian so the old man can remain in his own house. He is only doing so because he knows the guardianship comes with a $1,500 monthly stipend and he desperately needs whatever money he can lay his hands on. He violates his promise to the judge and stashes Poplar in the local old-age home anyway (at Poplar's expense).

This suggests *Win Win* is going to be something special and vivid—a movie about the anxieties of the suffering middle class during the American financial downturn. And then, all of a sudden, writer-director Tom McCarthy turns *Win Win* into an indie version of *The Blind Side*. A skinny teenage boy named Kyle turns up. He is Poplar's grandson, and he's come to live with the grandfather he's never met. Mike and his wife Jackie take Kyle in as they wait for his absent mother to show up, and it turns out he's a dazzlingly talented wrestler. Of course it turns out Kyle has been abused, but he's a good kid at heart. He changes everyone's life for the better.

And then Kyle's mother shows up and it's time for a melodramatic third act, complete with a courtroom confrontation and a climactic wrestling match and Poplar disappearing from the nursing home and Kyle running away and everybody getting a chance to yell at Mike.

Win Win's turn toward uplifting sports drama feels grafted onto the more interesting material about Mike's troubles. And Kyle is an unrealized character whose positive effect on Mike and Jackie and his teammates is simply asserted, not shown. McCarthy cast an amateur in the part, and that was a mistake, because the role requires more intensity and emotion than the kid we see can summon up.

That is of a piece with the movie as a whole. McCarthy displays no talent whatever for the conventional storytelling tropes to which he defaults as *Win Win* comes to its close. He is much better when it comes to tiny details—a child spilling apple juice on a kitchen table, the barely populated stands at a wrestling tournament, the perpetually hangdog expression of Mike's bummer of an assistant coach (the wonderful Jeffrey Tambor). His talents mirror those of Paul Giamatti, who has become the American cinema's great Everyman.

Giamatti never strikes a false note. Would that one could say the same of *Win Win*. ♦

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, *is* The Weekly Standard*'s movie critic.*

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

For Immediate Release — May 17, 2011
Townhall Event with the President in Holmdel, New Jersey
PNC Bank Arts Center, Holmdel, New Jersey

(cont'd)

gutsy call. But that's why they pay me the big bucks. (Laughter.) Still, there's much to do. The economy needs to get better and people need to find jobs. And that is what I'm all about. (Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Mr. President, we thank you for bringing Osama bin Laden to justice. That was a great thing. But when you tell us people need to find jobs, that the economy needs to get better, well, how?

THE PRESIDENT: An excellent question. You see, the Republicans like to criticize and reject ideas. They are the Party of No. But we are the only ones with real ideas—ideas like bringing Osama bin Laden to justice! (Applause.) Next question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: With all due respect, Mr. President, you didn't really answer the last question. Could you please explain to us what concrete steps you are taking to help the economic situation?

THE PRESIDENT: Concrete, yes. Sort of like the concrete barriers our Navy SEALs were able to overcome when they landed their choppers in Osama bin Laden's backyard. (Smattering of applause.) How about someone else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Mr. President, are you concerned at all about the state of your health care reform? The polls indicate it's still unpopular and many would like to see it repealed.

THE PRESIDENT: That's interesting. Because the polls I've seen tell me that my decision to take down Osama bin Laden was a good thing. And it's not just Democrats. Republicans and independents also agree. The man had to go.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: But Mr. President, unemployment is still hovering around 9 percent. Can you tell us why you think this is not a jobless recovery?

THE PRESIDENT: Osama bin Laden.

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