

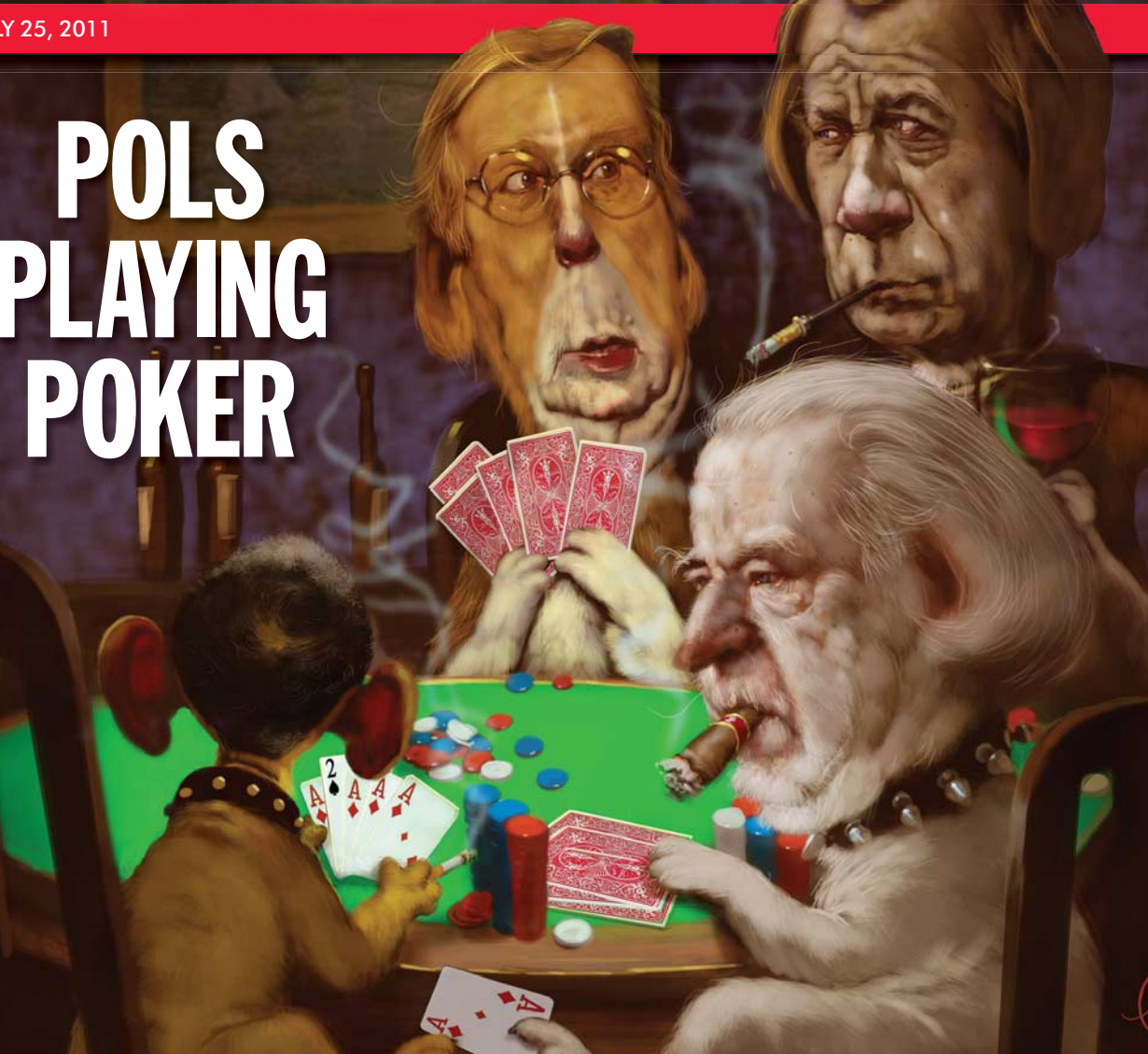
**A FLING WITH
THE WELFARE STATE**
NOEMIE EMERY

the weekly standard

JULY 25, 2011

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POLS PLAYING POKER



**JEFFREY H. ANDERSON
FRED BARNES
STEPHEN F. HAYES
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on the debt ceiling negotiations



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1. Dobson DaVanzo & Associates, LLC analysis of MedPAC data presented in March 2011

Report to Congress: Medicare Payment Policy.

2. Medicare and Medicaid Statistical Supplement - http://www.cms.gov/MedicareMedicaidStatSupp/11_2008.asp#TopOfPage

3. Medicare Savings and Reductions in Rehospitalizations Associated with Home Health Use. Avalere Health, LLC. June 2011.

4. Avalere Health. Potential Impact of Home Health Co-Payment on Other Medicare Spending. July 2011.

5. Dobson DaVanzo & Associates. Medicare Home Health Co-Payments: The Potential Impact on Home Health Beneficiaries and Medicaid Spending, July 2011.

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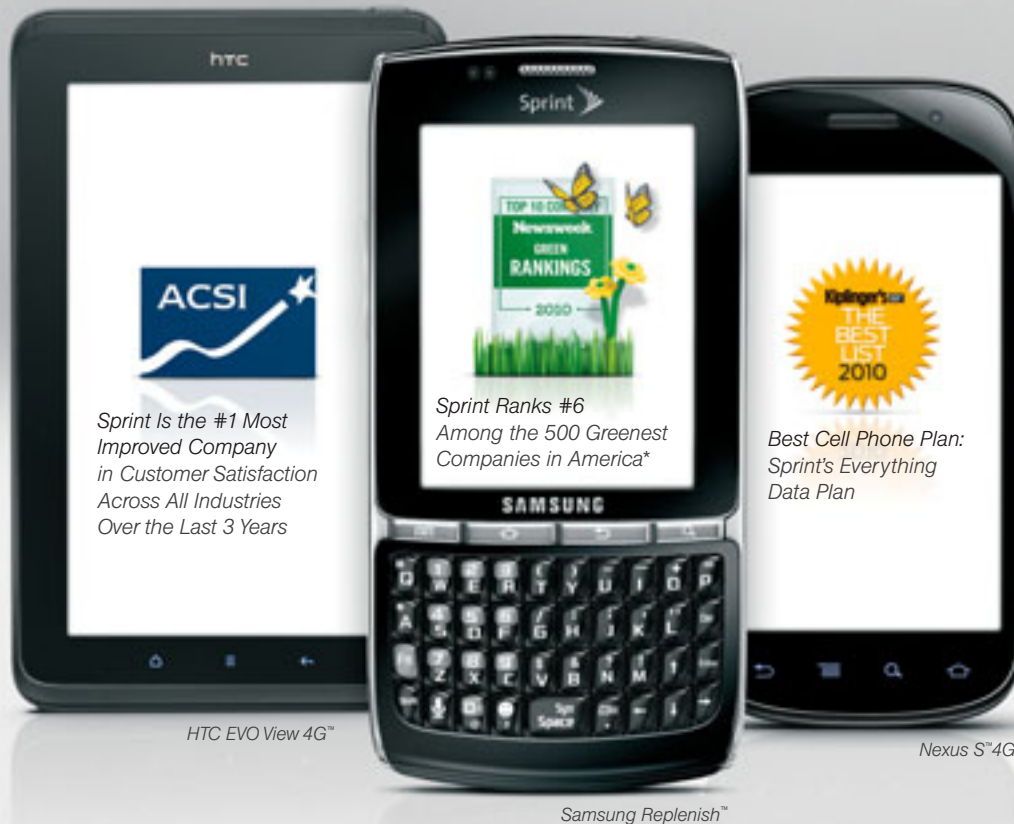
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The Terrorist Next Door

A SCRAPBOOK correspondent in the state of Washington mails us the June 24 front page of the *Seattle Times*, reporting the arrest of two men who were plotting a suicide attack on a U.S. military office in Seattle. On July 7, a federal grand jury indicted the two, Walli Mujahidh and Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, on nine felony counts, including, as the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported, “conspiracy to murder officers and agents of the United States, and conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction.”

What caught our correspondent’s eye was the surreal juxtaposition of the *Seattle Times*’s headline description—“looked like everyday guy”—and the adjacent photo of Abdul-Latif (born Joseph Anthony Davis), the “guy” in question, an admirer of Osama bin Laden who we would say looks rather fearsome in his full-Wahhabi beard. We’re guessing Abdul-Latif didn’t have a “Visualize World Peace” bumper sticker on his 17-year-old Honda.

As connoisseurs of the genre will recognize, this sort of hilariously inapt headline is actually par for the course for newspapers dealing with out-of-the-ordinary crime suspects. A few years ago, under the headline “What’s Wrong with the Neighbors,” *Slate* compiled these examples:

“I thought he was pretty nice. . . . But then again, I knew that his beliefs were way out of line. They were good neighbors, but, well, I got blue eyes, so I guess that helps” (Meda VanDyke



‘Seattle Times,’ June 24, 2011: Can you spot the ‘everyday guy’?

on her neighbor, neo-Nazi murderer Buford Furrow).

“We figured they would have questioned him and let him go and eventually we forgot about it” (Eric Anderson, neighbor of Atlanta mass murderer Mark Barton, on the murder of Barton’s first wife and mother-in-law several years earlier).

“He was shy, a little withdrawn.

But not real bizarre,” and “he never bothered anyone” (mass-murderer Jeffrey Dahmer’s neighbors).

And in the case of Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, the headline description also came from next door, as it were: According to the *Times* report: “‘He looked like an everyday guy,’ said one of his neighbors, Abdi Mohamad.” ♦

Remind Us What This Item Is About

THE SCRAPBOOK has long maintained that a certain amount of social science research is really just the quantification of common sense. You know, the revelation that men are more attracted to attractive

women than to unattractive women, or the discovery that incidents of crime tend to decrease in proportion to an increase in the prison population. Consider, as another example, the recent findings of Columbia University psychologist Betsy Sparrow and her colleagues, as reported in the pages of the *Washington Post*.

Search engines may be changing the way our brains remember information. . . . [P]eople are more likely to remember things they do not think they can find online and will have a harder time remembering things they think they’ll be able to find online.

In other words, if people have

learned that they can retrieve certain information from the Internet—“Google Effects on Memory” is the title of Professor Sparrow’s paper—they are less likely to commit such information to memory, and vice versa. That is to say, it is easy and convenient to consult Google when you need to remember the capital of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg), but it wouldn’t be smart to rely on Google to remind you of the date of your wedding anniversary.

Lest *THE SCRAPBOOK* be accused of philistinism, we hasten to add that there’s nothing especially wrong with the quantification of the obvious, especially when people of all races, creeds, and points of view can agree on certain basic propositions. We also suspect that Professor Sparrow’s revelation may be applied retrospectively. The invention of writing, or printing, probably did some damage to the oral tradition of storytelling, which brought us Homer’s *Iliad* and any number of venerable folk tales and sagas. Similarly, just as the introduction of the automobile radically reduced public knowledge about the care and training of horses, *THE SCRAPBOOK* is bold to suggest that the invention of television probably cut the number of weekly moviegoers in America. You could look it up.

It is possible—indeed, likely—that the swift availability of information on the Internet will affect patterns of cognition, perhaps even brain function. But *THE SCRAPBOOK* detects a hint of displeasure, even foreboding, about this in the coverage of the study. “Why remember something if I know I can look it up again?” asks a psychologist at Washington University in the *Post* story. “In some sense, with Google and other search engines, we can offload some of our memory demands onto machines.”

Which, in *THE SCRAPBOOK*’s considered judgment, is not a bad thing. Yes, it’s nice to commit poetry or biblical passages or the birth date of the Duke of Wellington to memory; but how much nicer that we have such



things as books to serve as permanent repositories of knowledge, or new technologies like search engines that retrieve such information instantaneously, and collate and classify it as well. *THE SCRAPBOOK* suspects that the amazing speed and convenience of such handy tools as Google will leave us with even more leisure time to fill. Perhaps we will finally have time to memorize more poetry. ♦

Insuring Obama’s Mom

Look who’s finally fact-checking President Obama! The *New York Times* filed this report on July 14:

Book Challenges Obama on Mother’s Deathbed Fight: The White

House on Wednesday declined to challenge an account in a new book that suggests that President Obama, in his campaign to overhaul American health care, mischaracterized a central anecdote about his mother’s deathbed dispute with her insurance company.

During his presidential campaign and subsequent battle over a health care law, Mr. Obama quieted crowds with the story of his mother’s fight with her insurer over whether her cancer was a pre-existing condition that disqualified her from coverage.

In offering the story as an argument for ending pre-existing condition exclusions by health insurers, the president left the clear impression that his mother’s fight was over health benefits for medical expenses.

But in *A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama’s Mother*, author Janny Scott quotes from correspondence from the president’s

mother to assert that the 1995 dispute concerned a Cigna disability insurance policy and that her actual health insurer had apparently reimbursed most of her medical expenses without argument.

Indeed, as Byron York pointed out in a July 11 column for the *Washington Examiner*, Ann Dunham had no worries at all when it came to her health insurance, and her employer was more than generous:

At the time she took the job [working in Jakarta for an American company under contract with the Indonesian State Ministry for the Role of Women] Dunham was increasingly worried about her health; she was suffering from intense abdominal pains. In November 1994, Dunham went to an Indonesian doctor who diagnosed appendicitis. As Dunham debated whether to leave the country for surgery, she called her boss at Development Alternatives. "You've got health insurance, that's taken care of," the boss told her. "We can cover the airfare."

Good for the *New York Times* for noticing that their superhero's cape has a couple of wrinkles in it. Our expectations for them are low, but in this case they exceeded them. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

'Kids with substantive allowances could purchase actual records, but the rest of us, trapped in prudent homes, had only Memorex tapes to save our favorite jams from the yawning void beyond the memory of playlists. Who knew how long it would be before we again beheld the splendor of 'Cold Gettin' Dumb'? Even the artists were ethereal. There was no Vibe or XXL to confirm the death of the Human Beat Box or Scott La Rock, or explain why UTFO faded away. Over-run by mystery, you had only divination and hours upon hours of deciphering . . ." (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *New York Times*, July 10). ♦

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The Way We Fly Now

The man squeezing his way through to the window seat smells of manure. Not a bad, rotten smell, exactly. Just that faint, fresh odor that farmers can't ever quite get rid of. "He smells funny," announces the little girl waiting in the aisle, and everyone stares carefully down at the airplane's industrial-blue carpet, pretending they didn't hear.

Even the farmer pretends he didn't hear. And the girl's mother. And the stewardess. And the smoker shakily clawing nicotine gum out of its wrapper, and the scholarship girl in the Wellesley sweatshirt who's heading back east to school, and the retired plumber who's taking his wife to Aruba—they all pretend, because . . . well, because that's what people do on airplanes. It's the etiquette of the thing. The manners of flying in America, even on a flight from Bismarck to Minneapolis.

Maybe *especially* on a flight from Bismarck to Minneapolis—although there remains the question of what, exactly, they're pretending. Mostly that they're stoically inclined, polite Scandinavians, if the ups and downs of their speech are any guide: all those mildly but consistently misplaced stresses, as though the *rhythm of the sentence trumps the accent of the syllables*.

Besides, good or bad, the passengers have to put up with the smell, because they're stuck with one another. The flight from Bismarck is crammed full, all 50 seats occupied on one of those old twin-engined Canadair jets that look like toys when they arrive in Minneapolis and taxi up to the terminal next to the grownup 747s. Next to the fat Airbuses, for that matter, which always remind me of German hausfraus, all *oomph, oomph* business as they waddle in tweeds through the shops on the village street.

In fact, maybe that's the best way to understand airports in America: as villages, albeit villages in which the villagers don't actually know one another. Or maybe as a single village—the world's largest village, since all airports are really the same place. Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson, Boston's Logan, Chicago's O'Hare, Fargo's Hector International, together with LaGuardia, Dulles, Lambert, and Sea-Tac: They're not locations so much as entrances, the roads that lead you down into Airportville, U.S.A.



I mean, I know, in some abstract sense, that the three-hour layover I'm suffering through on my way to the east coast is at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport in the state of Minnesota. But I might as well be in Dallas/Fort Worth or Denver or Portland. It's got the same carpet and the same shops as every other airport.

The same villagers, too. That church glee club passing through Concourse B here in Minneapolis—the Lutheran teenagers with the matching T-shirts and mismatching backpacks. You saw them, or their cousins, anyway, at the Newark airport. And the Miami airport. Baltimore/Washington, Detroit/Wayne County, Charlotte/Douglas. Albuquerque,

Indianapolis, Nashville, Roanoke.

You saw those squabbling kids in line at Starbucks, right behind the sleepy businessman in the gray slacks who's been traveling since he left his house in Hartford at 4:30 that morning. And the recorded voice endlessly intones, "You are coming to the end of the moving walkway." And the toddler in the summer dress runs back and forth from her mother to the chairs across the way, playing some exhausting game. And the couple in sunglasses striding by, holding themselves as though they're expecting to be recognized at any moment. And the fat lady and the man in the beard and sandals. They're over there, reading the gate-assignment screens, and then they either hurry away or fall into nearby seats and pretend they have messages on their cell phones that require immediate attention.

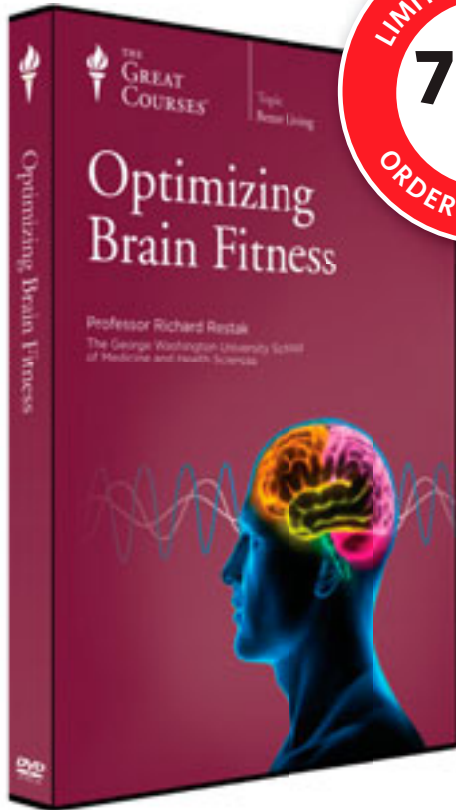
The most interesting thing may be how polite everyone is. America dressed up, once upon a time, to fly on airplanes: suits and ties and skirts. Now we dress down. Way, way down. But still we behave with the last remnants of etiquette, pretending not to see, pretending not to notice. The virtue of patience has come, in modern times, to be understood mostly as the answer to boredom. But back in medieval thought, patience was named instead the opposite of anger—and the old politeness of the nation still shows up in how rarely Americans allow anger to overcome them in airports.

Oh, yeah, here and there fury breaks out. But mostly it doesn't, despite the fact that, even in polite Minneapolis, the local TSA officials and ticket agents seem to be practicing the functionality and facilitating roles they may later play in hell. It is not sheepishness and docility that makes the flocks of Americans in the nation's airports behave, all in all, fairly well. It's mostly just politeness. Politeness and patience. Someday, I pray I learn those virtues.

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Pols Playing Poker—Badly

The debt ceiling negotiations have become a tedious game of dorm room poker. Barack Obama is the dealer, and the deck is stacked in his favor. He's enjoying the game. Even so, he's not as good as he thinks he is: Witness his comment last week to House Republican leader Eric Cantor, "Eric, don't call my bluff," which suggests the president doesn't know it's a bad idea to tell your opponent you're bluffing. Still, Obama has the advantage over the Republican congressional leadership, who are playing weak hands . . . weakly. Meanwhile, the GOP rank and file and conservatives around the country are exasperated, at once disliking the whole game and annoyed that they've only been allowed to participate at the last moment.

So, when all the collegiate *Sturm und Drang* is over, Obama may come out slightly ahead.

But if so, only slightly—and maybe not at all. Because it looks as if we'll end up with no tax hikes, some spending cuts, and a situation in which Obama and the Democrats are basically responsible for our assuming ever more unsustainable debt, while most Republicans oppose the final deal. Meanwhile, we have to endure a painful few weeks here in Washington, with GOP congressional aides cringing as their bosses get outplayed in some low pot hands, and the liberal media whooping and hollering as Obama pockets a few penny antes.

But how much damage is really being done? Public opinion polls in the real America have so far shown no movement in Obama's direction or towards the Democrats. Gallup reported last week that the generic GOP candidate had opened up an 8-point lead over President Obama, the largest yet, when voters were asked their 2012 intentions. Rasmussen reported a more or less steady 5-point lead for Republicans in the generic congressional ballot. So fretful conservative commentators who are gnashing their teeth over every hand should probably calm down. It's just not worth getting too worked over all the misleading arguments being tossed around. And there's no reason to give

credibility to the media's attempt to make this a decisive moment in the battle for America's future.

It's not. The real high-stakes poker game is in 2012. That's when the voters will call Obama's bluff.

Because it's hard—even for Barack Obama—to bluff reality. The whole structure Obama is defending—liberal big government, a bloated public sector, the entitlement state—is a bluff. It can't deliver on its promises. It produces slow growth, debilitating regulation, and a dissatisfied citizenry. It can't work, and it doesn't work, and when the college game is adjourned, the players have to go out into the real world of real consequences.

In that world, conservatives will have every chance to make the case that liberal policies fail and conservative policies work. It's not a difficult case to make. They get to defend Carter's economy and Obama's, and Greece's welfare state and California's. Conservatives get to appeal to the records Reagan and Thatcher, and the economic performance of conservatively governed Canada and Texas. Conservatives should do fine in this real world debate.

This—a common sense appeal to experience, to the tests of reality—may well be enough for a Republican to prevail in 2012. But a bold and fresh agenda in addition wouldn't hurt. And such an

agenda will be essential for the task of governing in 2013. The challenges that will face President Bachmann or Romney or Pawlenty or Perry or Ryan or Christie or Rubio in 2013 will be very different and in some ways more fundamental from those of the past. The reform agenda that will be required will have to be bold and comprehensive. The work of developing such an agenda is what's truly important, and in many respects it's well underway.

Republicans and conservatives have to play their hands as they're dealt. But they should keep in mind that this year's tussles are mere warm-ups for the serious poker games of 2012 and 2013. In those games, no one will be bluffing, and conservatives need to be ready to go all in, and to win.

—William Kristol



Dissembler in Chief

‘I’m the president of the United States, and I want to make sure that I am not engaging in scare tactics. And I’ve tried to be responsible and somewhat restrained so that folks don’t get spooked.’ So said President Obama at his June 29 debt ceiling press conference. Two weeks later, *CBS Evening News* anchor Scott Pelley asked Obama whether he can “tell the folks at home that, no matter what happens, the Social Security checks are gonna go out on August 3?” President Obama replied that whether it was Social Security checks, veterans’ checks, or disability checks, “I cannot guarantee that those checks go out on August 3 if we haven’t resolved this issue, because there may simply not be the money in the coffers to do it.”

These statements are representative of Obama’s contradictions, in word and deed, over the course of the entire deficit debate. Gelatinous is an apt description (to paraphrase Speaker John Boehner) of the president’s rhetoric, for Obama has been slippery and irresolute—the opposite of the responsibility and restraint he touts.

To be responsible, a leader should express ideas to the American people in clear and informative language. Yet the deficit debate has been marked by Obama’s fondness for referring to “revenues” (taxes), “investments” (spending), the need to “reduce spending in the tax code” (increase taxes), and the importance of “further improving Medicare” (cutting Medicare) by further empowering the Independent Payment Advisory Board, whose cuts—at least under current law—would go to fund Obamacare, not cut the deficit.

He has misled people and incited envy by repeatedly suggesting that wealthier Americans don’t pay their fair share of taxes. Yet Congressional Budget Office (CBO) figures show that if the citizenry is divided into quintiles by income, the top two quintiles pay 99 percent of all federal income taxes, and the top 1 percent pays 40 percent. Nor is this merely reflective of disparities in income: The top two quintiles make three times as much money as the bottom three quintiles but pay 75 times as much in income taxes.

And take Obama’s statement about not having the money for Social Security, veterans’ checks, or disability: The federal government takes in roughly \$180 billion every month. (It also borrows \$135 billion a month.) Social Security payments are about \$60 billion a month, payments to all military personnel (veterans and otherwise) are about \$12 billion, and payments to disabled veterans are about \$6 billion. That totals about \$78 billion. To say that “there may simply not be the money in the coffers” to pay for these items is plainly false. One might even call it “engaging in scare tactics.”

Perhaps most grating of all are his repeated references to “a balanced approach” and his petulant insistence that Congress “make a deal.” In a debt ceiling press conference during which he chided Congress for “procrastinating,” Obama said, “This is a matter of Congress going ahead and biting the bullet and making some tough decisions. . . . We’ve identified what spending cuts are possible. We’ve identified what defense cuts are possible. We’ve identified what health care cuts are possible.” Then, in a comment that some might not characterize as “restrained,” he added, “You know, Malia and Sasha generally finish their homework a day ahead of time. Malia is 13; Sasha is 10.”

Yet Obama hasn’t followed his daughters’ fine example. He has yet to submit a single debt ceiling proposal to Congress for a vote. Likewise, he has yet to submit a budget to Congress that would cut federal spending by so much as \$1. He did submit a budget (defeated in the Senate 97 to 0) earlier this year that he described as reducing deficits by “roughly \$1 trillion.” But the CBO scored it and said it would *increase* deficits by \$2.8 trillion—and that’s even compared to current law, which would already lead to \$6.7 trillion in new deficits.

Meanwhile, in his July 15 press conference, Obama said of the Republicans, “If they show me a serious plan I’m ready to move.” But House Republicans passed a serious budget three months ago that would cut deficits by \$1.6 trillion, even before its proposed Medicare reforms (for those under 55) would go into effect. Yet Obama hasn’t moved. He has shown no willingness to tackle runaway entitlement spending. To the contrary, Obamacare dramatically accelerates it—even though, according to his own budget, mandatory spending alone will surpass total federal revenues this year.

As for Obama’s “balanced approach,” according to White House figures, the highest percentage of the gross domestic product that Americans have ever paid in taxes is 20.9 percent, at the height of World War II. Obama’s budget calls for spending an average of 24 percent over ten years—a tally that, pre-Obama, we last hit during that same war. So Obama’s idea of a “balanced approach” involves spending at the highest rate since World War II and taxing at the highest rate in American history. Meanwhile, Obama wants a debt ceiling increase of at least \$2.4 trillion, the staggering amount of money that we’d need to borrow to get us through his reelection bid.

In light of all this, it’s no wonder that House Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan received a standing ovation from his fellow Republicans last month at the White House when he told Obama, “Mr. President, the demagoguery only stops if the leaders stop it,” adding, “Leadership should come from the top.” Ryan’s words tapped into an increasing feeling of frustration among the American people—the frustration that comes when the president of the United States speaks to them as “folks” prone to being spooked rather than as responsible citizens of a democratic—if increasingly insolvent—republic.

—Jeffrey H. Anderson

The Last Shuttle Launch

One giant leap backwards.

BY P.J. O'ROURKE



NASA

Merritt Island, Florida

My seven-year-old son, Cliff, watched the last space shuttle launch from the NASA viewing stands at the Kennedy Space Center. He had a spiritual experience of a kind that no amount of dragging him to Mass or even Fenway Park has inspired. His little face—seemingly made up entirely of open eyes—announced it: “*This is awe!*” He didn’t need to say anything and, having forgotten to breathe, he probably couldn’t. Indeed, for the first waking moment in his 89 months on earth, he was silent.

The swooped delta of the *Atlantis* shuttle with its orange gothic squid of a liquid fuel tank and its twin column, party hat-topped solid-fuel boosters—the “full stack” as it’s called—is three-and-a-half miles away but looms nonetheless. Perching on its launcher it is as tall as a 25-story building. There’s a flash below the engine nozzles. A fiery glory pours out on every side. A few seconds later comes the joyful noise, a trumpeting so powerful that the decibels will kill you if you’re closer than 800 feet.

My eyes were as wide as my son’s, but, unlike him, I was babbling as if I were a blind, deaf, and dumb man miraculously cured: “*This is light!*” “*This is sound!*”

The full stack stands almost still, trembling with the strength of 6,825,704 foot-pounds of thrust. Then it is risen—ascending on a tower of smoke with the slow majesty befitting 2,030 tons of wondrous engineering. The *Atlantis*, still joined to its external tank and boosters, rolls gracefully onto its back, embracing the heavens now instead of the Earth, and traces an arc as grand as the curve of the space-time continuum. Then it disappears into the layer of stratocumulus that had been threatening for three days to scrub the launch.

Cliff made a small noise of protest. With a child’s love of things coming apart, he’d wanted to see the

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solid boosters detach and fall into the ocean. But there was a better show. Rocket smoke cast a scything shadow out to the horizon across the cloud tops while at the launch site smoke still stood, vertical, immense, and undissipating. “He took not away the pillar of cloud by day.”

And He didn’t. Congress and the White House did. Since the end of the countdown about two minutes had passed, which seemed like an era, and it was—the end of an era. That’s that for the NASA shuttle program and maybe for the whole idea of U.S. manned space exploration.

We used to have presidents who liked to send Americans places—Iraq, Afghanistan, the Moon, or Mars. But George W. Bush’s NASA Constellation program has been canceled. Its gigantic Ares V rocket is off the drawing board. The Constellation’s *Orion* flight capsule has been renamed, in a telling translation into GovSpeak, MPCV—“Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle.” What the multiple purposes are supposed to be is anyone’s guess. At the moment the only way NASA can get a person into space is by paying Vladimir Putin for a ride on the creaky old *Soyuz*. Looks like the Russians won the space race after all. Meanwhile America’s government has not funded, or even proposed, anywhere new for people to go beyond low Earth orbit. Never mind that the observable universe is 92 billion light years across and would seem to offer ample travel opportunities.

In a rare outburst of bureaucratic blunt truth, Michael Leinbach, the *Atlantis* launch director, told colleagues at the Kennedy Space Center, “We’re all victims of poor policy out of Washington. . . . I’m embarrassed that we don’t have better guidance.”

On the trip to Florida I explained America’s space exploration to Cliff as well as I could. In a sense he understands better than I do. To him space travel is not an extraordinary phenomenon but a long-standing historical movement, an inevitability in

the course of human affairs. It’s what the discovery and settlement of the American West was to me when I was his age, before Manifest Destiny was insulted in grade schools.

Cliff’s reaction to the news that America will now lack a manned spaceship was like hearing from Miss Sonnenberg, my second grade teacher, that America had stopped with the Louisiana Purchase; there was no war with Mexico, and the heck with Texas and California.

Cliff and I went to the shuttle launch through the good offices of our friend G. Ryan Faith, research analyst at the Space Foundation, a

At the moment the only way NASA can get a person into space is by paying Vladimir Putin for a ride on the creaky old Soyuz. Looks like the Russians won the space race after all. Meanwhile America’s government has not funded, or even proposed, anywhere new for people to go beyond low Earth orbit.

nonprofit that brings together everyone involved in space exploration—civilians, the military, commercial entrepreneurs, and government space agencies from around the world. I think aliens from Area 51 in Nevada would be welcome if they existed. One purpose of the foundation is to build understanding, support, and enthusiasm for what would be the coolest thing in the world except all sorts of other worlds are involved so it’s even cooler than that.

Places for children in the NASA viewing stands are hard to come by, reserved mostly for astronaut offspring. But I argued that if you’re going to promote the coolest thing in the world you need testimony from someone who really uses those words in daily speech. The Space

Foundation put us in touch with the John H. Glenn Research Center, which is, among other things, NASA’s main propulsion test facility, and let’s hope they have something to propel soon. James M. Free, the deputy director, extended invitations, and Cliff became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s most vocal advocate—after his power of speech returned.

Two nights before the launch the Glenn Center hosted a reception in Cocoa Beach. Actual astronauts were in attendance, including Rick Mastracchio, who has been on three shuttle missions and done at least three space walks. He was wearing his blue NASA flight suit. I introduced Cliff, and Cliff came right to the point about the cancellation of the shuttle program. Well, not right to the point. He had some questions of greater seven-year-old importance to ask first. “When you were weightless, did you do a flip?”

“I sure did,” Mastracchio said.

“Did you do a ‘Misty?’” asked Cliff.

Mastracchio looked puzzled. “A snowboarding term,” I explained. “A back flip with a 540-degree spin.”

“Good idea,” said Mastracchio. “I’ll try it next time.”

But Cliff knew there won’t be a lot of next times. Only four Americans a year will fly on the *Soyuz*. A decade ago the astronaut corps had about 150 men and women; now there are 61.

Cliff said, “Why are they putting the shuttle down?”

It was a nice choice of phrase. A country boy knows what happens to old or unwanted animals, and he combined that with the term for a schoolyard diss—the space geeks being razed by the popular kids from the Oval Office and the Hill.

Mastracchio answered diplomatically. NASA is working on a new heavy-lift rocket. (Though it probably won’t be ready until 2020, leaving budget-cutters plenty of time to work.) Private commercial manned flights are on the way. (But not before 2016, and only if Congress is willing

to pay for seats on board.) “By the time you’re ready to be an astronaut,” Mastracchio said, “there will be plenty of ways to go to space.”

Cliff was not convinced. “Is the government,” he asked, “just being mean?”

A significant glance was exchanged between astronaut and parent over Cliff’s head.

So enough’s enough, Christopher Columbus. Four voyages were plenty. The natives are crabby. There’s no gold out there. And Don Quixote needs meds. Sancho Panza’s pension plan has to be fully funded. A wide variety of social and educational initiatives are necessary for Dulcinea to achieve her full potential as a wench. Anyway, if we need to go to the New World again, Sir Francis Drake would consider having a Spaniard onboard to be a real prize.

On July 20, 1969, at 10:56 P.M. I was in my off-campus apartment staring at a black and white portable TV, a can of Budweiser in my hand. “One small step . . .” I remember every detail. Where were you and what were you doing when Lyndon Johnson signed Medicare into law? Medicare cost \$523 billion in 2010. NASA cost \$18.7 billion, just 0.6 percent of federal spending. In fact, since NASA’s founding in 1958, its total spending has barely exceeded what we pay for Medicare per annum. Would you rather reach into infinity for 53 years or get old and sick for 12 months? In 2011 each American will give NASA about \$60—the sun, the moon, and the stars for less than the price of a month of basic cable.

Oh, maybe it’s a waste of taxpayer money. But government wastes taxpayer money. This is what government does. It can’t be changed. Our earliest evidence of government, in the ruins of Babylon and Egypt, shows nothing but ziggurats and pyramids of wasted taxpayer money, the TARP funds and shovel-ready stimulus programs of their day. Let’s waste taxpayer money putting that look back on Cliff’s face. ♦

THOMAS FLUHARTY

Divide and Conquer

The president’s real agenda.

BY FRED BARNES

Soon after Mitch McConnell joined the debt limit talks, his suspicions grew. An agreement with President Obama on raising the limit by \$2.4 trillion—and tied to serious spending cuts—looked impossible. The more he heard from Obama and his aides in the private sessions at the White House, the more he felt that no good could come from the talks. They would lead to a bad deal, harm to Republicans, or both.

McConnell, the Senate minority leader, did not participate in the earlier negotiations, seven weeks of them, guided by Vice President Biden. Senate Republican whip Jon Kyl had taken part in those talks, which were friendlier and far more productive than the meetings run by Obama. Biden, despite his reputation as Washington’s premier windbag, had restrained himself. The president hasn’t. He’s talked incessantly and for so long that others often gave up trying to get a word in. Obama dominated one session so completely that only one of the four Republicans spoke and then only in short spurts.

What appalled McConnell was Obama’s insistence that even relatively small spending cuts be accompanied by tax increases. These were “little stuff,” one Republican says,

and not particularly controversial. That wasn’t the only rollback from the Biden talks. Obama’s aides had reduced the size of the cuts.

They were also eager for Republicans to accede to precisely the tax increases—on corporate jet owners, the oil and gas industry, hedge funds—that buttress Obama’s reelection ploy of positioning himself as foe of the rich and defender of everyone else.

These tax increases were presented as offsets to a specific spending reduction, but they didn’t come close.

Nor was the schedule of spending curbs offered by Obama credible. Only \$2 billion would occur in 2012, with “empty promises of more to follow,” McConnell said.

After several rounds of Obama-led talks, Senate majority leader Harry Reid noted the obvious: Republicans simply aren’t going to agree to tax increases. The president was undeterred. He continued to toss out ideas Republicans were sure to find unacceptable. At the fifth of the daily White House talks, economic adviser Gene Sperling outlined a plan for a deficit cap. It had one problem. If the cap were breached, it would trigger an automatic tax hike (as well as spending cuts). Kyl, the only Republican to speak during the meeting, rejected it.

Obama hasn’t made compromise any easier for Republicans. He’s made



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it harder, perhaps on purpose. He's operated as if he's in full command of the situation. And Republicans have no option but to go along or be blamed for blocking an increase in the debt limit. Eighty percent of Americans want a "balanced" deal, Obama declared at his press conference at the end of the week. In the president's lexicon, "balanced" is the same as "shared sacrifice" and "tradeoffs" and "tough choices." They all mean higher taxes.

After sitting through two days of talks, McConnell was ready to bolt. He delivered a sharply worded speech on the Senate floor. "I have little question that as long as this president is in the Oval Office, a real solution is unattainable," he said. "In my view the president has presented us with three choices: smoke and mirrors, tax hikes, or default. Republicans choose none of the above."

The next day, McConnell proposed an escape hatch, a jerrybuilt scheme to allow the debt ceiling to rise without Republicans voting for it. And it would keep them from becoming, in McConnell's phrase, "co-owners" of the Obama economy.

House Republicans aren't ready to escape so cleanly. They may affix \$1 trillion in cuts in spending—cuts agreed to by both sides in the Biden talks—to McConnell's legislative device. But that assumes they'll ultimately embrace it, which is anything but certain.

The state of things after two months of negotiations suggests Republicans made three mistakes. One, their leverage in a fight over a debt limit increase turns out to be far less than McConnell, among others, had figured. Two, by agreeing to secret talks, they let Obama and Democrats pretend to support deep spending cuts without offering any public evidence, like a budget. And three, they played into Obama's hands by walking out of the Biden talks and calling on the president to take over.

With Obama in charge, he and Republicans are farther apart than ever on a deal. And Obama thinks he has Republicans right where he wants

them—divided. Indeed, Republicans are split on whether to persist in rejecting a tax increase in further talks, adopt the McConnell approach, or leapfrog the debt limit debate and try to enact spending cuts and a balanced budget amendment. The leapfroggers are in the majority.

The president's soaring confidence is reflected in his three press conferences. On June 29, he concentrated on attacking Republicans. On July 11, he was more statesmanlike. On July 15, he grinned and bantered with reporters. With a few exceptions, they're an easy mark for him.

Their questions are mostly softballs. Asked if he still has hope for a bipartisan agreement, Obama said he does. According to the transcript, this followed: "Don't you remember my campaign? (Laughter)."

The president has been less genial away from the prying eyes of the press and the public. In the private talks, he's dominated the discussion with the eight most senior members of Congress in an overbearing way not likely to lead to compromise. He's been argumentative. He's come across as President Blowhard.

After Sperling briefed the group on the deficit cap proposal, House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi addressed another subject. When a Republican participant criticized the deficit cap, Obama interrupted with a monologue. When the Republican tried to speak a second time, the president quickly cut him off and delivered another sermon on why the criticism was wrong.

Obama has taken the tack that he must respond to everything that's said, whether by a Republican, a Democrat, or even Biden. And his responses, like those in his press conferences, are never brief. But who's going to complain about Obama's verbosity, at least in his presence? He's the president.

The contrast with the Biden talks is stark. Biden is among the most likable people in Washington, and after 36 years in the Senate, he knows how to run a meeting amicably. He took the trouble to confer with participants to decide beforehand what should be discussed at the meetings.

Republicans believe Obama isn't used to being challenged. "Any time you take a policy difference from him and stick to it, he doesn't like it," House majority leader Eric Cantor says. Cantor has taken exception to Obama frequently. He may be the president's least favorite Republican. Kyl, who's also objected repeatedly to Obama's ideas, is probably next on the list. But in his case, the president hasn't let on.

The Obama presidency was three days old when the first Obama-Cantor run-in occurred. When Cantor raised a question about a tax credit, Obama declined to argue the merits. "I won," he said. "So I think on that one, I trump you." A few weeks later, at a White House summit on entitlement reform, he characterized Cantor as an obstructionist. Obama added, "I'm going to keep on talking to Eric Cantor. Someday, sooner or later, he's going to say, 'Boy, Obama had a good idea.'"

That day hasn't arrived. In the White House deliberations, House Speaker John Boehner has deferred to Cantor, just as McConnell has to Kyl. Cantor has argued relentlessly for spending cuts and against raising taxes. When he brought up the possibility of an abbreviated extension of the debt limit last week, the president answered with a lecture. "Don't call my bluff," he said. "I am not afraid to veto and I will take it to the American people. . . . This may bring my presidency down, but I will not yield on this."

Even before this clash, the White House had made Cantor its villain-of-the-moment. Democrats and the press joined in the Cantor-bashing. The media were quickly brimming with leaks from the talks aimed at putting Cantor in an unfavorable light and causing friction between him and Boehner. In a Senate speech, Reid said Cantor "shouldn't even be at the table." Democratic senator Chuck Schumer of New York also chimed in. The Democratic Senate Campaign Committee sent out a fundraising letter attacking Cantor.

The pillorying of Cantor could have been spontaneous, but Republicans

doubt it. Obama grew up in the politics of Chicago, an Illinois Republican noted. “The president views Eric as a greater threat to him than Boehner,” the Republican told me. The treatment of Cantor is “Chicago-style politics—destroy him.”

Cantor has survived and emerged safe, sound, and a hero to conservatives

and the class of House Republicans elected last year. And Boehner isn’t going to part ways with Cantor. He remembers Obama’s attempt last year to make him the chief villain in Washington. It didn’t work. Now Obama is running out of devils to berate. Could McConnell be next? Targets that big Obama can’t handle. ♦

has done in the debt limit fight it has done with an eye toward the president’s reelection. As important as whether he eventually got a “grand bargain” was how the president positioned himself throughout the process in the eyes of the electorate. And while we do not know the details of a final deal, if there is to be one, we do know one thing: Obama won this round. And Republicans helped him.

The big question is whether he won a short-term victory or one with consequences that will last through the 2012 elections. Obama’s political team is doing everything possible to ensure that it’s the latter—trying desperately to link the fight over the debt ceiling to the flagging economy. Bill Burton, former deputy press secretary at the White House, left to run Obama’s SuperPAC for the 2012 campaign. On July 9, he wrote: “If our nation defaults, economists say there could be a double-dip recession—all because of Republican obstruction.” This is the key White House objective—to somehow pin blame for the sorry state of the economy on Republicans. It may not be plausible yet, but if the markets do grow unsettled by the debt limit debate, you can be sure the media will take up this White House talking point with a vengeance.

A month ago, Republicans were growing increasingly confident about their prospects for a good year in 2012. Obama’s approval ratings were below 50, his marks for handling the economy were abysmal, his numbers on debt and deficits even worse.

And beyond the president himself, the political environment was toxic for Democrats. Perceptions of the economy were overwhelmingly negative. Views about the prospects of enduring American economic strength were pessimistic. The all-important right-track/wrong-track number was awful for the incumbent president and his party.

Even worse for the White House, Obama had exacerbated his own problems. When the May jobs report showed the pace of hiring had slowed, Obama spoke with the detachment of an economics professor, not the compassion of a concerned leader (or even

Spend Spend, Elect Elect, Tax Tax

The White House debt strategy.

BY **STEPHEN F. HAYES**

At a press conference early last week, Barack Obama used the first question posed to preempt another that he was certain to receive. In the summer of 2009, Obama had explained at some length that raising taxes in an economic downturn was “the last thing you want to do” because doing so would “put business further in a hole.” And yet two years later, with economic growth grinding to a near halt and unemployment once again climbing, negotiations over raising the debt limit were breaking down largely because of the White House’s insistence on tax hikes in any deal that cut spending.

The contradiction wasn’t quite as glaring as it seemed, Obama insisted last week, because the tax increases he was talking about now—more than \$1 trillion worth—wouldn’t kick in

until 2013. The president left two things unsaid, one on economics and one on politics. The unspoken economic assumption behind the president’s argument is that while times are tough now, things will be humming in



2013—with growth strong enough to withstand the new taxes he wants to levy. That’s optimistic. The International Monetary Fund projects U.S. growth of 2.5 percent in 2011, 2.7 percent in 2012, and 2.7 percent in 2013—not exactly robust. And those projections came before the recent “soft patch” started

looking more like a longer downturn.

The greater significance of that date is political. The tax hikes he wants would hit two months after the 2012 elections, which is to say, after Obama had faced voters for the last time and, quite possibly, just as his successor takes over.

Happy coincidence?

No. Everything the White House

Stephen F. Hayes is a senior writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

the phony empathy of a slick politician). He called the report a “bump in the road.” Later, at an event designed to highlight his administration’s work on job creation, Obama laughed about the lack of “shovel-ready jobs” in the stimulus.

Congressional Republicans, despite the ceaseless attacks on their embrace of real entitlement reform, were viewed more favorably than congressional Democrats. And in front of them lay an opportunity that would allow them to follow through on the mandate they’d been given in the 2010 elections: the battle over the debt ceiling.

Virtually every poll on the issue showed overwhelming opposition to raising the debt ceiling, and Republicans were entering the debate with what should have been a decided credibility advantage over the White House. Obama had done nothing on debt in his first two and a half years in office other than expand it—with a stimulus of nearly \$1 trillion, a new middle class entitlement in Obamacare, a 2012

budget that would add \$7.2 trillion in new debt, and a stubborn refusal to do anything at all to reform the entitlement programs that are the main drivers of our current crisis.

The president has never been serious about reining in spending because doing so fundamentally compromises his political philosophy. So even as he offered platitudes about debt, he spoke enthusiastically of new “investments” to “win the future.” His State of the Union, previewed by his advisers as a serious speech about Washington profligacy, also included his push for another “Sputnik Moment.” More spending.

In the face of a fiscal crisis, his budget in February contained billions in new spending on high-speed rail, solar shingles, and various pet agencies. His budget director, Jack Lew, defended the new spending and tried to argue that Obama’s lack of leadership on entitlement reform was really the essence of presidential statecraft—sort of the domestic policy equivalent of “leading

from behind.” In an interview on NPR, Lew said: “History shows us that when presidents put proposals out that have been shot down, it slowed the process down, it didn’t speed it up.”

Adding to Republicans’ potential advantage, the administration had boxed itself in. Top officials had been saying for months that failing to raise the debt limit would be cataclysmic, an abdication of responsibility that would lead to economic ruin. These dire predictions carried with them an obvious implication: The Obama administration would do anything to prevent such an economic meltdown.

The Republican challenge was to come up with a plan to cut spending and reform entitlements—a proposal aggressive enough that it could get enough votes from conservatives in the House but still pass in the Senate and get a signature from the president. There were discussions for weeks about presenting such a plan. Some in the Republican leadership opposed offering anything at all, pointing to

Our Biggest Challenge and Highest Priority: J-O-B-S

By Thomas J. Donohue

President and CEO
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The 26 foot tall banner that stretches across the front of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce headquarters in Washington, D.C., spells out our nation’s biggest challenge and our highest priority in one word—J-O-B-S. That banner has served as a reminder to us and to all of Washington for nearly 15 months where our focus must be.

But over that same time period, we’ve seen the economy sputter. The June jobs report showed a discouraging rise in unemployment—9.2%. It’s more than 16% when you include part-timers who can’t find full-time work and those who have dropped out of the workforce altogether. A new survey released by the Chamber shows that 64% of small business executives say that they are not expecting to add to their payrolls in the next year. Another 12% plan to cut jobs.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that the fundamental can-do spirit of the American people hasn’t changed—neither has its free enterprise principles. We saw that firsthand at the Chamber’s second annual Jobs Summit on July 12, bringing together businesses large and small to brainstorm what it’s going to take to keep and create jobs and to turn around the economy.

The Chamber believes that stronger and faster economic growth is the best way to successfully put Americans back to work. For the past two years, however, we’ve treated the symptoms with few results. We must clear away government impediments and the resulting uncertainty that has strangled businesses, stifled our economy’s ability to grow, and slowed job creation. With government out of the way and the principles of free enterprise driving growth, we can deliver more customers for businesses, more revenues for government, and, most importantly, more jobs for Americans.

How do we do that? We must increase

domestic energy production and reinvest in our nation’s crumbling transportation, energy, and water infrastructure. We must expand trade to send more American goods to customers across the globe, starting with ratification of free trade agreements with Colombia, Korea, and Panama. Regulatory burdens that hamstring American businesses must be eliminated so we can bring certainty back to the markets. And we must make long-term investments in our workforce, in our capital markets, and in technology innovations that will keep us globally competitive.

America has strong demographics, abundant natural resources, the world’s most productive workers, and a long history of picking ourselves up when we are down. We can do it again—and we *must* do it again to ensure our future prosperity.



U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Comment at
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the complications that arose from doing so during the fight over the continuing resolution earlier this spring. In that debate, however, the White House was choosing between cuts and a short-term government shutdown that likely works to their benefit. In this one, the White House itself had portrayed the choice as one between austerity and calamity.

The plan with the most support from Republican freshmen and other conservatives, “Cut, Cap, and Balance,” would slow spending more aggressively than the Ryan budget passed by the House earlier this year. The “balance” component, a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution, would require a two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate—not easy. In the end, there was no plan and the president didn’t have to make that choice.

Stepping into the breach last week, Senator Mitch McConnell went public with what he called a “backup plan.” Through a series of complicated legislative maneuvers, the McConnell proposal would allow the White House to raise the debt limit in three increments between now and the election while simultaneously allowing congressional Republicans to formally disapprove each raise. The proposal would require the White House to submit spending cuts greater than the amount that the debt ceiling would be raised in each of the three requests. But those cuts would be suggestions rather than requirements. Thus, it would be possible for the president, with some support from congressional Democrats, to get his debt hikes without agreeing to any actual cuts.

The political upside of the plan, according to its supporters, is that it would assign responsibility for the growing debt to Obama and his party. That’s debatable, considering it was conceived and announced by the leader of Republicans in the Senate, later blessed by the Republican speaker of the House, and would require at least some Republican votes to pass.

Beyond that, there are two main problems with the McConnell plan, however noble its intentions: (1) It came too early, and (2) it’s unclear how

it will pass the House. By releasing his last-resort plan three weeks before the August 2 deadline for the debt-limit increase, McConnell ensured that whatever tougher measure might emerge from the House Republicans, it would be less appealing to the White House than the McConnell plan. On Friday, July 15, with their leverage severely diminished, House Republicans finally announced that they would try to pass “Cut, Cap, and Balance” and a balanced budget amendment.

Others have urged Republicans to “call Obama’s bluff” and pass a short-term hike in the debt ceiling. The idea is that Republicans would present a short-term extension with spending cuts equal to the debt ceiling increase and dare the president to reject it, in effect trying to restore the leverage they had before the McConnell plan. But it’s still unclear such a measure could pass the House.

And if the time comes when the president is faced with either of these—a tough choice between the new Republican austerity plan and the default that his administration has said must be avoided at all costs—he now has a third option: the bipartisan McConnell plan. Republicans in effect changed the debate this week from “austerity or else” to “austerity or there’s this backup plan that we’ve laid out for you.”

But there’s a more worrisome prospect for Republicans. The president and Democrats may fully embrace the McConnell plan (they quickly warmed up to it in the days after it was introduced), while the House refuses to pass it. Many House Republicans simply don’t believe there will be economic consequences if the debt ceiling is not raised by August 2. So they will vote against it.

Nobody knows exactly what would happen, but there will undoubtedly be consequences—some of them real and some of them contrived by an administration eager to change the story from “Obama’s abysmal economy” to “Republicans’ unconscionable irresponsibility.” And there is no question that Republicans will be blamed for any disruptions in the market—not only by Democrats, but

by the media and, almost certainly, the American people.

In that event, Republicans will have not only lost the debt-ceiling debate and failed to slow the growth of government, they will have handed Democrats a life-preserver for the 2012 elections.

At his press conference Friday, the president made that clear:

I am going to keep on working and I’m going to keep on trying. And what I’m going to do is to hope that, in part, this debate has focused the American people’s attention a little bit more and will subject Congress to scrutiny. And I think increasingly the American people are going to say to themselves, you know what, if a party or a politician is constantly taking the position “my way or the highway,” constantly being locked into ideologically rigid positions, that we’re going to remember at the polls.

In the same press conference, Obama made clear that his reelection would mean that the growth of government we’ve seen over the past two and a half years would continue unabated. It’s important for progressives to engage in the current debate about debt, he said, so that they can eventually spend more money:

If you are a progressive, you should be concerned about debt and deficit just as much as if you’re a conservative. And the reason is because if the only thing we’re talking about over the next year, two years, five years, is debt and deficits, then it’s very hard to start talking about how do we make investments in community colleges so that our kids are trained, how do we actually rebuild \$2 trillion worth of crumbling infrastructure. If you care about making investments in our kids and making investments in our infrastructure and making investments in basic research, then you should want our fiscal house in order, so that every time we propose a new initiative somebody doesn’t just throw up their hands and say, “Ah, more big spending, more government.”

If you are not a progressive, the last few weeks in Washington have probably made you want to throw up more than just your hands. ♦

The Economy and the Election

Happy times aren't here again.

BY JAMES PIERESON

The disappointing employment report made public on July 8 provided fresh evidence that economic growth is slowing and the state of the economy will be the central issue in next year's presidential election. As if in anticipation of the jobs report, David Plouffe, senior political adviser to President Obama, said shortly before the bad news was released, "The average American does not view the economy through the prism of GDP or unemployment rates or even monthly jobs numbers. People won't vote based on the unemployment rate; they're going to vote based on: How do I feel about my own situation? Do I believe the president makes decisions based on me and my family?"

Plouffe has a point. Several incumbent presidents have been reelected in the face of abnormally high unemployment. Ronald Reagan won reelection in 1984 with an unemployment rate of 7.5 percent and, most famously of all, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was reelected in 1936 despite a jobless rate of nearly 17 percent. On the other hand, Gerald Ford was defeated in 1976 when unemployment stood at 7.7 percent, and George H.W. Bush lost in 1992

with unemployment at 7.5 percent. In his memoir *Six Crises*, Richard Nixon attributed his narrow defeat in 1960 to a sudden upsurge in unemployment in September and October of that year.

As Plouffe suggests, the unem-



ployment rate by itself is not the decisive factor in national elections. What seems to matter most is the overall direction of the economy during the election season and whether voters see things moving in the right or the wrong direction. FDR and Reagan won reelection because they made the case that conditions were

improving, as in fact they were in 1936 and 1984. Ford and Bush (41) lost because they could not make that case. This is why new signs of economic weakness pose such a threat to President Obama's reelection.

Yale University economist Ray C. Fair has devised a simple formula by which we can accurately predict the two-party division of the popular vote on the basis of three economic factors: (1) per capita growth of real Gross Domestic Product during the three quarters preceding the election; (2) the growth in inflation during the incumbent's term; and (3) the number of "good news" quarters during the incumbent's term in which real

GDP grows by more than 3.2 percent. This equation, when applied to elections from 1880 to 2008, yields a remarkably close approximation of the popular vote for president.

In recent months Fair has used his formula to predict the outcome of the 2012 election based upon economic forecasts of inflation and GDP growth in 2011 and 2012. Last November, when forecasts projected growth exceeding 3.5 percent in 2011 and 2012, it predicted a landslide victory for Obama with about 56 percent of the popular vote, up from 53 percent in 2008. When the equations were adjusted in April with somewhat less rosy forecasts, the president's predicted vote share dropped to 52 percent.

During May and June of this year, forecasters have continued to downgrade their expectations for the economy over the next 18 months. The *Wall Street Journal*, in its June survey of economists, now forecasts real GDP growth of 2.7 percent in 2011 and 3 percent in 2012, down from February forecasts of 3.5 percent and 4 percent respectively. If these

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JASON SELZER

forecasts turn out to be accurate, there will be no more “good news” quarters for Obama between now and the election.

A similar survey released in May by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia also downgraded earlier forecasts for GDP growth from 3.2 to 2.7 percent in 2011 and from 3.1 to 3 percent in 2012. That survey also adjusted earlier forecasts for inflation upward from 1.7 to 3.1 percent for the rest of 2011 and from 2 to 2.2 percent in 2012. These forecasts were made well before the latest employment reports came out. It is a safe guess that new forecasts based upon second quarter data will be even more pessimistic about future growth.

What happens when we plug these latest numbers into Fair’s equation?

With GDP growth in 2012 at 3 percent (with an adjustment for population growth), inflation increasing moderately (especially in 2011), and no more “good news” quarters (there has been just one so far during his term, in the fourth quarter of 2009), the equation yields Obama 49.1 percent of the two-party popular vote. Current economic forecasts are thus projecting a dead heat in 2012 between President Obama and just about any Republican challenger, with the odds today slightly in favor of the challenger. If economic conditions should deteriorate beyond current forecasts, his chances of reelection would continue to fall accordingly. Notwithstanding the comments by his political adviser, President Obama is now at the mercy of economic conditions over which he has little control.

Obama came into office thinking that he would become a modern-day FDR, rescuing the U.S. economy from Republican mismanagement through public spending, aggressive regulation of business, and expansive welfare programs. The old-time religion does not appear to be working as we head into the election season. With the economy faltering and Obama out of ammunition, is it possible that instead of reprising FDR he will turn out to have been the contemporary incarnation of Herbert Hoover? ♦

GARY LOCKE

More DOJ Malpractice

A misbegotten scheme to boost gun control turns deadly. **BY MARK HEMINGWAY**

The Obama administration’s Justice Department has been no stranger to controversy. Attorney General Eric Holder has staked out controversial policies on everything from terrorist detainee trials to the decision not to pursue voter intimidation charges against two New Black Panther party members patrolling a polling place with weapons.

Now a slow-burning scandal at the Justice Department is threatening to become the largest law enforcement debacle in decades. The scandal, dubbed “Gunwalker,” involves the department’s role in knowingly supplying guns to Mexican criminal gangs. Holder has been lucky to avoid taint thus far, but his luck may not hold. Gunwalker could tarnish not just his department but the entire Obama administration.

The scandal was touched off by three pivotal events:

■ On December 14, 2010, Brian Terry and three other border patrol agents got caught in a firefight with Manuel Osorio-Arellanes and two other Mexican nationals carrying AK-47 rifles near Mesquite Seep, Arizona. Terry was shot in the pelvis and died the next day.

■ On February 15, 2011, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents Jaime Zapata and Victor

Avila were ambushed while driving on a highway near San Luis Potosi in northern Mexico. Zapata was killed; Avila survived his wounds. The gun used to kill Zapata was traced back to Otilio Osorio, a Dallas-area man known for helping Mexican gangs.

■ In May, rumors began to spread that a Mexican military helicopter was forced to land after it had been fired upon in western Mexico by a heavy caliber weapon. The Mexican military later seized some 70 weapons in the accompanying raid—including a .50 caliber rifle, known for its ability to fire long distances and pierce armor. A number of the seized guns were said to have originated in the United States.

To hear the Obama administration tell it, the fact the guns used in these attacks came from the United States should not be surprising. In April 2009, the administration claimed that “90 percent” of the weapons used in Mexican cartel violence originated in the United States, a figure that was also parroted by the Mexican government.

When congressional hearings examined the substance of that claim, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) revealed that figure referred only to guns that the Mexican government handed over to the ATF. Of the total number of guns seized by Mexican authorities, about 8 percent were of U.S. origin.

So in the three attacks mentioned



Mark Hemingway is online editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

above, it might seem surprising that all would involve guns of U.S. origin. But this turned out not to be coincidental. In fact, the weapons used to kill the two U.S. law enforcement agents and down the Mexican helicopter were all provided to Mexican criminals as part of a baffling and ill-considered scheme initiated by the ATF and Justice Department.

“Gunwalking” is ATF slang for investigations where potentially illegal gun sales are allowed to go forward so that the guns can be used to help trace smuggling routes. Until recently, such obviously risky investigations have been rare.

That changed when the Obama administration in its first few months took up the cause of doing more about the alleged threat of U.S. guns entering Mexico. The White House’s warnings about U.S. culpability in Mexican drug violence—particularly the “90 percent” fiction—were so alarming to the National Rifle Association that the organization gave prescient congressional testimony in March 2009 warning that the White House would make “scapegoats” of lawful U.S. gun owners as a justification to pass more gun regulation to address violence in Mexico.

By the fall of 2009, ATF had launched an operation dubbed “Fast and Furious” that shifted ATF tactics away from seizing guns as soon as possible in favor of gunwalking. Fast and Furious may have allowed as many as 2,500 straw purchases of guns to Mexican gangs with no clear plan for recovering the weapons. The program was so out of control that when Arizona representative Gabrielle Giffords was shot last January, ATF agents immediately feared that the gun would be traced back to Fast and Furious.

And the operation appears to have come right from the top. “This shift in strategy was known and authorized at the highest levels of the Justice Department. Through both the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Arizona and ‘Main Justice’ headquarters in Washington, D.C., the Department closely monitored and supervised the activities of the ATF,” according to a June 14 report produced by the

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

What’s more, the House report notes, “though many line agents objected vociferously, ATF and DOJ leadership continued to prevent them from making every effort to interdict illegally purchased firearms.” In fact, as early as this past December, months before congressional investigators began probing the issue in earnest, ATF agent Vince Cefalu was publicly speaking out against the agency’s gunwalking operation. Cefalu now reports he was sent a termination notice at the end of June, an action he claims is politically motivated.

The Justice Department has been less than forthcoming with investigators. As of the release of the June 14 congressional report, the ATF and Justice Department had been unresponsive to seven letters and a subpoena from the House oversight committee.

The Justice Department has been less than forthcoming with congressional investigators. As of the release of the June 14 congressional report, the ATF and Justice Department had been unresponsive to seven letters and a subpoena from the House oversight committee.

Then over the July 4 holiday, things took an unusual turn. Acting ATF director Kenneth Melson appeared before Senate Judiciary Committee and House Oversight and Government Reform investigators. Remarkably, Melson made the appearance with his private attorney rather than with Justice Department representatives, consistent with Melson’s reported contention that higher-ups in the Justice Department had been trying to muzzle him.

Melson told congressional investigators that the gunwalking operation

was part of a special task force being run by the U.S. attorney’s office in Phoenix. Further, even in his capacity heading up the ATF, he had no knowledge of what was going on. Melson’s testimony came in the wake of a June 18 *Wall Street Journal* report on the Justice Department pressuring him to resign over the scandal. If Melson truly didn’t know the operational details even as the Justice Department was maneuvering to make him the fall guy, it’s no wonder he would get his own attorney, break his silence, and implicate the Justice Department.

It also appears that numerous other law enforcement agencies—including the FBI, DEA, ICE, U.S. Marshals, and Homeland Security—were involved in Fast and Furious to varying degrees. Again, the coordination of that many law enforcement agencies clearly points to involvement at high levels of the Justice Department.

“The evidence we have gathered raises the disturbing possibility that the Justice Department not only allowed criminals to smuggle weapons, but that taxpayer dollars from other agencies may have financed those engaging in such activities,” Representative Daryl Issa, chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, and Senator Chuck Grassley, ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, wrote in a July 6 letter to Eric Holder.

There’s one more disturbing wrinkle that has yet to be ironed out—the role of federally licensed firearms dealers in Fast and Furious. Were they coerced into participating in the operation under threat of losing their licenses as firearms dealers? Troublingly, even if they knowingly made illegal sales to criminals at the behest of law enforcement, that wouldn’t immunize them from prosecution.

In February, the Mexican government retained a U.S. law firm, Reid Collins & Tsai, LLP, to pursue “claims against certain entities and individuals in the U.S. believed to be participating in . . . the illegal manufacture, import/export, or sale of weapons, or other conduct that may be harming Mexico.” That’s according to the Foreign

Agents Registration Act paperwork, which must be filed with—yes—the Justice Department before a U.S. law firm can represent a foreign country. Incredibly, Mexico could take U.S. firearms dealers to court for their unwitting and unwilling role in *Fast and Furious*.

Despite the growing scandal, the White House is moving full steam ahead with planned gun regulations. On July 11, an ATF-Justice Department order went into effect requiring gun dealers in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas to report the purchase of two or more semi-automatic rifles over five days that are greater than .22 caliber and include a detachable magazine, a description so broad it encompasses a huge segment of the commerce in ordinary hunting rifles. The justification, naturally, is stemming the flow of guns into Mexico, even as that rationale is blowing up in the administration's face.

Taken together, the Mexican government's legal maneuvering and the Obama executive order raise the unsettling question of whether the White House and Justice Department have coordinated with a foreign country against U.S. gun dealers to help move forward a gun control agenda.

The NRA was quick to slam the executive order, saying, "\$40 billion transnational criminal enterprises don't fill out paperwork and are not deterred by paperwork violations. This is a blatant effort by the Obama administration and ATF to divert the focus of Congress and the general public from their gross incompetence in the *Fast and Furious* scandal."

For once, the NRA might be understating things. "Gross incompetence" doesn't adequately describe what has transpired here. The investigation is far from complete, but the facts so far suggest that the Justice Department and White House are implicated in the needless deaths of two U.S. law enforcement agents. And the level of political collusion suggests they were motivated not by law enforcement concerns, but by a desire to gain traction in implementing a liberal gun control agenda. ♦

A Beverly Hills Bailout?

Federal earthquake insurance is an awful idea.

BY ELI LEHRER

Residents of California do not have nearly enough insurance to cover rebuilding costs following a big earthquake. One proposal to deal with this problem, a bill before Congress called the Earthquake Insurance Affordability Act, would not make things better and would drain billions from federal coffers. The proposal—a Democratic plan that has received positive attention from California conservatives like Rep. John Campbell—is a new and even worse version of the unworkable, costly, but continually popular idea that the federal government should start writing property insurance for individual homes. It's a terrible plan that does not even deserve a hearing.

At its core, the bill that Democratic senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein have proffered would provide federal loan guarantees to the Golden State's government-run, privately funded California Earthquake Authority (CEA). (Although not mentioned in the legislation as benefiting from it, no entity besides CEA qualifies as eligible under the bill's language.) These loan guarantees would reduce CEA's need to buy insurance of its own (reinsurance) on the private market and, in theory, let it cut rates. In return for the guarantees, CEA would supposedly pay fees to the federal government that would cover costs. With lower rates, more Californians would presumably buy earthquake insurance and thus have more money to rebuild following a big quake.

Eli Lehrer is vice president of the Heartland Institute.

The problem the bill seeks to confront isn't trivial, and nobody who has taken a serious look at the issue believes that Californians now buy enough earthquake insurance. Although nearly all seismologists predict that existing stresses along the San Andreas Fault make "the Big One" almost inevitable sometime in the next few decades, the percentage of Californians with earthquake insurance has declined since the last major quake struck in 1994.

In 2010, only about 12 percent of California home and condominium policies included earthquake coverage; over a quarter had it in the early 1990s. Taxpayer-owned mortgage securitizers Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac don't require such insurance before they package mortgages, even though they do require general-purpose homeowners' insurance and, in many places, federally backed flood coverage. As a result, any lender that starts asking its borrowers to secure earthquake policies would face a real competitive disadvantage and, because Fannie and Freddie hold the mortgages anyway, no real benefit to its own bottom line.

The result of this *laissez-faire* policy towards earthquake insurance would almost certainly guarantee enormous losses following a major quake. The sheer number of borrowers who currently owe more than their houses are worth (58 percent in hard-hit locations like Solano County) could send the already troubled California economy into a terminal tailspin following an earthquake as "underwater" borrowers walked away from their rubble heaps.

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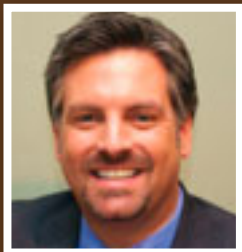
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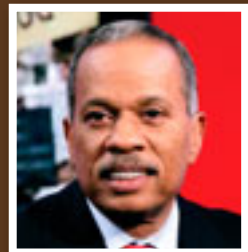
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Californians to buy earthquake insurance, however, the Boxer-Feinstein bill can't possibly work as advertised since it egregiously violates the risk-pooling principles at the heart of insurance. When they're underwriting almost any type of large risk, insurers (including CEA) buy reinsurance to spread their risks around the world. Private reinsurance might pool the risks of a quake in California with, for example, the risks of a flood in Germany and an industrial accident in Brazil. Because the events will almost never happen at the same time, reinsurers can make profits off of one type of reinsurance even while paying out big claims on another.

All other things being equal, the broader the pool, the less a reinsurer has to charge to achieve any given level of profit. The Boxer-Feinstein

proposal would concentrate risk in the United States under the aegis of federal guarantees. As a result, for the fees to cover long-term costs, they would have to be higher than the analogous charges now assessed by private reinsurers. If the federal government does its math right, neither the CEA nor anyone else would have any reason to buy what it offers.

It's much more likely, however, that a federal program would underprice its coverage and leave all taxpayers holding the bag. The results could resemble those of the most similar existing federal effort, the National Flood Insurance Program, which promised to break even in the long run when it started over 40 years ago but currently owes the Treasury over \$17 billion and has no practical way to ever pay it back.

Because of California's ongoing financial crisis, it's quite plausible that in the event disaster struck, it would be able to slough its obligations off on federal taxpayers. Even if California met the bill itself, the need to fund repairs from tax revenues could send people fleeing the state. And none of this takes into account the need for another bailout of Fannie, Freddie, and the many banks that would suddenly be in trouble if enormous numbers of California borrowers walked away from mortgages following a quake.

Earthquake coverage today is not remotely unaffordable. In early July 2011, CEA quoted a premium of \$71.67 a month for a 20-year-old, two-story wood-frame Beverly Hills (90210) house with a structure value of \$500,000 (land value would almost certainly put the sale price of such a house over \$1 million). CEA's deductibles, 15 percent in the above example, are much higher than those typical from wholly private insurers but not unmanageable since low-interest, everyone-qualifies Small Business Administration disaster loans could cover uninsured costs.

The solution, therefore, isn't a new federal liability but measures that would encourage homeowners to take responsibility, rather than assume an eventual taxpayer bailout. If Congress wants to do something constructive, it should protect taxpayers around the country by having Fannie and Freddie require privately backed earthquake insurance for all mortgages in seismically active areas, just as they now require homeowners' insurance everywhere else. It's true that any measure that raises housing costs will cause further turmoil in California's housing market. But the benefits of having private insurance available to pay the costs of "the Big One" far exceed the damage to housing values that might result.

Whatever happens, however, members of Congress, even those from California, should realize that proposals to have the federal government take over the earthquake insurance market will not work as advertised. ♦

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A Fling with the Welfare State

From the best of intentions to bankruptcy and recriminations

BY NOEMIE EMERY

The intentions of Democrats are only the best. They want all of the old to have lavish retirements, all of the young to have scholarships, verse-penning cowboys to have festivals funded by government, and everyone to have access to all the best health care, at no cost to himself. In the face of a huge wave of debt swamping all western nations, this is the core of their argument: They want a fair society, and their critics do not; they want to help, and their opponents like to see people suffer; they want a world filled with love and caring, and their opponents want one of callous indifference, in which the helpless must fend for themselves. (“We must reject both extremes, those who say we shouldn’t help the old and the sick and those who say that we should,” quips the *New Yorker’s* Hendrik Hertzberg.) But in fact, everyone thinks that we “should” do this; the problem, in the face of the debt crisis, is finding a way that we can. It is about the “can” part that the left is now in denial: daintily picking its way through canaries six deep on the floor of the coal mine, and conflating a “good” with a “right.”

Ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt linked “freedom from want” to “freedom of speech” and “freedom of worship,” the left has been talking of everything that it thinks would be nice to have in terms of an utter and absolute right: a right to a job and a right to an income, a right to retire in comfort in Florida, a right to the most advanced health care without paying much for it, and a right to have your children taken care of while you work all day at your job. The problem is that these are all goods and services, though of varying importance, and goods and rights are not the same things.

Noemie Emery is a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD and a columnist for the Washington Examiner.

People tend to concur upon rights (except for the speech rights of those who oppose them), and they do not depend upon others to supply and pay for their rights. With goods, there is always a political argument: about the value of the good, who is to get it and who is to pay. And all this comes down to the question of “fairness,” about which there is no end of disputation and grief.

And on nothing does the rights/goods division loom larger than on the issue of health care. Rights come from nature, and cost no one money, but good health in nature

is rare. It is only thanks to human ingenuity over centuries and billions of dollars of effort that we have been able to conquer illnesses not long ago fatal, rebuild bodies broken in war or by accidents, postpone or ameliorate the problems of aging, and bring people back from the dead. The roll call of miracles that surrounds us today—the vaccines and the pills that have vanquished infections, the devices that let amputees run marathons, the organ transplants and the open

heart surgeries, the techniques that replace hips, knees, and heart valves, not to mention the treatments that make so many public men cancer survivors, that saved Bob Dole years ago, are saving Dick Cheney, and once kept John Kennedy able to function—all of these are the result of the time, sweat, and strain of doctors and nurses, technicians and scientists, inventors and makers of drugs and devices, administrators of hospitals and large corporations, whose time is expensive, and who need to be paid.

Paid by whom, one may ask? Not by the patient alone, as the cost of a serious illness or accident overwhelms the resources of all but a few. They are paid by the state, or a private insurer, which in turn are funded by citizens, through taxes, or premiums paid.

But when costly new drugs and treatments appear on

On the issue of how generous a welfare state we can afford, the left is now in denial: daintily picking its way through canaries six deep on the floor of the coal mine, and conflating a ‘good’ with a ‘right.’



the scene (and are demanded by patients) they are paid for by hikes in the taxes and premiums, which reduce the money people have to spend elsewhere. This is true for governments, too. They either end up rationing care, cutting back other programs, or simply printing money. The people who insisted that goods had to be treated as rights, (which is to say, as universal and limitless), refused to seek cuts, and went on printing money. Even as the whole western world seemed to run out of money, the Obama administration decided it was high time for a massive expansion of government benefits. Then, in early May 2010, just after the American left passed its huge and hugely unpopular health care reform bill, the republic of Greece hit a wall.

From that day on, the world and the country would be given a series of lessons in the dangers inherent in treating a good as a right. The European Union extended a bailout to Greece in exchange for a series of deep cuts. The country was to reduce its deficit from 13.6 percent of its gross national product to less than 1 percent in 2015, by way of “reduced wage costs in the public sector . . . and lower defense and health care spending.” Other countries in Europe began preemptive measures to deal with their own budget problems. In Britain, David Cameron planned cuts of \$130 billion over a five-year period, cutting welfare and causing riots by raising fees in universities. In France,

Nicolas Sarkozy raised the retirement age from 60 to 62, and limited pensions. In Spain, Socialist José Luis Zapatero did much the same thing. “An elaborate cocoon of benefits faces disassembly,” the *Washington Post* reported on May 15, 2010. “We can’t finance our social model any more,” the European Council president said. “Workers have been forced to accept salary freezes, decreased hours, postponed retirements and health care reductions,” Edward Cody wrote in the *Post* on April 25, 2011. “From blanket health insurance to long vacations and early retirement, the cozy social benefits that have been a way of life [in Europe] appear be luxuries the continent can no longer afford.”

In the United States, the states patterned most on the Old Europe model—those with high taxes, high spending, and strong public unions—suffered the same plight as Europe, while those with free-market models did not. “The eight states with no state income tax grew 18 percent in the past decade,” Michael Barone tells us. “The other states grew just 8 percent.” The 22 states with right-to-work laws grew 15 percent in the past decade, the 28 others grew 6 percent. The 16 states that don’t require collective bargaining with state employees grew 15 percent, the others grew 7 percent. The most rapid growth—21 percent—was in the Rocky Mountain states and Texas,

MICHAEL RAMIREZ

which have low taxes, weak unions, and light regulation.

Among the states with high taxes, strong unions, and heavy public employee pension burdens are those in the Rust Belt around the Great Lakes. As Matt Continetti writes in the *Washington Post*, “Five of the eight states that border the Great Lakes now have Republican governors working to limit union power,” while one Democrat, New York’s Andrew Cuomo, son of a much revered liberal icon, has been praised by New Jersey’s Chris Christie as his cost-cutting twin. And to everyone’s shock, the Democratic legislature in Massachusetts has voted to rein in unions, too.

“For decades, the Great Lakes states have subscribed to a high-tax, high-spend, closed-shop political model,” explains Continetti. “That hasn’t worked out.” That didn’t work out in Europe (whose welfare states the American left has always looked up to); that didn’t work out in American states such as California and Michigan; that didn’t work out in Detroit, which is becoming a wasteland in spite of massive infusions of government money, and that didn’t work out for General Motors, which turned in time into a retirement plan with a car company attached to it, which priced itself out of the general market while foreign car companies built factories in right-to-work states in the South, employed hundreds of thousands of people, and took its share of the market away. It probably won’t work out in Illinois, either, where the Democratic governor passed a massive tax increase, and the Republican governors of neighboring states invited Illinois businessmen to relocate there.

Was it wrong for the liberals to try to create an entitlement paradise when World War II ended? No, the war’s end seemed a good time to start over; the link between the rights that they fought for and the “right” to a middle-class standard of living seemed rather more plausible then, and they had no way of knowing it might one day prove too expensive. When Roosevelt signed Social Security into law, it was meant to start coverage at age 65 at a time when 58 was the average life span of male Americans. (Roosevelt himself died at 63 ten years later.) When President Johnson signed Medicare, life spans were still well below today’s standards, and most major medical breakthroughs were still in the future. (Johnson also would die in his 60s.) Neither imagined a world in which people routinely lived into their 80s and 90s, with knee replacements and heart transplants and home dialysis machines. Roosevelt opposed public employee unions, whose pension demands and early retirements are now driving some of our states and cities into bankruptcy. It’s easier to think of goods as rights when the costs are low, and they therefore take little from others. It’s when the costs rise—as in medical treatments—that the political trade-offs rise, too.

And of course, their intentions were laudable. But so are those of most people, within the bounds of what they think

is realistic, is feasible, and is likely to work out in real life. Two times in recent memory Americans have tried to “fix” health care, and each time the script is the same. They start out, according to pollsters, by trying to think it’s a right. They think it unfair that income can alter the access to treatments. They bleed for poor people whose children are sick. They know they are one diagnosis or car crash away from financial as well as from medical challenges. They want everyone to be covered, no one turned down due to pre-existing conditions, want no limits on payments for medical treatments. Encouraged, Democrats draw up their bills, proudly present them, and wait for the thanks of the rapturous public. Then the fine print is revealed, and people are shocked at the expense and conditions. It’s then that their attitudes change.

What the fine print reveals beyond disputation is that health care is a good, not a right; that goods involve trade-offs, and that the trade-offs are high: higher costs and less choice for those covered already, rationing inflicted by government bureaucrats, interference by bureaucrats in medical doings, doctors threatening to leave the profession, less incentive (and money) to develop new treatments and drugs. They still want what they wanted before, but not at the cost of the harm it will wreak on the system in general. They vote their concerns, and 1994 and 2010 turned out very badly for Democrats. Stunned, Democrats fall back on their noble intentions, and say their opponents are mean.

They aren’t mean, of course, merely weighing their options, and finding that the costs to be paid by all of the people outweigh the gains made by the few. It would be mean indeed if standards declined, hospitals closed, cancer patients had to wait months for surgery, or if life-saving treatments stopped being developed. It would be mean indeed if the burdens of welfare brought down the economy. And nothing would be meaner than if Medicare remained unreformed and ran out of money, or if Social Security also ran out of money, because trimming benefits, raising the age of retirement, or imposing a means test is “mean.”

It was not wrong to have a fling with the welfare state sixty-five years ago, when it was a noble experiment that had not yet been attempted. It is wrong to ignore the evidence that in some ways it is failing, that the model set up has become unsustainable, and that renovations are needed if its critical functions are to survive. Goods are not rights. Pensions and access to health care remain social goods that a decent society will try to provide to its people. But goods are not rights, and the old model, which claimed that they are, is broken. We need a new one, which provides sustainable ways to convey social goods to those who most need them. Good intentions are fine, but without means they are useless. They are the things with which the road to Gehenna is paved. ♦

The Jihadist as Civil Rights Hero

Tarek Mehanna is an odd choice of 'victim' for so-called progressives

BY SOHRAB AHMARI

In late March, as Boston emerged from winter, so did the city's protest community. On the 24th of the month I watched as antiwar students joined forces with partisans of the Palestinian cause and Nation of Islam members in their immaculately pressed suits and distinctive bow ties, to gather in Dockser Hall at Northeastern University. The pretext was a community panel on prosecutorial misconduct at the Boston United States attorney's office. The star of the show was disgraced Boston city councilor Chuck Turner, there to make his "last stand" before reporting to Hazelton federal prison, where he is serving a three-year sentence for public corruption. As outspoken as ever, the erstwhile civil rights hero claimed federal prosecutors in Boston had colluded with "the oligarchy" to frame him after he called for troop withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, Turner had been tagged for accepting a \$1,000 wad of cash from a cooperating witness in return for assisting a Roxbury nightclub obtain a liquor license.

Turner's case comported nicely with the larger political theme of the evening—the unjust prosecution of free-thinking citizens by a racist American government. And so Turner's fate wasn't the only cause celebrated that evening. There was also the curious case of Tarek Mehanna, a 28-year-old Ph.D. who was indicted in November 2009 by a federal grand jury returning a 10-count indictment

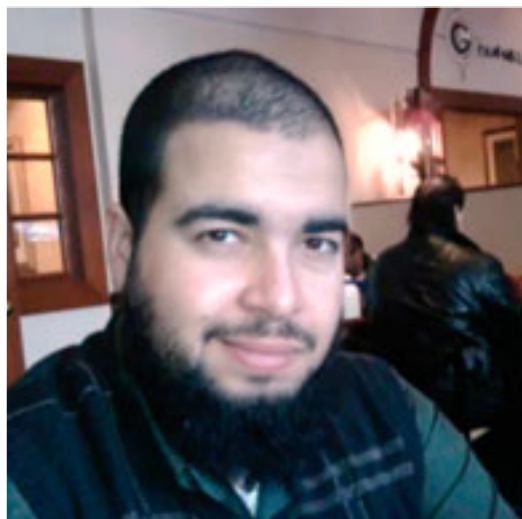
against him, alleging, *inter alia*, that he had conspired to provide material support to terrorists. Like Turner, however, Mehanna sees himself as a victim.

So do his supporters. Laila Murad, a young organizer with the Tarek Mehanna Support Committee, stepped to the microphone to defend Mehanna as "a devout Muslim, an educator and mentor to the youth, a scholar, a good friend, a devoted and respectful son . . . a loved and esteemed member

of our local Muslim community." Murad's voice quivered with palpable intensity as she described Mehanna's bravery in speaking "out against U.S. foreign policy" and his advocacy on behalf of Muslim prisoners. Federal authorities, Murad claimed, had leveled false charges against him in retaliation for his taking a principled, unpopular stance. It was Mehanna's activism, and his dogged refusal to inform on his own community, that had made him an ideal target for the "post-9/11 campaign of repression against Muslims."

"My crime," Mehanna declares in a defiant poem written

not long after his arrest, "is my mind, uncolonized and free / and that I'm not the house slave they want us all to be." In another poem, Mehanna pays tribute to his own spiritual resilience, and that of the other unjustly imprisoned faithful. Visitors to Mehanna's website can access an extensive collection of his poems, essays, and illustrations. Stilted and artless though they may be, these efforts help Mehanna come across as a prisoner of conscience, facing a long sentence simply for defending his faith against an American government bent on subjugating Muslims at home and abroad. One drawing—looking very much like a rejected piece of conceptual art from the *Matrix* trilogy—depicts



Jihadist wannabe Tarek Mehanna, from a YouTube video

Sohrab Ahmari's work has appeared in the Boston Globe and Commentary, among other publications.

“Uncle Thomas Laboratories,” where a grotesque machine divests American Muslims of their mental autonomy. Here, a massive tube first sucks out a young Muslim’s brain. Next, robotic arms remove the layers surrounding the brain—“dignity,” “self-respect,” and “pride for the *ummah*”—while others inject it with an “inferiority complex,” and an “apolgetic attitude.” The final product, a “colonized mind,” is neatly wrapped in a box marked “made in U.S.A.”

Mehanna’s supporters have launched a relatively sophisticated campaign portraying him as a misunderstood, moderate Muslim dissident. And yet the “Free Tarek” initiative reaches far beyond Boston’s Muslim community. A YouTube video on the “Free Tarek” website, for example, features the Rev. Jason Lydon, a Unitarian minister and LGBT rights advocate, telling local reporters that Mehanna “is a man who expresses love of his faith and a deep commitment to justice.” He is “a known moderate in his political views [who] consistently demonstrates his peaceful response to conflict.”

Moreover, by branding Mehanna as a rights crusader, his supporters also seek backing from Boston’s African-American community. At the North-eastern event speakers drew a straight line between the black community’s valiant struggles against American apartheid in the 1960s and Mehanna’s struggle against the U.S. government’s “anti-Muslim agenda” today.

Mehanna has embraced the role of the intrepid civil rights hero—his website’s banner carries Dr. King’s warning that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” But the massive evidentiary arsenal that law enforcement agents have amassed against him paints an entirely different picture of Tarek Mehanna. It offers a fascinating psychological portrait of an Islamist undergoing an almost decade-long process of radicalization. And yet the real story here is not about the making of a homegrown Islamist militant. Rather, it’s about his supporters’ use of the well-worn lexicon of identity politics to turn a young man who is seething with hatred, sexually frustrated, and profoundly alienated from his own family into a standard-bearer for racial justice and a model American Muslim. He is neither.

Born in Pittsburgh to an Egyptian-American family, Tarek Mehanna was raised in Sudbury, an affluent suburb some 25 miles west of Boston. His father, Ahmed Mehanna, is a professor of medicinal chemistry at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health, where Tarek obtained a doctorate in pharmacy. U.S. attorneys

allege that Mehanna started absorbing radical Islamist ideology as early as 2001 and began on the path of ideological jihad before eventually attempting to wage physical jihad. Mehanna’s Internet footprint and hours of recorded conversations with alleged co-conspirators and associates tend to support this theory.

According to the government, Mehanna’s parents were aware of his radical Islamist leanings, which they did not share, long before his arrest. But they did not “control his actions or influence his beliefs.” (Nor did they hesitate to spring to his support once he was indicted.) Alarmed congregants at a Sharon, Massachusetts, mosque, for example, had approached his father Ahmed with their concerns after Mehanna shared his extremist views there. “[I]f we didn’t know he was [your] son,” one worried, “we would say he was a member of al Qaeda.” Subsequently, a disagreement

apparently broke out between father and son. “I can’t speak anymore,” Mehanna told “D.S.,” an online associate. “I have to pack up all my books.” This was in 2006, almost two years prior to his first arrest for making false statements to the Joint Terrorism Task Force. (He was eventually released on bail before being rearrested on the material support charges.)

Ahmed Mehanna’s disapproval, the government argues, did not deter his son from pursuing jihad. Not long after the mosque incident, Mehanna

shared his profound admiration for Osama bin Laden with “Aab,” another online associate: “[T]he way they were describing him [in the book *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*] made me realize . . . how much he truly gave up . . . and why he gave it up.” At that point, Mehanna “realized that I look to [bin Laden] as being my real father, in a sense.” Indeed, it was bin Laden whose example started Mehanna down the path that ultimately led to his arrest. “I love [bin Laden] more than I did before,” Mehanna told “Aab.” “I have been following him for over six [years] now. . . . [F]rom the moment I saw him . . . the hair on my arms . . . stood on end. . . . [H]e’s the reason . . . I started practicing.”

Mehanna’s affinity for al Qaeda and his spiritual father Osama bin Laden was matched only by his deep antipathy for the American government and non-Muslim individuals and institutions generally. Mehanna’s hatred was on full display, for example, during a June 2006 online conversation with associate “M.” concerning the September 11 atrocities. “[P]eople . . . say for Allah to have mercy

Tarek Mehanna looked to Osama bin Laden as his real father, and his affinity for al Qaeda was matched only by his deep antipathy for the American government and non-Muslim individuals and institutions generally.

upon the *kuffar* [infidels] who were in it,” Mehanna sneers. “[S]o I say . . . may Allah have mercy on just the buildings . . . not the *kuffar* who were in it . . . as at least the buildings weren’t *kuffar*.” Federal investigators also found two photographs on Mehanna’s computer harddrive of him and two associates standing in front of Ground Zero. Mehanna is smiling mischievously while pointing upward to the empty New York skyline.

In another online conversation in January 2006, Mehanna commented on the plight of Jill Carroll, the *Christian Science Monitor* journalist who was taken hostage by Iraqi followers of al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Musab al Zarqawi and kept captive for over 80 days. “Iraqis, man,” quipped Mehanna, “they know how to treat a woman.” Later, in May 2006, Mehanna and D.S. planned a movie night to watch video of Zarqawi beheading the 26-year-old American businessman Nicholas Berg:

MEHANNA: we can have a movie night
D.S.: what movie? . . . “State of the Ummah?”
MEHANNA: ni . . . no . . . Heads Up
D.S.: lol . . . Heads Up?
MEHANNA: hehe joke
D.S.: does it star Mr. Z [Zarqawi]?
MEHANNA: yes
D.S.: it should be Heads Off
MEHANNA: hehe yeah

Mehanna’s extremism found an outlet in his Internet and media-related activities, which form part of the basis for the material support indictment. Mehanna’s crowning achievement in this regard was his English translation of a pro-terror tract called *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad*, which, the grand jury charged, “was intended to inspire individuals to participate in violent jihad.” As counterterrorism analyst Jarret Brachman testified before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities,

The book’s author introduces a variety of ways in which Muslims, who may not be able to fight on the frontlines because they are too young or too sick, for instance, could still prepare for and support active *jihadi* insurgent campaigns around the world. Some of those ways include urging women to socialize their children with a *jihadi* mindset from an earlier age by reading them bedtime stories of the great *jihadi* fighters or playing them videos of successful attacks against American forces.

Mehanna, the government alleges, took great pride in providing Anglophone Muslims with access to *39 Ways*. Indeed, he and his associates eventually came to view themselves as Al Qaeda in

Iraq’s “English wing.” Mehanna’s pride was tempered only by his sense of inadequacy compared with his al Qaeda idols (“maybe . . . if we are lucky . . . we get to clean their toilets”).

Mehanna supported the cause in other, more creative ways, as well. Federal prosecutors credit Mehanna with authorship of a popular Islamist poem titled “Make Martyrdom What You Seek.” This poem is much more direct than Mehanna’s relatively tame prison writings. As its title suggests, the poem encourages the faithful to leave the comforts of the material world behind and wage jihad: “Make your path none other than Islam’s high peak / Whose mountain is climbed by making death what you seek!” Also worth noting is the bizarre, erotic dimension to the poem, arising from the poet’s description of the buxom virgins offered martyrdom-seekers. In the martyr’s paradise,

*You turn and behold! The voices are singing
Coming from Maidens so fair and enchanting,
These are the Hoorees with round and firm chests
Pure untouched virgins, they’re better than the best,
Seventy-two in all, with large eyes of dark hue
Each one created especially for you.*

Sexual frustration appears to have been a significant factor in much of Mehanna’s “activism.”

It rears its head, for example, in numerous telephone conversations between Mehanna and Daniel Maldonado, a Muslim convert and Mehanna associate who eventually pled guilty to terrorism charges. In late 2006, Maldonado sought to lure Mehanna to Somalia, where he was staying at the time, so that the two could attend “culinary school” and “make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches” together—code language, the government alleges, for undergoing terrorism training. (Mehanna was apparently prevented from doing so by financial constraints.)

“Dude, what about like marriage and stuff?” Mehanna asked Maldonado on one such call. “Marriage is so easy, brother,” Maldonado responded. Later in the same call, Mehanna brought up the topic of marriage once more, asking Maldonado whether he plans on “getting a number two,” i.e., a second wife. Maldonado responded that in Somalia “light skin” men are popular among the ladies. “I could have a wife waiting for you [in Somalia],” Maldonado promised Mehanna. “That’s what I want, that’s what I’m there for,” Mehanna replied.

Mehanna was not just another horny twentysomething looking for love and adventure abroad. He could well have turned out to be the next successful homegrown holy warrior.

Maldonado also mentioned that a comrade named Omar “was almost married in two days to a real good sister.” “Whatever Allah wills,” Mehanna laughed.

Mehanna at this stage did not even have a “number one” let alone a “number two.” Thus, the prospect of an Islamist Somalia—where even smoking is illegal, as Maldonado boasted—and brimming with eager Muslim brides must have been attractive. But Mehanna was not just another horny twentysomething looking for love and adventure abroad. If even a fraction of the factual allegations the government is about to marshal against him are true, then Mehanna could well have turned out to be the next devastatingly successful homegrown holy warrior—that is, if not for his Islamist cohort’s utter incompetence at waging physical jihad.

For example, prosecutors allege that, as early as 2003, Mehanna, Ahmad Abousamra, a Boston-based Islamist who later disappeared to Syria, and a cooperating witness (“CW2”) planned to shoot up dozens of civilians at a mall and assassinate two members of “the executive branch”—a designation the indictment does not further specify. The task

of securing the needed automatic weapons was given to the then recent convert Maldonado, who the other three believed might be able to obtain them through gang contacts in New Hampshire. Maldonado was only able to secure handguns, though, so the plan was soon abandoned. A year later, according to the government’s account, Mehanna, Abousamra, and CW2 traveled to Yemen in search of terrorist training. Once again, however, their hopes of waging jihad were dashed. No one was around, Mehanna would later tell CW2, who had backed out of the trip at the halfway-point in the Emirates. The individuals they were supposed to meet were all either jailed or on pilgrimage.

His lawyers suggest that Mehanna’s damning online statements in support of al Qaeda should be viewed within a broader politico-theological context. “The context of the discovery in this case does not lend itself to objective evaluation,” they write in

opposition to the government’s motion for pretrial detention. “[T]erms such as ‘jihad’ and ‘martyr’ can mean different things; to some, they indicate terrorism, to others, they indicate completely nonviolent and traditional aspects of Islam.” As to his truly revolting comments, defense counsel reminded the court that they were made by a “juvenile” transmitting thousands of instant messages to other young men. Finally, Mehanna’s lawyers argue that the First Amendment protects his right to make these comments—however reprehensible the court may find them.

These arguments failed to move the court to release Mehanna pending trial. However, Mehanna has not yet

had his day in court, where a jury may still acquit him. His supporters also harp on the fact that the lead prosecutor in this case, Jeffrey Auerhahn, is facing a bar disciplinary proceeding for having failed to disclose a witness’s exculpatory statement to the defendant in a 1989 gangland case. (An internal Justice Department investigation ended with Auerhahn receiving a private reprimand.) But even assuming for the



Mehanna’s jihad is derailed with his February 2009 arrest.

sake of argument the—preposterous—notion that federal prosecutors are “framing” him, the fact remains that Mehanna is a deeply hateful, misogynistic, and misanthropic young man.

In turning Mehanna into a civil rights hero, his supporters compound their mendacity by characterizing him as a “tolerant,” “moderate” Muslim. Actual moderates in the Muslim community daily risk the wrath of the Mehannas of the world to speak out against radical Islamism. For example, when in 2006 he learned that Farzana Hassan-Shahid of the Canadian Muslim Congress had called on fellow Muslims to “be more proactive” in confronting the extremists in their midst, Mehanna sent a chilling instant message to Abousamra: “She needs to be raped . . . with a broomstick.” To call Mehanna tolerant, then, is to undermine actually existing moderates like Hassan-Shahid. It is also to do violence to the very ideal of tolerance, distorting it beyond all recognition. ♦

REUTERS



Barack Obama points to Barney Frank while Christopher Dodd looks on, 2010

Guilty Men

The political origins of the meltdown. BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

To have served as the intellectual architect of the stalest presidential campaign of the modern-media era, to have lost a record number of states, to have gained a reputation for ruthlessness and secrecy in the process—only in Washington is that a recipe for success. Running the 1984 effort of his fellow Minnesotan, Walter Mondale, turned out to be the perfect entrée for James A. Johnson: He wound up a director of the Kennedy Center, chairman of the Brookings Institution, a board member of Goldman Sachs, an adviser to John Kerry in 2004, and—until derailed by scandal—the head of Barack Obama’s vice-presidential search team in 2008.

But if Johnson’s name winds up in

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Reckless Endangerment
How Outsized Ambition, Greed, and Corruption Led to Economic Armageddon
by Gretchen Morgenson & Joshua Rosner
Times Books, 352 pp., \$30

history books, it will be for something else. It was he who transformed Fannie Mae (formerly the Federal National Mortgage Association) in the course of the 1990s. Fannie had been a sleepy vestige of the New Deal bureaucracy, meant to deepen the market for middle-class mortgages by purchasing qualifying loans from banks. Under the leadership of Johnson and his successor, former Clinton budget director Franklin Raines, it became the flagship of the subprime mortgage industry. Its executives earned eight-figure salaries. It held as much debt as the U.S. Treasury in

2005. It had a massive, ferocious lobbying organization. It proclaimed itself to be leading a righteous mission to spread affordable housing to minorities, poor people, and other “underserved” parts of the population. And in 2008, it had to be bailed out by the U.S. taxpayer, at a cost, so far, of several hundred billion dollars.

The upshot of *Reckless Endangerment*, by *New York Times* business journalist Gretchen Morgenson and economist Joshua Rosner, is that Johnson has as much claim as anyone to be the main villain of the financial crisis.

Fannie Mae was a funny company. Privatized in the 1960s, it maintained a lot of government perks. Its board was partly appointed by the president. It was exempt from taxes in the District of Columbia, from certain conflict-of-interest laws, and from regulations governing financial disclosure, including disclo-

OWENDB / BLACK STAR / NEWS.COM

sure of executive salaries. It benefited from the perception—correct, alas—that it had the backing of the U.S. government. This backing allowed Fannie to borrow more cheaply than its competitors. Fannie claimed that these savings were all passed along to homebuyers, but a 2003 study by the Federal Reserve found that Fannie lowered mortgage costs by less than one percent.

Fannie's mission kept changing. Rather belatedly, it became an arm of the War on Poverty. "More than any other single act," the authors write, Congress's decision to equip Fannie with an affordable-housing mission in 1992 would lead, decades on, to the financial collapse. That same year, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, led by the economist Alicia Munnell, did a study of lending patterns purporting to show "redlining," or discrimination against blacks. The study had obvious flaws. It did not control for creditworthiness in the most elementary way. Munnell admitted to *Forbes* that "there was no relationship between the racial composition of the tract and the default rate." Had there been discrimination against blacks in lending decisions, blacks' default rate would have been *lower* than that of whites. The ridicule that greeted the report did nothing to dampen the Clinton administration's insistence on using home lending as a tool of poverty-fighting and race relations.

This required what the authors call "a completely new approach to lending"—a politicized one. This is where Johnson's lobbying expertise was crucial: If the new affordable-housing mandate did not make Fannie more economically sound, it had the potential to make it politically unassailable. Fannie started a foundation that funneled money to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and to all the community organizing groups that could possibly resist its plans for expansion. It formed an advisory council and invited a number of housing advocacy groups to join it—La Raza, the National Low Income Housing Coalition, and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). One of the great revelations of *Reckless Endangerment* is that the role of ACORN in shaping U.S. housing pol-

icy is not just a figment of the right-wing TV-watchers' imagination. ACORN helped devise Congress's affordable housing goals.

Fannie Mae opened "partnership offices" across the country which a later HUD investigation concluded were "primarily designed to obtain access to or influence members of Congress." Rather like a tobacco company, Fannie also paid for academic research—including a 2002 paper by Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz and future White House budget director Peter Orszag—that showed its role in the industry to be benign and its risks of a bailout negligible.



James A. Johnson, 2011

The preferred method of the Clinton administration for meeting these goals was the public-private partnership. When they work well, such partnerships spread the costs of government to those who most benefit from it, and they lower taxes. But the experience of the past 20 years is that they don't work well. Mostly they give plutocrats the power to make law. Johnson wound up with unseemly links to certain private companies. Since 1999, he has been on the board of Goldman Sachs, which, back in the 1990s, designed an investment vehicle that would allow Fannie's executives to shift income from year to year to meet bonus targets for earnings per share.

That is part of the reason why, according to Morgenson and Rosner, "[y]ou could predict what Fannie's earnings-per-share would be at year-end, almost to the penny, if you knew the maximum

earnings-per-share bonus payout target set by management at the beginning of each year." Between 1998 and 2003, Johnson's successor Franklin Raines made \$90 million, \$52 million of which was tied to these incentive targets.

Angelo Mozilo, the aggressive CEO of Countrywide Financial, the mortgage giant that swooned, bankrupt, into the waiting arms of Bank of America in 2008, called Johnson a man who "could cut off your balls and you'd still be wearing your pants"—doubtless a compliment in Mozilo's book. By 2007, Countrywide was supplying 28 percent of Fannie's loans. It was for having taken a friends-of-Angelo loan from Countrywide at a preferential rate that Johnson had to leave the Obama campaign in the summer of 2008. Others who got these loans included the late Richard Holbrooke (Johnson's former lobbying partner), senators Christopher Dodd, Kent Conrad, and Barbara Boxer, former Health and Human Services secretary Donna Shalala, and George W. Bush's Housing and Urban Development secretary, Alfonso Jackson.

There is certainly plenty of blame for both political parties in the finance crisis that grew out of the subprimes. But Johnson was an extremely partisan Democrat and for that reason, the unraveling of Fannie is largely a Democratic scandal. Fannie's most strident defenders were Democrats, and they include the two authors of the most recent financial reform bill, Dodd and Rep. Barney Frank, whose ex-boyfriend Herb Moses Fannie hired while they were dating. Almost all of Fannie's foes were Republicans. There were a couple of exceptions: Sen. Christopher Bond of Missouri was a ferocious defender of Fannie Mae, and former Utah senator Robert Bennett was one of the main beneficiaries of its favors. (You may applaud or deplore the ouster of Bennett by Tea Party Republicans last year, but they had their reasons.)

Johnson's priorities survived him, and Fannie was not alone in using housing policy as a means of social engineering. Housing and Urban Development secretary Andrew Cuomo pressured Fannie to buy more subprime

mortgages. A 1999 HUD study faulted Fannie for disqualifying borrowers with “low incomes, limited wealth, and poor credit histories; applicants with these characteristics are disproportionately minorities.” Cuomo threatened fines if such borrowers were not given more loans. In 2003, California representative Maxine Waters called for eliminating down payments from mortgages altogether. What sounded insane in 2003 was industry practice in 2005.

Gretchen Morgenson’s columns are as bold and well-informed as anything in American financial journalism, and Joshua Rosner is one of the rare analysts who saw, a decade ago, where subprime shenanigans would take us. But one wishes this book were better. The two authors’ contributions do not mesh. There is a hundred pages on Johnson, a hundred pages on Fannie Mae after Johnson, and then a hundred pages about topics, interesting in their own right, that the authors never manage to slot into an overarching narrative: the history of rating agencies’ role in mortgage securitization, the story of the disreputable mortgage originators NovaStar and Fremont, the shocking account of how Johnson, Mozilo, and former HUD secretary Henry Cisneros colluded to build a lot of moderate-income housing with zero-money-down loans in San Antonio.

James Johnson provides a useful device for launching us into this narrative, and he is well chosen as a villain. It was, indeed, unfortunate that such a capable political schemer—one, moreover, with enough of the self-righteous Midwestern moralizer in him not to care much for the counsel of others—should have wound up at the head of such a powerful agency. When you are earning one of the largest salaries in the world while haranguing the country on behalf of the downtrodden, you might see any attempt to hold you accountable as an assault on the country itself.

But there is no shortage of shrewd, driven, ruthless, capable bleeding-heart liberals across whose mind not a hint of self-doubt has ever passed. If Johnson had never been born, the mortgage crisis would have unrolled just as it did. The direction in which he took Fannie

Mae was the direction in which Bill Clinton, the economists at the Boston Fed, Andrew Cuomo, and the mortgage industry were pushing him. We were

bound to wind up with the system we have, in which the rich, in the name of the poor, avail themselves of the assets of the middle class. ♦



Getting There

When the going gets tough, the world beckons.

BY THOMAS SWICK

Toward the end of this clear-eyed, finely wrought memoir, the author finds herself in Paris with her diplomat-boyfriend, living the life of a freelance writer in an elegant apartment off the Champs-Élysées and wondering where it all went wrong. “As we get to know the area,” Eaves writes, “we like it less and less.” She complains about the chain stores on the famed boulevard and the lack of life on the side streets. When people do appear, their faces are often distorted, telltale signs that they’ve just been to one of the neighborhood’s numerous plastic surgeons.

It takes a good writer to make Paris appear unappealing. But having read the previous 280 pages, we fully understand Eaves’s dissatisfaction with her fate. She has a restless soul, and heart, and her life up to this point has been anything but tame. Eaves, author of the well-received *Bare: The Naked Truth About Stripping*, is one of those people for whom travel is an almost physical need. At the age of nine, living in Spain during her father’s sabbatical, she discovers Tintin and dreams of foreign adventures even while in the midst of one. This year abroad shows her, at an early age, “that when you were somewhere else, you could be

someone else.” Back home in Vancouver, she attends a French immersion school until the ninth grade, so she speaks two foreign languages before many American kids study one. At the

University of Washington, she takes up Arabic.

Her good friend Graham sets off on a year of travel, and reading his aerograms—mailed from Hawaii,

Fiji, Australia—she falls in love with him. Has he become someone else? Or is it that she sees for the first time his adventurous and sensitive sides (having experiences and then putting them into words)? On his return, they become lovers. Then she sets off for a summer in Spain, where she meets Pepe. Their passionate affair causes her no conflict; she is back in the land that taught her about adopted identities: “Graham and Pepe were not even relevant to one another. They were in different languages, and I was a different person with each one. They belonged to two separate worlds.”

This summer establishes a pattern of finding love and escaping from it, only to succumb again in another place. The desire for new lands becomes inextricable from her need for new lovers—the sensual pleasures of both satisfying her unquenchable thirst for experience. Travel provides a way out and (if she wants it) a way back in—with everything fresh. “The traveler,” she writes, “always betrays the place.” Romances don’t sprout everywhere. Eaves spends

Wanderlust
A Love Affair
with *Five Continents*
by Elisabeth Eaves
Seal Press, 304 pp., \$16.95

Thomas Swick is the author, most recently, of A Way to See the World: From Texas to Transylvania with a Maverick Traveler.

a year abroad in Cairo—"I needed something that would sear me, something that might hurt"—and includes a fascinating section on the problems of traveling as a woman (which will open the eyes of any male who has ever been mildly hassled in a *souk*).

Academics have spent too much time trying to explain objectification, considering that there's an easy way to make white, Western men understand: You just have to go out in public somewhere poor. You become a thing. Your conscious and unique self becomes irrelevant, as a thousand eyes try to figure out how to best tap your wealth. And objectification begets objectification. The harassers become an undifferentiated mass themselves, made up of identical things that torment.

There is a special hell reserved for foreign women. With her friend Mona she travels to Yemen. These chapters—which, like the others, have old-fashioned titles like "On Being an Alien," "On Adaptation"—nicely capture the atmosphere of not only the place but the feeling of being adrift in a very strange land. The two women managed to go beyond the tourist experience (which is often easier in a country without many tourists) staying with a Yemeni family in Taiz. Reading her cool, detailed depictions of the culture—after her more personal revelations—I was reminded of the memoirs of Kate Simon, possibly the greatest travel writer (certainly the most underrated) this country has produced. Eaves has the same knowing, unflappable appreciation of the world, and the ability to make it come alive on the page.

Returning home, she breaks up with Graham and then meets Stu before heading off on a State Department internship in Karachi. It is in Pakistan that the futility of Foreign Service work is revealed to her (though the feeling of powerlessness she experiences as an intern is not surprising, and perhaps not the best indication). Stu joins her at the end of her stay, and with some colleagues they make an arduous journey to the Chinese city of Kashgar. Here

they find a muezzin calling the faithful to prayer ("no one came"), snow leopard pelts, and the predictable assortment of international travelers: "We thought we were iconoclasts at the far edge of the world, but here we were in uniform, like members of any clique." As they take turns telling about their travels, someone dismisses Australia as "all about sex and lager." Eaves—"tired of proving I was tough enough"—finds that description rather attractive.

Back in Seattle she sets up house with Stu, even plans a wedding, but after a year and a half bolts for Asia. At this point a few readers are going to critically



question how they spent their twenties. "The mind is primed by going away," Eaves writes. "Desire and appetite build and you feel like you can't miss a thing, because who knows when you're going to have just this chance again? Everything has to be tasted." In Malaysia one night she calls home and receives the news that her grandmother has died. "I felt relieved to be so far away, because I was excused from grieving. . . . Going away could free you from feeling too much." Though some readers might see this as travel's curse. Eaves makes her way to Australia, gets odd jobs, and falls in love with a landscaper named Justin. With some friends they make a leech-filled trek through Papua New Guinea. Then she leaves Justin to reunite with Stu in New Zealand. This time, departure doesn't lessen the hurt.

No one ever explained how to deal with this kind of pain. All the examples of what I was supposed to want were about channeling emotions, funneling them carefully into marriage or at least monogamy. What if I didn't work that way? . . . The jungle, with its never-wavering pattern of life and death, its seasons and routines, its clarity about what would kill you, was a rational place compared to my own heart.

She compares herself to Houdini, whose "point wasn't so much to *be* free as to *get* free." In Auckland, she and Stu renew their Seattle life, Eaves working once again for a shipping company. She leaves the job on short notice to work on a boat sailing to Tonga. A week-long storm makes them change course and head for Fiji. (If Eaves's land life is anything but stable, why should her sea life be any different?) Back in the States, Eaves attends Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. There is a glorious passage describing what it's like to be young in Manhattan. New boyfriends accrue—including an ex-Marine and one with no name other than "the Englishman"—as do foreign assignments. But technology has changed the nature of long-distance relationships: "Now we have email and

cell phones. . . . Reality intrudes on the perfection of the distant image. . . . Time and age have also done their part. The implicit permission to do anything no longer flies. Monogamy is part of the boyfriend-girlfriend deal, and forgiveness isn't assumed." Yet three pages later Eaves is still longing for the double life, which, she says, is not the product of travel but the inspiration for it.

Can someone like this ever be happy? Walking around her arrondissement, Eaves finds the women with facelifts frightening. She writes that "becoming them is one possible outcome of a life spent trading on sex appeal, and I know that I've dabbled that way."

About this she needn't worry. As *Wanderlust* shows, she has other talents. ♦

Katherine the Sixth

The art of spousal survival in the aging Henry's court.

BY J.J. SCARISBRICK



It used to be thought that, when England's uxorious Henry VIII made his sixth attempt at matrimonial bliss in 1543 and took on the twice-widowed (but childless) Katherine Parr, he had at last got things right and that, bloated and diseased, he was able to spend his last years consoled by a homely companion.

J.J. Scarisbrick, professor emeritus of history at the University of Warwick, is the author of Henry VIII.

Katherine Parr
Complete Works and Correspondence
edited by Janel Mueller
Chicago, 656 pp., \$65

Recently, however, we have come to see Katherine as a much more colorful and interesting person: highly educated and aware, a competent mistress of the royal household and even regent while her husband heaved himself into vain-glorious campaigning in France (that is,

nearby Boulogne); dutiful stepmother who strove to bring together the offspring of Henry's first three wives—Mary, Elizabeth, and Edward; a patron of learning who fought to save enough from the wreckage of Henry's assault on the monasteries to found Cambridge's largest establishment, Trinity College.

And now the learned Janel Mueller has reminded us of something more: Katherine was the first English woman to have a printed book of her own devising published in her own name—not the first English woman to write a book, of course, but the first to publish one in print under her own name. This was her *Prayers or Meditations* (its short title), a compilation of extracts mainly from an abridgement by the devout Bridgettine monk Richard Whitford of Syon Monastery of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. That book was published in 1545. In the previous year, Katherine had produced anonymously a work entitled *Psalms or Prayers taken out of holy scripture*, a free translation of a Latin work of 1525 by St. John Fisher. Then in late 1547 came a third pious work, *Lamentation of a Sinner*, a meditation on the sinfulness of humankind.

These three works, together with the few surviving letters to and from Katherine and other related documents, are meticulously edited in this admirable volume. But perhaps the most interesting item is an unpublished primer (that is, a personal prayer book), previously attributed to Lady Jane Grey, the hapless girl who was used in a plot to stop the Roman Catholic Mary from becoming queen, which Mueller has identified as Katherine's by its handwriting—thanks especially to its similarity to the handwritten fragment of *Prayers and Meditations* which Mueller chased down to the “mayor's parlour” in Kendal in northwest England. Though once again a collection of favorite readings, it provides another window into the queen's inner life.

To help the reader, the original versions of all four works are followed by modernized ones, Latin fragments are scrupulously reproduced with their corrections and crossings-out, and for good measure, an appendix lists the queen's personal effects at her death

(mainly jewels and books). So we must congratulate the editor herself and the University of Chicago Press on this fine, scholarly production. At the same time, may we complain about the prose? No doubt we have to take on the chin—like a man—such feminist jargon as “degenders the masculine locutions.” But surely the University of Chicago Press (or someone) ought to have expunged such horrors as a “historically specific, pathbreaking trajectory,” let alone “The expanded phrasing . . . emits its own incantatory energy, evoking the serialism of a vernacular liturgy.”

Such eggheadspeak does bad things to blood pressure. Worse, it obscures Mueller’s central thesis, which is that, within a short time of marrying Henry, Katherine had become a zealous promoter of Lutheran Protestantism. This is all the more remarkable since, as Mueller shows, she had had many connections with England’s Catholic past and had not only translated that Latin work by Bishop Fisher but even included prayers by him and Thomas More in her *Psalms or Prayers*. But by 1545-46 she was clearly undergoing a profound religious conversion.

We must be careful, of course. Catholics, too, believe in original sin and human depravity. (Did not More describe himself as a “vile, abject, abominable, sinful wretch”?) They, too, affirm that Christ alone is the redeemer who reopened the gates of Heaven to those who believe in Him—and *pace* Mueller, they emphatically do *not* believe that the Mass is a reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. Moreover, it was not so much what Luther affirmed as what he denied that separated him from the old Church.

Though a great deal of Katherine’s writings seemingly belong to traditional, pessimistic (Augustinian) spirituality, Mueller is surely right about her growing Lutheranism. But it is what is missing—what she does not say about sanctification, the Sacraments, etc.—that is most revealing. Luther flaunted his denials; Katherine makes hers so quietly that a reader might not notice their absence.

And what had caused Katherine to shift to the religious left? Mueller

suggests convincingly that Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who was himself already moving towards a more radical Protestantism than Luther’s, was the major influence on her and that she and he were partners in concerted, surreptitious promotion of the new religious program. They were promoting what was then heresy. It is important to remember this. Mueller gets into a bit of a muddle about Henrician theology: The fact is that, after apparently flirting with Lutheran ideas immediately after he repudiated Rome, Henry had reaffirmed his commitment to “Catholicism without the pope” and persecuted dissenters of all kinds. No wonder, then, that Katherine did not publish her most Lutheran book, *Lamentation of a Sinner*, until after Henry’s death. And no wonder that the conservative old guard, led by the formidable Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester, having perceived what a dangerous woman she had become, should have tried to get rid of her.

Mueller rightly accepts the story told by the Protestant martyrologist John Foxe of how Gardiner and the then-lord chancellor reported her to the king in the hope that he would destroy her. And Mueller explains how cleverly Katherine escaped her husband’s wrath by pretending to be an utterly submissive

innocent who knew little about anything. Her dissembling disarmed him—but nonetheless left him snarling that it was a funny world in which women took it upon themselves to be divines.

Would Henry ever have repudiated her, even had her burnt for heresy? Quite possibly. Those were fraught times, and Henry was a capricious tyrant. In the event, it was Henry who died—in January 1547—leaving a nine-year-old Edward to succeed him. With near-treasonous haste, Katherine then married the man who had always been her true love, Thomas Seymour, younger uncle of the new king and an ambitious rogue who, among other things, had molested the young Princess Elizabeth and probably left her emotionally scarred for life. Katherine was soon pregnant for the first time. On August 30, 1548, she was delivered of a daughter, and a few days later she was dead—the victim of puerperal fever.

Not long afterwards, Thomas Seymour was destroyed by his brother Edward, who was effectively ruling the realm and was scarcely less of a rogue. By October 1549 Edward had, in turn, been deposed and was a prisoner in the Tower of London. That Katherine should have married into the Seymour family may not cast doubt on her religious integrity, but it says little for her good sense. ♦

BCA

Poetry of Light

Illuminating the darker corners of humanity.

BY IAN MARCUS CORBIN

Adam Zagajewski’s 2008 collection of poems, *Eternal Enemies*, includes a piece entitled “Poetry Searches for Radiance.” However true this may be of poetry writ large, it is eminently true of Zagajewski’s poetry. He is a

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Unseen Hand

Poems

by Adam Zagajewski

translated by Clare Cavanagh

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 128 pp., \$23

writer of profound, lucid verse that seeks and finds shimmers of radiance all over the map of human experience.

Much to his credit, this search ranges fearlessly over terrain that often seems tinged, or even saturated, with darkness. Most American readers will know him best for his poem “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” which the *New Yorker* printed on its back page two weeks after 9/11. Always a poet both cosmopolitan and deeply Polish, Zagajewski enjoys international prominence; he currently splits his time between Kraków and the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, where he teaches (among other things) a course on the work of his friend and mentor Czesław Miłosz.

Unseen Hand is Zagajewski’s sixth book of verse to be translated into English, and in it, Zagajewski, now in his mid-sixties, takes up themes of mortality and eternity, loss and preservation, with particular poignancy. Many of the poems here treat the machinations of time with a mild, elegiac sadness. And yet, the sadness is often leavened by hints of some durable, preserving elements—memory, beauty, eternal life, God—that lie under the surface of worldly flux, unseen by human eyes. If the epiphanies in this collection are more subdued than ecstatic, *Unseen Hand* is nonetheless an insistently hopeful book. It demonstrates that even when radiance is most shrouded, great poetry keeps searching, and great poets keep waiting.

In “Like the King of Asini,” Zagajewski borrows the image of an absent king from a poem by George Seferis (1900-1971), writing of his own long search for “the absent,” and ends with

*Like the King of Asini in Seferis, I thought—
nothing beneath the gold mask, a living absence—
but that void may be filled
at any moment, it may happen
that the king will suddenly return and
gold will shine triumphant.
Damp gooseberry bushes rustle in the garden,
the wind stirs. Know that we’re waiting.
We’re still waiting.*

This messianic note fits comfortably in Zagajewski’s larger oeuvre,

where persistent religious longings mingle freely and continually with persistent, solvent doubts. The graceful handling of this unresolved tension exemplifies Zagajewski’s most distinctive poetic virtue: the sense of an inner life that is marvelously composed, gently gathering potentially dissonant tendencies into a single harmonious self. Throughout his work we find Parnassian aspiration married to self-effacing irony, a



Adam Zagajewski, 2005

profoundly historical consciousness married to zen-like presence in the moment, a commitment to particular people, things, and places married to a penchant for abstract reflection. These marriages shift and slip—all free, unforced marriages do—but the overall impression that the reader takes away from Zagajewski’s work is that of a poet who means to approach the world, and his poetry, as a *whole* person, rational, emotional, physical, instinctual, and everything else that we are. When the poetry does slip, on occasion, towards some extreme—the sentimental or self-pitying, say—it simply seems like further, unnecessary evidence that a rich inner life is an imperfectible balancing act.

If none of this sounds particu-

larly revolutionary, it is not, nor is it meant to be. Zagajewski stands firmly in the humanistic tradition crystallized in Terence’s famous statement that “I am a man. Nothing human is alien to me.” But of course, different contexts can make different human things seem alien, and our context is no exception. On the few occasions when Zagajewski turns his critical irony outward, it is often aimed at the reductionist tendency in contemporary thought, a certain world-weary sophistication that denigrates human aspirations to heroism, sainthood, inspiration, and the like as fantasy, masks for our “real” interests (power, sex, money).

Zagajewski is keen to defend the possibility of inspiration: that our grasping after truth can bring us into contact with something larger than ourselves; our understanding of reality can be more than a projection of desires and fears. These are unfashionable opinions in many cultural precincts. The epigraph to “June in Siena” is a quotation from the postmodernist philosopher Richard Rorty, declaring, with characteristic breeziness, that *we shall never be in touch with something greater than ourselves*. Zagajewski’s gentle riposte begins, *Flat days came to pass, when doubt governed, / days of obvious accord*. He then presents a short series of everyday vignettes that show how even mundane experience is freighted with precisely the sort of *eros* that Rorty would have us eradicate. The poem ends with these lovely lines: *the brown city quivered like troops before a battle. Dry lips waited for rain*. Of course, this is nothing like a logical refutation of Rorty’s position but an invitation to linger for a moment, or maybe a lifetime, before demanding the excision of a vast and venerable part of the human story.

This breadth and generosity of vision emerges from a sure, unembarrassed sense of the self’s own breadth. But Zagajewski fights off the blinders of solipsism through careful attunement to our smallness in the larger scheme of things. And so we find him ending “Self-portrait” with this:

in a winter day's quiet, it is I, bored,
resigned,
unhappy, haughty, it is I, daydreaming
like a teenager, dead tired like the aged,
I in the museum, at the seashore, on Krakow's main square,
yearning for a moment that won't show,
that hides
like mountain peaks on cloudy after-
noons, brightness
finally arrives, and I suddenly know all,
know it is not I.

Adam Zagajewski's radiant poetry

is a gift. It offers a chance to ponder the vagaries of human experience in the company of a uniquely sensitive, patient, hospitable companion, who maintains a capacity for child-like wonder in concert with maturity. His work is also an example of what art can achieve *now*, in defiance of theorists who insist that poetry is no longer an authentic possibility, that we are each trapped in our own small, stifling self. ♦



God's Country?

Religion was far from absent in the Founding.

BY DAVID AIKMAN

On New Year's Day 1802, nine months after Thomas Jefferson's inauguration as America's third president, a gigantic block of cheese—1,235 pounds of it, to be precise—arrived at the White House as a gift for the president. A gesture of solidarity from old French revolutionary comrades? A sigh of relief from grateful Virginians and perhaps a gaggle of agnostic hangers-on? No indeed: The mammoth gift had been delivered by the farming community of Cheshire, Massachusetts, on the instructions of none other than the leading Baptist evangelical of his day, John Leland. It symbolized one of the strangest, but most significant, political and cultural alliances of the early post-independence nation: what Thomas S. Kidd calls “an unlikely alliance of evangelicals, Enlightenment liberals, and deists working together to win religious freedom.”

What made the alliance significant is that the evangelicals and the

God of Liberty
*A Religious History
of the American Revolution*
by Thomas S. Kidd
Basic Books, 304 pp., \$26.95

Enlightenment liberals—meaning, principally, Jefferson himself—were profoundly aware that each party's ultimate goals differed glaringly. Leland unabashedly declared that his “only hope of acceptance with God is in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ.” Jefferson, as is well known, didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God, or had even *claimed* to be such, and he considered the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to be sheer foolishness. What brought them together, however, was more than the motto inscribed on the crust of the cheese: “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” It was a subtle, but important overlapping of shared convictions about freedom of conscience, about the role of Providence in American life, and about the essential nature of virtue in the governance of a healthy republic.

Of course, there has long been a

growing debate among historians, popularizers of history, and general polemicists over the issue of what role Christianity, especially zealous evangelicalism, played in the cultural and political currents that led to the American Revolution. Some advocates of the “Christian nation” point of view barely credit theologically liberal Christians, let alone deists and Unitarians, with any significant contribution to the goals of the revolution. On the other hand, ardent secularists sometimes try to portray the revolution as merely the logical outcome of American absorption of the lessons of the Enlightenment.

As Kidd shows in this eloquently argued study, both perspectives overlook significant facts. To be sure, it was evangelicals like Leland who “led the charge” against state-supported religious establishments; but, Kidd notes, “they often gained crucial assistance from liberal Christians or deists like Jefferson who shared their goals.” Kidd points out that Jefferson was the architect of the second major point of agreement between deists and evangelicals: “The idea of a creator God as the guarantor of fundamental human rights.” Despite his reputation among critics of his own era as an “atheist,” Jefferson was far from being any such thing: He believed in the deist God, creator of everything in the universe, including human rights. He also believed that God intervened in history—not a typical deist concept—and thus was closer to being a Unitarian.

Leland and other evangelicals believed firmly in the Calvinist notion of the utter sinfulness of human beings and their tendency to behave in depraved ways. Kidd shows that key Founders such as George Washington himself did *not* share this outlook: He notes, however, that “a wide spectrum of Americans” during the revolutionary era did believe in the inherent danger of too much political power residing in any one sector of the new republic, or in any one person, and in the tendency of people to succumb to the temptations of power.

David Aikman is the author, most recently, of The Mirage of Peace: Understanding the Never-Ending Conflict in the Middle East.



George Whitefield (1714-70) preaching in the open air

During the writing of the Constitution, this belief reinforced a fastidious attention to the separation of powers. But it also led to much hand-wringing among the generation of the Founders about the need to preserve virtue in the new republic. Conservative Christians did not believe in the inherent existence of republican virtue because advocates of this view seemed to believe that people could be good independent of Christianity. Almost everyone, however, believed that if citizens of the new republic were not virtuous, the republic would fail.

Kidd points out that “during the Revolution, a new blend of Christian and republican ideology led religious traditionalists to embrace wholesale the concept of republican virtue.” By the 1770s even Calvinists and other conservative believers agreed with Samuel Adams (the notably evangelical cousin of John) that if America remained virtuous it might be possible to create a “Christian Sparta.” Kidd pronounces this idea “a unique amalgamation of the Christian and classical Republican traditions.”

A final area of creative overlap between evangelical Christians and Enlightenment revolutionaries, Kidd suggests, was the belief that God—or Providence, as deists might prefer to name the entity—moved in and through the doings of nations. Even

Washington, far from being a “Christian nationalist,” repeatedly referred to “Providence” or “the author of the universe” as central to the success of the revolution. Equally emphatic about America’s purposes having been ordered by a divine hand was the fastidiously deist Benjamin Franklin: “If it had not been for the justice of our cause,” Kidd quotes Franklin as ruminating in 1784, “and the consequent interposition of providence, in which we had faith, we must have been ruined” in the revolution.

Is there any personality among the Founders who bridged the Jefferson-Leland philosophical gap? In a way, Kidd argues, that personality was John Adams:

To Adams, the American Revolution was not exclusively either a secular or a religious endeavor. Instead, he integrated the legacies of the Reformation and the Enlightenment to propound a convergence of classical republicanism and Reformed Christianity that would provide America with a new moral vision.

Adams had been raised in a conservative Congregationalist family and was the descendant of a devout generation of founding Puritans. His father had wanted him to become a minister, but Adams could not stomach the core of Calvinist theology about man’s fallen state. He nevertheless

wrote emotionally about the effect upon him of the thought of God’s abiding presence in his life, and he interpreted the controversy with Great Britain as a contest between spiritual liberty and spiritual tyranny. During his presidency, Adams pronounced a national day of prayer and fasting to ask God for “his infinite grace, through the Redeemer of the world, freely to remit all our offences, and to incline us, by his Holy Spirit, to that sincere repentance and reformation” which would elicit God’s favor. Adams’s estimation of the value of human liberty, according to Kidd, was explicitly theological: “Liberty must at all hazards be supported,” he asserted, “because all people have ‘a right to it, derived from our Maker.’”

John Adams did not go as far as many Americans of his day who (according to Kidd) “conflated America’s political affairs with divine purposes, which lent an aura of redemptiveness to the war and to the agenda of a fledgling nation.” He nevertheless shared with all the Founders the conviction that republican freedom could not survive unless the people were virtuous. That conviction, Kidd notes, grew directly out of the Great Awakening. This opened up, for many Americans, exciting spiritual possibilities, and imbued them with the fortitude required to challenge established power. But it also led the Continental Congress to appoint days of prayer and fasting in 1774 and 1775 because of the broad conviction that sin among the people led to national punishment!

Kidd is careful not to adopt an explicitly “Christian nation” view of the role of religious faith, especially evangelical Christian faith, in the nation’s founding. He demonstrates effectively the variety of faiths among Americans of the revolutionary era, including an increasingly visible community of Jews. But he is unequivocal in stating that the majority of Americans at the time were Christian believers of some kind or other, and that the evangelical component of them (Patrick Henry, for example) played a formative role in creating the new republic. ♦

Seriously Good

Enlightenment springs from an unlikely source.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

In 1963, Mel Brooks made a three-minute short called *The Critic* that won an Oscar. What you see is a series of animated shapes and patterns and squiggles. What you hear is a Yiddish-accented 71-year-old man reacting to what he's watching. "What the hell is this?" he says. "It must be symbolism. I think it's symbolic. Of junk!"

You can watch *The Critic* on YouTube. And if you do, what you will be hearing is a version of what people all over the country are saying as they view Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. Having been drawn to the theater by the names of Brad Pitt and Sean Penn on the poster, and by a pretty trailer that suggests it is a sentimental story about a 1950s family, moviegoers have instead found themselves trapped in the dark with something strange and abstract and hard to follow. And they are storming out in droves.

Yes, it has Pitt and Penn in it, and yes, it does come to center on a boy growing up in Waco at a time when children happily chased after trucks spraying DDT. But *The Tree of Life* is after far bigger game. It is an unironic, full-bore inquiry into man's place in the universe and a complex acknowledgment of the unmistakable omnipresence of the divine. That's really what the movie is about. It has no story to speak of, and Malick explains nothing. It's left to us to piece together that the almost-silent Sean Penn is the adult version of the little boy we see through the rest of the movie growing up in an idyllic memory of the Texas town.

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, is THE WEEKLY STANDARD's movie critic.

The Tree of Life Directed by Terrence Malick



We must also piece together that what we are watching is a visual representation of a spiritual crisis afflicting Penn's character—a crisis of faith born of the death of his younger brother. As the crisis of faith erupts, based on little more than an elliptical conversation with his own father and the sight of a tree growing in front of an office building of which he is the architect, the movie basically stops in its tracks for 15 minutes. For those 15 minutes, its writer-director, Terrence Malick, attempts nothing less than a depiction of the creation of the universe informed by Genesis: We see God, the world without form, the creation of light, the separation of the light from the dark, the land from the sea, the invention of life itself.

I'm sure by this point that I've convinced you to avoid *The Tree of Life* at all costs. Indeed, I avoided it myself for a few weeks. It is the fifth feature in 38 years made by the writer-director Malick, whose work I haven't liked, to put it mildly. His career began with the brooding and pointless serial-killer film *Badlands* and the gorgeous but inert *Days of Heaven*. Then Malick fell mysteriously silent for two decades before releasing a preposterous combination of World War II battle flick and South Seas nature documentary called *The Thin Red Line*, inexplicably nominated for a handful of Oscars. (Seven years after that, he made a version of the Pocahontas story called *The New World*, but having spent those seven years recovering from the coma into

which *The Thin Red Line* had placed me, I couldn't bear to see it.)

What these movies have in common is a stunning lack of interest in plot, character, or incident—all the things that generally draw one into a movie. Malick is a metaphysician, not a storyteller; he is interested in the mechanics of being and existence, and the relation of man to nature. Which is nice for him, but to me and many others like me, the equivalent of an aesthetic root canal.

So imagine my surprise when *The Tree of Life*—which has every one of these weaknesses—completely overwhelmed me. The movie is a maddening and staggering combination of grandiosity and grandeur. Mostly, though, *The Tree of Life* is earnest and deadly serious, and those are qualities so rare in cinema that it almost seems to have come from a different time or a different planet.

The movie comes to center on the battle of wills between the boy who grows into Sean Penn and his father, played by Brad Pitt in a precise, compressed, and immensely complex performance that deserves to be called magnificent. This man is surely a version of Malick's own father, and there has rarely been as moving or interesting a cinematic portrait of a son's view of a father. He is martinet and inspiration, the suppressor of joyous natural instinct and the bearer of heavy familial responsibility, an inventor of some genius who is full of regret because he is not a musician of genius.

We learn all this elliptically rather than straightforwardly, as we dip in and out of Penn's memories and see him grapple with earthly temptations—jealousy, anger, violence, cruelty—while being reminded to follow the "way of grace" by his saintly and ethereal mother. Maddening though it is, the seriousness and deep intelligence with which Malick addresses the intertwining of the divine and the earthly helps *The Tree of Life* transcend its own pretensions and become something glorious.

As Mel Brooks's critic says, "It's symbolic." But *The Tree of Life* is the opposite of junk. ♦

“Journalist Cokie Roberts says that when former first lady Betty Ford was planning her own funeral she asked Roberts to deliver a eulogy about politics ... [and] talk about a time in Washington when Democrats and Republicans were friends.”

—Associated Press, July 11, 2011

PARODY

**TRANSCRIPT OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE
OCTOBER 31, 1976**

HARRY REASONER (ABC NEWS): Finally, Governor Carter, tell us in your own words why voters should reject Mr. Ford and elect you president in his place.

JIMMY CARTER: You know what, Harry? I’m not quite sure why I’m running myself. President Ford is not only a close, personal friend, but he’s been a wonderful president, leading us out of our long national nightmare of Watergate and then—

GERALD R. FORD: Thank you, Jimmy—or Governor, I should say.

JIMMY CARTER: —and then restoring our faith in the Constitution and the government. I guess I’m running because, if something should happen to President Ford, and I sincerely hope it doesn’t, I would want to be the one to pick up where he has left off.

HARRY REASONER: President Ford?

GERALD R. FORD: Harry, it’s hard for me, frankly, to count off reasons why the American people shouldn’t vote for my dear friend Governor Carter, who has been such an inspiration down there in Atlanta as chief executive of the state of Georgia.

JIMMY CARTER: By the way, Harry, when I referred to “our long national nightmare,” I didn’t mean that as a criticism of our good friend Richard Nixon, who I believe is here in the audience with us this evening. *(Applause)*

SUSAN STAMBERG (NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO): You guys are too much! I’ve been trying all week to get Governor Carter to say something bad about President Ford, and he won’t do it!

JIMMY CARTER: Susan, I told you I thought my daughter Amy is more adorable than Susan Ford! *(Laughter)*

GERALD R. FORD: Governor, I have to respectfully disagree. But Betty and I think little Amy is cute as a button, and our three sons have nothing on your three sons when it comes to being fine, upstanding young citizens. I know you and Rosalynn must be immensely proud of them. *(Applause)*

ERIC SEVAREID (CBS NEWS): Isn’t it astonishing that both candidates have one daughter and three sons? I think that tells us something about the healthy state of American