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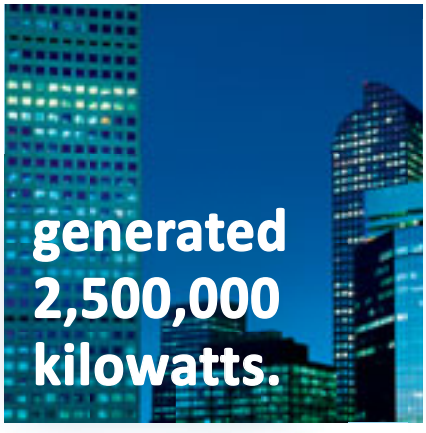

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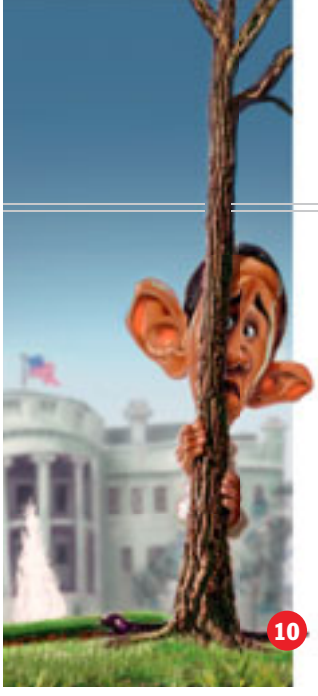

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COVER BY THOMAS FLUHARTY

Spielberg's Escort Service

There was a brief gossip item the other day in the *Washington Post* that caught The Scrapbook's attention. Well, not gossip, exactly, but what passes for gossip these days: a celebrity sighting. Steven Spielberg was spotted taking photographs of the cherry blossoms along the Tidal Basin! "Bundled up against the cold like all the other tourists," the *Post* reported, a little breathlessly, "[he] was escorted along the pathway by a couple of Park Service rangers."

The mean streets of the Tidal Basin: Be sure to bring a security detail.

It may be a measure of the widening gulf that separates The Scrapbook from the award-winning journalists at the *Washington Post*, but the element of this incidental item that plucked our antennae was not the presence of the great Spielberg in Washington—as it happens, not such a rare event—or the fact that he likes to take snapshots of tourist attractions. No, it was the National Park Service detail.

Steven Spielberg, we are pleased to acknowledge, has given the world *Jaws* (1975), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Schindler's List* (1993), and *Amistad* (1997). And he is, perhaps, sufficiently well known that he might be recognized by some of his fellow tourists and shutterbugs among the cherry blossoms. But at this juncture in the fiscal life of the nation, was it really necessary to spend taxpayers' dollars to provide a privileged Hollywood celebrity and deep-pocketed Democratic donor (who could easily afford his own private regiment of bodyguards) with "a couple of Park Service rangers" to protect him from—well, from what? The worst that could happen to a bundled-up Spielberg along the Tidal Basin would be a friendly greeting from the occasional admirer, or an autograph request or two. Bothersome, perhaps, to an artist of delicate temperament; but worthy of the cost of armed "protection" by the federal government?

National Park Service rangers are the people who tell you where you cannot park at the Jefferson Memorial (nowhere within walking distance, in case you're wondering) and patrol the no-man's-land between attractions on the Mall. When White House deputy counsel Vincent Foster committed suicide on federal property in Virginia in 1993—one of the stranger episodes of recent times in political Washington—the Clinton administration helped to create a sense of mystery by putting the National Park Service on the case.

Now the rangers are taking time out from ticketing drivers on Washington's parkways and thoroughfares to protect Citizen Spielberg from his fellow citizens—or perhaps vice versa. Either way, a waste of public funds and another irritant of daily life in the nation's capital. ♦

Never Let a Disaster Go to Waste

Taking note of the calamitous natural disaster in Japan, California Democratic senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein have proposed something called the Natural Hazards Risk Reduction Act of 2011. Despite its wholesome-sounding title, the bill is actually a rather naked effort to put federal taxpayers on the hook for damage to private homes following any big earthquake that might strike California. (And nearly all seismologists believe that is a near certainty in the next few decades.)

Quite simply, the bill sets up qualifications met only by one insurer in the country—the semi-public California Earthquake Authority (CEA)—and then promises that the U.S. Treasury will reinsure (or "backstop") it. This, CEA's managers say, will let them cut prices because the federal government will charge less than the private sector does for reinsurance coverage. This, in turn, will encourage more Californians to buy earthquake insurance for their homes. Because it doesn't actually appropriate any money from the Treasury, there's a good chance that the people assigned to determine its costs will decide that the proposal is "free."

Actually, however, it will cost a mint because, like any effort to insert government into property insurance markets, it cannot possibly work as advertised. Here's why: Insurers and reinsurers spread risk all over the world while government programs concentrate it. Particularly when insuring against major catastrophes, insurers—even quasi-governmental ones like CEA—buy international reinsurance that might pool the risk of,

say, a California earthquake with the risk of a flood in the United Kingdom and a cyclone in Australia. Because these events almost never happen at the same time, reinsurers can make profits in some areas even when they pay out mammoth claims in another.

By relying on U.S. government reinsurance, however, CEA's risk will get concentrated right here. Thus, to break even, as Boxer and Feinstein promise the program will, Treasury will actually have to charge more than the private sector would for whatever backstop it provides, and the stated *raison d'être* for the bill will vanish. Otherwise—and this seems a lot more likely—the government will end up systematically underpricing coverage and somehow sticking taxpayers with the bill. The most similar effort currently in operation, the National Flood Insurance Program, already owes the Treasury more than $18 billion and has no way to pay it back. Bottom line: The country doesn't need any more government-run insurance programs. ♦

Life Imitates P.J., Yet Again

It's hard out there for a satirist. Just ask our own P.J. O'Rourke. In these pages on February 9, 2009, O'Rourke jested (we thought):

> The next great government crusade will be against soap. The president will appoint a Blue Ribbon Commission, which will determine that soap releases polluting grime into the ecosystem, leads to aquifer depletion, and contains fatty acids that laboratory studies have shown to be acidic and not fat-free . . .

The very next month, regulators in Washington state targeted dishwashing detergent, a move that set off a lengthy struggle between environmentalists and angry homeowners frustrated by suddenly ineffective dishwashers. (Jonathan V. Last chronicled that battle in our January 31 issue.)

And now comes word that nanny-staters are going after hand soap.

While Reps. Ed Markey and Louise Slaughter are leading the charge against hand soap in Congress, the Natural Resources Defense Council is trying to make an end run in the courts by suing the Food and Drug Administration. They want the FDA to ban triclosan, a common ingredient in antibacterial soap. FDA testing says triclosan "is not currently known to be hazardous to humans," but fear not—the FDA is "engaged in an ongoing scientific and regulatory review of this ingredient."

If you were previously under the impression that scrubbing yourself free from bacteria was a good thing, we hope the scales have fallen from your eyes. ♦

Four Strikes?

Readers may recall the sad story of Tilikum, the orca. On February 24, 2010, Tilikum was performing in a show at Orlando's SeaWorld when he attacked and killed his trainer. He was not a first-time offender. In 1991 he also killed a trainer. And in 1999, SeaWorld workers arrived at the park to find a dead man floating in Tilikum's pool. There was not enough evidence at the time to convict him.

Despite these three incidents, Tilikum returned to work last week, performing in a show titled "Believe." In a statement, SeaWorld animal training curator Kelly Flaherty argued, "we feel [participating in shows] is an

important component of his physical, social, and mental enrichment. . . . He has been regularly interacting with his trainers and the other whales for purposes of training, exercise, and social and mental stimulation, and has enjoyed access to all of the pools in the Shamu Stadium complex."

It's not really a surprise that the marine biology set would view Tilikum's rehabilitation the way many 1970s liberals viewed the rehabilitation of convicts. Except that in this case the root causes actually do mitigate Tilikum's crimes: In the whole of recorded history, no orca in the wild has ever killed a human.

Even so, one wonders what Tilikum would have to do to get SeaWorld to revoke his work release. Let's hope we don't find out. ♦

Recommended Reading

The Scrapbook has just received the spring issue of the journal *National Affairs* and, in accordance with the upbeat view of spring in this week's lead editorial, can cheerfully report that it's a barn-burner. Editor Yuval Levin ponders where we go "Beyond the Welfare State," and law professor extraordinaire Richard Epstein dissects our emerging "Waiver State." The Manhattan Institute's Josh Barro considers pensions, George Mason's Todd Zywicki explains the auto bailout . . . and there's much, much more, including Stanford's John Taylor on "The Cycle of Rules and Discretion in Economic Policy" and Yale's Steven Smith "In Defense of Politics." Read it, subscribe to it, and tell your friends about it. ♦

So There!

An emphatic correction by the *New York Times* of its March 30 article "Obama Lays Out Plan to Cut Reliance on Fuel Imports": "A previous version of this article misstated how many of the president's proposals to reduce the country's reliance on imported oil were new in his speech on Wednesday. None of them were, not one of them." ♦

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Moral Rest in Old New York

Tourism, it has been said, is a condition of moral rest. On a recent trip to New York—where I was lent a two-room time-share apartment on 56th Street across from Carnegie Hall—I invoked this maxim time and again. I ate what I pleased, saw what I wished, did no work of any substance, and achieved nothing whatsoever in the way of self-improvement.

I enjoy New York's hum, the cacophony of foreign languages I hear on its streets, the high quality of its food, the frankly sexual get-ups of its female denizens. For these reasons, and for the wondrous variety of its shops, New York is one of the world's great walking cities. Walk in it I did, every chance I got, yet scarcely able to take in all the rich tumult—the rhooshey-booshey, in a fine neologism of my mother's—there on display.

Moral rest includes cultural rest. One of the things I did in New York was drop my highbrow standard and take myself to a musical comedy. I saw *Jersey Boys*, the story of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, which has been running for five years. Without a dead moment, the show is well-made, which in part explains its long run. The music isn't my music—I am of an age that puts me well on the other side of the rock 'n' roll divide—but not without its charms: "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You," "Silhouettes," "Walk Like a Man," and the rest.

The great moment in the show for me, though, was the quiet one when the actor who plays Frankie Valli announces that the Beatles came along and wiped every other group out, but not the Four Seasons. The Beatles, he says, made music for people who protested war; the Four Seasons made music for people who went to war, for the soldiers and the truck drivers and the hamburger flippers. What made this all the more interesting was that the people in the audience, many now in their fifties and early sixties, were preponderantly these people, now grown older but still enamored of the music.

To rinse the Four Seasons' songs from my mind, the next day I took myself to the Metropolitan Museum. I spent my time there in the Greek and Roman collection, at the end of which was the installation of the third-century A.D. Roman floor mosaic found in Lod, Israel. I ended this with a quick walk through a small collection of Cézanne drawings and sketches for his famous painting "The Card Players." Still, all this high culture could not stop me, once I hit the street, from humming "Silhouettes."

MICHAEL SLOAN

Food in New York is as good as it is because of the sheer demandingness of New Yorkers. Poor restaurants die quickly there, where in other cities they live on for three generations. I stopped to pick up a salad at a place called Chop't on West 51st Street, the unrelenting energy of whose workers, servicing a perpetually lengthy line of harried lunchers, is of a kind difficult to imagine encountering most places in America. I had two lunches at Cellini, on East 54th Street, my favorite restaurant, where even the water tastes good. One, accompanied by much laughter and rich gossip, was in the company of two old friends, one a native New Yorker, his wife a naturalized one.

I could have become a naturalized New Yorker myself. I lived there, in my middle twenties, for a few years. When I was young, if one felt one had talent, New York was the only place to test it. Certainly this was—and remains—true for the performing arts: acting, singing, dance, classical music performance. One night I attended three ballets put on by the Juilliard School and was impressed by the professional level attained by its young dancers in works by three very different choreographers: Nijinska, Eliot Feld, and Mark Morris. Nowhere else in America but in New York was this possible.

For writers the beneficence of living in New York is less certain: So much energy is used up in the sheer exercise of living. Nor is it clear that the city is the best place to find the ripest material for either fiction or nonfiction. New York, in a strange way, isn't really America at all; it has been described—not inaccurately, in my view—as a European city but of no known country.

Had I remained in New York, I would have got less work done. Whether the quality of what I have written would have been better under the forcing house of endlessly vibrant New York is not something I can judge.

I remain, then, a visitor, a man come to see the sights and seek the odd week's necessary moral rest.

Joseph Epstein

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The Arabs' Spring—and Ours

Spring isn't what it used to be. Here, for example, is Robert Browning in 1841:

The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in his Heaven—
All's right with the world!

In the context of *Pippa Passes*, within which these lines appear, the conclusion ("All's right with the world!") is somewhat ironic. But later generations took Browning's poetry as a perfect expression of Victorian naïveté. The moderns inclined toward a darker view of the season:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

An Egyptian family poses for a photo with an armored vehicle in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN / AP IMAGES

Today, we still seem stuck in T.S. Eliot's moral universe. This despite the fact that we are now, in 2011, further in time from "The Waste Land" (1922) than Eliot's poem was from *Pippa Passes*. Yet gloomy fatalism remains avant-garde even after many changings of the guard.

Maybe that's why our response to the Arab Spring has been so grudging. We recall that many springs fail to come to fruition. We've been taught that disappointment is inevitable. And so predicting failure seems more worldly, more knowing, than working for success.

Still, the Arab Spring deserves to be greeted with enthusiasm and support. It's been clear at least since September 11, 2001, that decades of "stability" in the Middle East had produced a waste land of brutal authoritarianism, Islamic extremism, and corrosive anti-Americanism. President Bush set out to change that, but it seemed for a while that the Middle East would be impervious to change. Some sophisticates rationalized that the status quo was better than any likely alternative—after all, the thinking went, at least the Arab "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers."

No more. The Arab winter is over. The men and women of the Greater Middle East are no longer satisfied by "a little life."

Now it's of course possible that this will turn out to be a false spring. But surely it's not beyond the capacity of the United States and its allies to help reformers in the Arab world achieve mostly successful outcomes—in Iraq, where we need to be sure that we don't fritter away the extraordinary gains that have been made in the last four years, and in Egypt and Tunisia. In Libya, halfway competent Obama administration policies should enable the Libyan people to get rid of Muammar Qaddafi. Regime change in Syria looks possible, and would surely be more likely with our aid and encouragement, and without our saying that nation's hereditary thug ruler, Bashar al-Assad, is a "reformer." And if at some point the House of Saud totters—well, goodbye to them too, and good riddance.

Here, early in the twenty-first century, the Arabs seem to be rising to the occasion. The question is, will we?

Perhaps. And perhaps especially if we recall the achievements of Winston Churchill, which suggest that fashionable fatalism is too, well, fatalistic.

Churchill wasn't a waste land type. He was in important respects a Victorian, or a neo-Victorian. On February 7, 1952, speaking to the British nation after the death of King George VI, as Queen Elizabeth II was ascending the throne, Churchill memorably closed his broadcast: "I, whose youth was passed in the august, unchallenged, and tranquil glories of the Victorian era, may well feel a thrill in invoking, once

more, the prayer and the anthem 'God Save the Queen.'"

Obviously, as Churchill knew well, the august, unchallenged, and tranquil glories of the Victorian era will not return (if they ever really existed). But is it too much to ask that we regain some of that Victorian confidence about the future? We can't make all right with the world. But we can make some things in the world a little better. It's certainly worth the effort to improve the Middle East.

And who knows? Helping the Arab Spring through to fruition might contribute to an American Spring, one of renewed pride in our country and confidence in the cause of liberty.

—William Kristol

Billions Now, Trillions Later

Conservatives are on the verge of victory—if only they can take yes for an answer. The situation on Capitol Hill is fluid, but it appears House Republicans will soon be presented with a choice: accept dramatic cuts in spending for the rest of fiscal year 2011 that, while less than the amount passed by the House in February, are about the same as Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan originally proposed—or risk a government shutdown by holding out for the maximum amount of reductions, as well as other items on the conservative wish list.

Paul Ryan organizes charts related to President Obama's proposed FY2012 budget, February 14, 2011.

The right decision: Accept a deal to cut tens of billions of dollars in the remaining months of fiscal year 2011. This would not only avoid a shutdown. It would also begin to reduce the size of government, and that would be a real victory. Congress would pass the largest reductions in nondefense discretionary spending in decades. Democrats would implicitly concede that the federal government is spending too much money. And the decks would be cleared for Ryan, who plans to deliver his fiscal year 2012 Republican budget this week.

While reining in government spending on nondefense domestic programs is necessary, Head Start and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are not the cause of America's structural deficit. Entitlements, Medicare and Medicaid in particular, are the spigots from which the red ink flows. You could give conservatives everything we want on the domestic discretionary side, and America would still be in a fiscal pickle. What's needed is a proposal that deals seriously with entitlements. That means preserving benefits for those in or near retirement, while putting health care programs on the path to sustainability. Luckily, there is just such a plan.

The Ryan budget will include significant cuts to domestic discretionary spending. But more fundamentally, it will reform Medicaid into block grants to states to give governors maximum flexibility. It will transform Medicare into a defined contribution program that will be stable for decades to come. And it will propose fundamental tax reform to remove loopholes and increase efficiency and spur economic growth. This is a comprehensive strategy that, over the long term, will reduce spending not by billions but by trillions of dollars.

Nor will this budget be of interest to actuaries alone. Behind the Ryan policy is a realistic vision for conservative governance. The budget accepts the fact of the modern welfare state while targeting aid to the truly needy and refashioning programs in ways that encourage thrift, competition, and self-reliance. The goal is a solvent federal government that pays its bills and performs its limited functions with energy and competence. The Ryan budget also prepares the ground for political battles in 2012 and beyond: The contrast with the liberal Democratic vision of an ever-expanding administrative state that taxes, spends, and regulates an increasingly dependent and indebted America couldn't be clearer.

Meanwhile, with respect to the struggle over the continuing resolution for the rest of 2011, the temptation to stick to one's ideological guns and hold out for the best rather than merely the good is always strong and, in some cases, justified. But there is also the danger of becoming blind to political reality. There's the risk that long-term political capital will be wasted in pursuit of a quixotic short-term goal. There's the threat that what starts out as a principled stand could collapse into self-righteous and self-destructive posturing.

Conservatives do not now have a monopoly on power. Quite the opposite: The GOP controls only the House of Representatives—not the Senate and, even more important, not the White House. That Republicans are on the path to achieving quite a bit is a testament to the power of their ideas and the nature of our times. Keeping the momentum going, however, requires tough-minded thinking about priorities and long-term goals. To embrace obstinacy over

NEWSCOM

short-term spending and reluctance to tackle big-ticket items like Medicare and Medicaid would get the formula for success precisely backward. So let's accept an achievable solution for this fiscal year, which is half over, and then begin to move the government in a responsible and conservative direction for decades to come.

—Matthew Continetti

Meanwhile, in Beijing . . .

For Chinese dissidents, trouble often starts with an invitation to "tea," a euphemism the police use to deliver a warning or worse. Since late February, when Internet postings urged Chinese to protest in a "Jasmine Revolution" modeled after the revolutions shaking the Greater Middle East, dozens of pro-democracy activists, lawyers, and bloggers have received such invitations to tea—only to be arrested in the most intense police roundup since the late 1990s.

After the fall of Zine El-Abedine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the ruling Chinese Communist party is taking no chances. In recent months the Politburo has met in secret to agree on new propaganda guidelines and Internet controls. In public, General Secretary Hu Jintao—nicknamed "Mu Jintao" by Chinese Internet users to evade censors and allude to Mubarak—rallied the cadres in a speech at the Central Party School in Beijing.

Last week, blogger Ran Yunfei was the first to be arrested formally for subversion. The authorities also brought charges against dissidents Chen Wei and Ding Mao. Dozens of other pro-democracy activists are missing after being taken away by police, and hundreds more are under "soft detention" at home, according to the group Chinese Human Rights Defenders. The risk that the disappeared will be tortured to force confessions of nonexistent crimes increases the longer they are held in captivity.

Teng Biao, a human rights lawyer, is one of the disappeared. This is not the first time Teng has been missing at the hands of police. But it is by far the longest. "Let's beat him to death and dig a hole to bury him in," one policeman said during a night of abuse and interrogation after plainclothes officers seized Teng and a colleague from a private apartment last year. Teng later wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that only his status as a lawyer and former visiting fellow at Yale led him to be released. So far the Yale connection hasn't helped this time. But perhaps Yale is working behind the scenes?

The New York City Bar Association has written a letter to the Chinese minister of justice seeking the release of lawyers arrested in the recent sweep. It's a good start. Here's what else American lawyers practicing in Beijing might do: Attempt to observe trials. Swear off dealings with any part of the Chinese government or businesses involved in state repression and Internet control. (The objection will surely be raised that it is impossible to know who and what companies are involved—but this would make a great research assignment for summer associates.) The American Bar Association could even pass a resolution against providing legal advice for such deals.

When democratic reform has not been in the cards, a longstanding American priority has been supporting the development of the rule of law. In China, however, the Communist party is supreme. The law serves its interests. The party's intolerance for anything that challenges its control has never been in doubt.

America's "engagement" policy makes a virtue of ignoring China's most egregious behavior. There have been no consequences for Beijing in the aftermath of this latest spike in repression. To the contrary: Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner was in China last week complaining about the value of the yuan. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell expressed concern about government abuses, while announcing that, in May, Washington will host the next session of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue—a massive conclave at which democracy and human rights concerns will not figure. Chen Bingde, chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army, will also visit Washington in May. It will be shameful if business continues as usual while so many lawyers, activists, and intellectuals remain missing or behind bars.

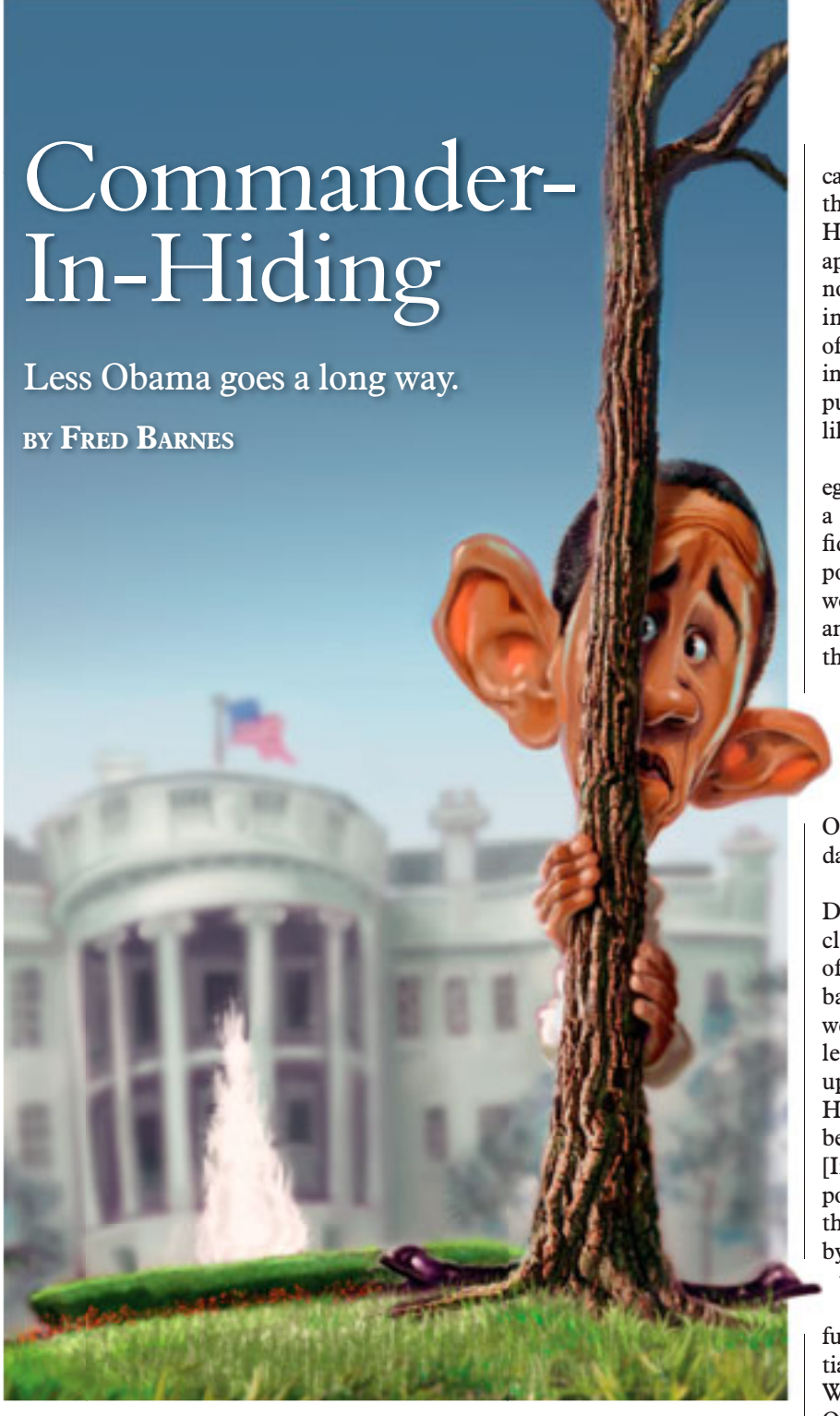
Teng Biao's business card displays the motto "living in truth." The phrase comes from former Czech dissident and president Vaclav Havel, who used it to describe resistance to totalitarianism. In his famous essay "The Power of the Powerless," Havel wrote that "living in truth" depends "not on soldiers of its own, but on the soldiers of the enemy as it were—that is to say, on everyone who is living within the lie and who may be struck at any moment (in theory, at least) by the force of truth." That is the potential of Teng Biao, wherever he is, and of his fellow dissidents.

—Ellen Bork

Commander-In-Hiding

Less Obama goes a long way.

BY FRED BARNES



GARY LOCKE

President Obama isn't quite in hibernation. But he's saying less, proposing less, appearing in public less, doing less, interacting with Congress less, plugging his health care plan less, and singling out a Republican demon less. It took two years and the harsh rejection of a midterm election for Obama to figure out what shouldn't have been a secret: The magic of the presidency declines with overindulgence.

Now several days go by at the White House with the president listed as having "no public schedule." Or his calendar will feature only a string of Oval Office meetings described as "closed press." That's Washington lingo for no media coverage whatsoever.

The shift from overexposure to carefully targeted public appearances is the smartest political move the White House has made this year. Americans appear ready for a president who's not in their face day after day, hectoring, sounding an alarm, and, more often than not in Obama's case, boring everyone. The less Obama does in public, I suspect, the more popular he's likely to become. Gradually.

It must have been a blow to Obama's ego to be told he'd be wise to slack off a bit. Obama is enormously self-confident, especially about his skill as a political performer and orator. Who wouldn't be after being called eloquent and inspiring so many times during the 2008 presidential campaign?

But the presidency is different. Themes like hope and change fall flat when you have real responsibilities, are building a public record, and constantly face accountability. Omnipresence may work for a candidate, but it doesn't for a president.

Obama's now-departed counselor David Axelrod came up with a clever analogy to the overexposure of Obama—Chicago Bears running back Walter Payton. When the Bears were bad in the 1980s, "it was Payton left and Payton right and Payton up the middle," Axelrod told John Heilemann of *New York* magazine. "It became kind of a dreary game plan. . . . [In Obama] we have one of the great political performers of our time. But I think we degraded that to some degree by using him as much as we did in the ways we did."

When David Plouffe, who skillfully managed the Obama presidential campaign, replaced Axelrod on the White House staff in January, he urged Obama to reduce his public exposure. William Daley, the new chief of staff, agreed. So these days we not only see Obama less frequently, but see him in seemingly inconsequential pursuits.

Obama showed up on ESPN to outline his March Madness brackets for us, as he had last year. While the Middle East was roiled by unrest, he attended the White House conference on bullying. And while the administration's policy on Libya was being

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decided, the president took a trip to Brazil, Chile, and El Salvador. It was a tour that could have been postponed indefinitely.

The president still has his formal duties. His State of the Union was a dud, however, and he might think about sending his thoughts to Congress in a written message, as presidents did before Woodrow Wilson. His budget was a letdown to those who believe the country faces a spending and debt crisis. The disappointed included much of the mainstream media.

After American warplanes and ships had already been deployed in combat, Obama could hardly have avoided an address to the nation on Libya. His speech, which vigorously supported democracy, was an improvement on the State of the Union. He sounded a lot like George W. Bush.

Normally such speeches are delivered from the Oval Office, with the president speaking into a TV camera. Ronald Reagan, who once said having been an actor comes in handy in politics, was great at this. Obama isn't. The relocation of his address, given to an audience at the National Defense University, represented another lesson learned.

More need to be. His love of the rhetorical device of the false choice was panned by Ruth Marcus of the *Washington Post*. Obama, she wrote, "has employed the false-choice device in assessing financial reform, environmental regulation, defense contracting, civil liberties, crime policy, health care, the deployment of troops in Iraq, Native Americans, the space program, and, most recently, the situation in Libya." Get rid of it, Marcus wrote. Good advice.

It would also be sensible for Obama to drop the relentless use of the empty promise and the meaningless target date. He insists, for example, he's for free trade and even renegotiated the trade agreement with South Korea last year. Yet he hasn't sent the agreement to the Senate for ratification.

Why not? It's the fault of Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, according to Senate Democrats. McConnell wants the treaty attached to the trade pacts with Panama and Colombia. Yes, that's McConnell's preference. But he's said he'd be happy to vote separately for the South Korea agreement.

Obama is also for more oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, but permits are being granted at a glacial pace. He's for cutting the corporate tax rate, yet no tax proposal has emerged from the White House. The problem here is accountability. A president is publicly held to his promises, and it's embarrassing when he doesn't keep them. Obama should be embarrassed.

Last week, he uncorked a new target date, plucked for all anyone can tell out of thin air. "By a little more than a decade from now, we will have cut [oil imports] by one-third," he declared in a speech at Georgetown University. This follows the claim that 80 percent of Americans will have access to high-speed rail "within 25 years." And 98 percent of Americans will get high-speed wireless coverage "within the next 5 years." Plus American exports will double by 2014.

It's doubtful anyone believes this stuff. It adds bluster to a presidency that doesn't need any. What would help Obama is a bit of mystery. A president gets that from holding back, from recognizing that his every thought need not be spoken. Reagan was good at that. So was FDR. Obama isn't, but he's getting better. ♦

Assad State of Affairs

Will Syria's dictator be the next to fall?

BY LEE SMITH

Beirut

It's Friday again, and across the Middle East people are waiting to see if and where the next uprising gathers steam. In retrospect, perhaps this period, starting with Mohamed Boazizi's self-immolation in a small Tunisian city, will be seen as the season that Arabs poured out of their mosques after Friday prayers to take to the streets and wrest their destiny from their ruling regimes. In the midst of this season of Fridays, we'll soon have a sense of what's going to happen in Syria.

Protesters are now out in most of the country's major cities—from Deraa, where the protests kicked off, to the capital Damascus, as well as Sunni strongholds in Homs and Hama. Perhaps worst of all for the regime is that the Kurds have now entered the fray as well, going to the streets in Qamishli in Idlib. The security services are out in force, but the fact is that the Alawite minority that runs Syria's repressive state apparatus is simply incapable of policing so large a country, if the more than 75 percent of Syria comprising the Sunnis and Kurds has in fact turned on Assad as it now seems.

The Lebanese have been quiet these last few weeks regarding the bloody protests unfolding next door. There's no reason to attract the attention of a wounded mastiff like the regime in Damascus. Even so, the Syrians are believed to be responsible for minor acts of discord here—the bombing of a church in Zahle, the kidnapping of

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seven Estonian tourists from the Bekaa Valley whose freedom, when secured, will no doubt be thanks to the gratuity-induced exertions of the Damascus government, kidnapper-cum-liberator of long standing.

That part of Lebanon's political spectrum that has been held hostage to the violent whims of Syria is watching with a sense of hopeful expectation that events may eventually usher in a friendly government in Damascus, or at least one less inclined to use Beirut as a laboratory for its sociopathies. And all of the Lebanese, including allies of Syria like Hezbollah, fear that the violence likely to follow a mass uprising will visit this country as well. Other regional actors are watching too, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia, both of whose futures may be shaped by events in Syria.

A rumor circulating in Lebanon's Shia regions is that the Saudis have reached out to a number of Syrian Sunni sheikhs and told them to keep people off the streets. Even as Syria's relationship with Iran has set it against Riyadh over a number of issues these last few years—from the 2005 murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri to Iraq's 2010 elections—in the end, both are Arab regimes that must stand back-to-back or else risk losing power should the wave of uprisings keep coursing through the region. The Saudis see Syria as a good place to stop the domino effect—by helping the Syrians dig in, the Saudis hope they can save themselves.

Of course it's not clear that a bunch of Sunni clerics in Syria tarnished by their association with the Assad regime have much influence with the young men who have already taken to the streets against their rulers. Bashar al-Assad certainly didn't help himself with his performance the other day before the Syrian parliament, a bizarrely self-involved oration suggesting that the regime does not understand that the global media revolution has pushed its regional theater troupe—Bedouins, heroes, revolutionary poetry, etc.—onto the world stage.

In 1982, news of the regime's massacre at Hama, where Bashar's uncle Rifaat al-Assad led the forces that killed 20,000 to 40,000 Syrians, took weeks to reach even Beirut. Today, cell phone video feeds posted to YouTube make the regime's crimes public within minutes, while CNN exposes for all the world to see that the giggling dictator in Damascus is a maniacal adolescent who holds the lives of 21 million Syrians in his nervous fingers.

Conspiracy theorist: Assad's finger-pointing speech was a flop.

Many observers argue that the Assad speech was evidence of a difference of opinion in the regime. After one of his chief spokesmen suggested earlier in the week that the government would lift the country's 48-year-old emergency law, Assad made no mention of the law or of any other reforms. Perhaps he remembered that the emergency law is the regime's sole source of legitimacy—only the cold war with Israel, and the danger that any criticism may fragment the country and keep it from presenting a unified front to the Zionist enemy, justifies Assad's repression. Accordingly, Assad blamed the antiregime demonstrations on "conspirators."

"He's signaling that he means to crush the demonstrators ruthlessly," says Lebanese political analyst Elie Fawaz. "If they were just protesters, then he'd have to listen and take their complaints seriously. But if they're just plotters, then he can deal with them any way he likes."

Nonetheless, independent Shia activist Lokman Slim says he was relieved to hear Assad use the word "plot." "Right then I knew he was an idiot," says Slim. "Our enemy is not intelligent."

What Slim means is that Assad's rhetoric is astonishingly out of touch with the political events of the last three months. The talk in the region has not been about Israel and the United States, plots and conspiracies, but rather corruption, discrimination, jobs, economics, food, and hunger. Ideological language is, for the first time in years, taking a backseat to the stuff of real politics.

"It is because there are no real politics here that this region is so heavily politicized," says Hazem Saghieh, a Beirut-based columnist with *Al Hayat*. "You go to Europe, the United States, where politics is one subject among 20, 25 different things. Here it's the main subject, the only subject, because we do not have real politics. We're politicized."

"We live below the political level," says Slim. "It's like the poverty level. But now we're seeing how to get there. How we can be serious about state-building, for instance."

But for many, the immediate concern isn't state-building—it's protecting vulnerable minority communities. One can't rule out the worst for Syria, a civil war that will set its majority Sunni population against the regime and the Alawite community it's drawn from, as well as against the regime's Christian supporters. There's no way to tell who will come out on top—whether the Muslim Brotherhood is still powerful enough to topple the regime that waged war against it a generation ago, culminating in the siege and slaughter of Hama in 1982.

REUTERS

This scenario—a Sunni Islamist-run Syria—has spooked American and Israeli policymakers from trying to tip the balance of power against the devil they know in Damascus. Perhaps the Sunni urban merchant class will wind up in power, or maybe there will be a series of coups and countercoups, as was the case before Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, came to power in 1970.

Of course, it's also possible that it will be quite a while before anyone governs Syria. If so, the chaos that will prevail there cannot help but touch Lebanon, where Hezbollah will also come under fire from the Sunnis. Iran, says Lokman Slim, will have no choice but to fill that vacuum by intervening directly. "They've invested in Hezbollah for 30 years," says Slim, "so they're going to do anything they can to protect it."

This is the kind of conflict that could not only shift the balance of power in the region, but redraw borders. "The Arab nationalists always complain that the problem with the region is due to the borders drawn by the European powers," says Saghieh, the argument being that they imposed contrived divisions on what would otherwise be a harmonious community. "In reality, the problem is that the borders unified us too much. These borders were all useful to the United States and the Soviets during the Cold War, but now it's something else." Saghieh thinks the Middle East may see a "second wave" of post-Cold War "dislocation," the first wave being the breakup of the Soviet empire in the Eastern bloc.

If the Syrian revolution has begun in earnest, the ruling Alawite regime will have to decide whether to stay in Damascus and fight, or make a run for the Syrian port city of Latakia on the Mediterranean, the de facto capital of the Alawites' escape-hatch rump state. The rest of the region is also in a race: Can it reach the shores of a post-ideological era toward which this wave of Arab uprisings seems to be cresting? Or are the Arabs doomed once again to crash against the sectarian, tribal, and national barriers that have set them against one another for centuries, if not millennia? ♦

Budget in the Balance

The GOP gambles on entitlement reform.

BY STEPHEN F. HAYES

If there is one thing that political strategists, pollsters, and elected officials of both parties have agreed on for decades, it's that entitlement reform is a sure political loser. Social Security is the "third rail"—touch it and you die. Suggest changes to Medicaid and you don't care about the poor. Propose modest reforms to Medicare and you're the target of a well-funded "Mediscare" campaign that ensures your defeat.

No longer.

"People are getting it that these things are unsustainable," says Karl Rove. "For so many people, debt is no longer abstract. It's more concrete. I don't know if it's seeing Greece on TV or what. It's still tough, but it's not the political loser it used to be."

Other influential Republicans go further. They believe that getting serious about entitlement reform can be politically advantageous.

"I think it can be a real winner for Republicans if we handle it the right way," says South Carolina senator Jim DeMint.

Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, agrees. "I think that some in the Democratic party have made the calculated decision that they are hoping that some of us start talking about this so they can use this as a political tool against us. I think it will backfire."

In a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, New Jersey governor Chris Christie said it was time for Republicans to "put up or shut up" on entitlement reforms and argued that tackling the problem—and treating voters as adults—would redound to their credit, just as his own blunt talk has caused his approval ratings in New Jersey to rise. "[I'm] more popular today than I was the day I was elected, and that's in a state that is as Democratic as any state in America for a Republican governor."

Brad Todd, a GOP strategist who helped run Ron Johnson's winning campaign for senator in Wisconsin and works with the National Republican Congressional Committee, says Republicans should be aware of the potential downsides of engaging on entitlement reform but warns that they may not be taken seriously if they fail to lead. "The calculus on entitlement reform has changed," he says. "Republicans are taking some chances by making it an issue. But at the same time, it's incredibly risky for Republicans not to engage on entitlement reform. It's impossible for Republicans to succeed with independent voters without winning on spending issues. And it's impossible for Republicans to win on spending issues without engaging on entitlements."

So have things really changed? We'll soon find out.

On April 5 or 6, Representative Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Budget Committee, will present his 2012 budget proposal. The document will be far more than just a spreadsheet of the government's revenues and expenditures. Ryan has put together a plan intended to serve as the blueprint for conservative governance for decades to come, with the ultimate goal of reversing the unbounded growth in the nation's debt. His budget will include bold

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proposals on tax policy, significant reforms of discretionary spending (including caps), and a major overhaul of the entitlement programs that threaten to drive the United States into insolvency.

It will include target numbers for the funding of Medicare and Medicaid that will require major structural reforms of those programs. Ryan has chosen to leave reform of Social Security for another day, with the hope that President Obama will, at some point, want to join his crusade for broad entitlement reform. Although Ryan's budget will not prescribe a single path to his objectives, instead leaving his colleagues free to fill in the details, Ryan's views on health entitlement reform are well known. In his "Roadmap for America," Ryan has argued that Medicaid should be block-granted to the states and Medicare should be transformed from a guaranteed benefit program to one that provides vouchers to individuals, enabling them to make health care purchases in the private market.

The House Republican embrace of entitlement reform wasn't inevitable. Ryan initially faced resistance from Republican leaders, who were understandably concerned that having their party own entitlement reform would leave them vulnerable to demagoguery. But they permitted Ryan to conduct tutorials on the budget and entitlements with small groups of House freshmen over the past several months. By encouraging the most aggressive deficit hawks to join Ryan's push for reform they were, in effect, recruiting for the other team.

The turning point came when President Obama—after calling repeatedly for an "adult conversation" on entitlements—presented a budget proposal that failed to address the issue in any serious way. Obama was roundly criticized, and not just by Republicans. Editorial pages that are usually friendly to the president ripped his abdication of leadership.

John Boehner, who had previously indicated an openness to entitlement reform, was angry that a president who had lectured Republicans thought he could get away with a transparently unserious approach to entitlements. In a February 13 appearance on *Meet the Press*, Boehner surprised even some members of his own caucus when he announced: "You'll see our budget where, I've got to believe, we're going to deal with the entitlement problem."

Not to be outdone, the following day Majority Leader Eric Cantor reiterated that call, promising that the GOP budget would be a "serious document that will reflect the type of path we feel we should be taking to address the fiscal situation, including addressing entitlement reforms, unlike the president did in his budget." That evening, at a Republican whip meeting, the House majority whip, Kevin McCarthy, formally notified his caucus that the Republican budget would include entitlement reform.

Senate Republicans, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and several other strong conservatives, are more cautious. Their argument is simple. Republicans only have a majority in the House, and real reform cannot happen unless the GOP wins the Senate and the White House in 2012. Getting specific on entitlement reforms now makes that less likely.

"There's more willingness on the House side," says DeMint. "Paul Ryan has shown real leadership on the issue. He's confident in what he believes, and he explains it well. Our leadership is much more reserved. They feel there is no need to get specific when the president isn't specific with us. Some of us feel, individually if not as a conference, that in order to be credible with our budget numbers we have to include entitlement reform."

It's hard to overstate the significance of this moment. By including numbers in the budget that assume real reform, Republicans have obligated themselves to sell voters on a way to meet those objectives. Senators who prefer to keep their heads down and avoid specifics will find it increasingly difficult to do so as reporters ask whether they agree with Ryan's targets and reforms.

The same will be true of presidential candidates. Reporters will ask those questions, and so will voters.

"I think Iowa Republicans are expecting to hear specifics from presidential candidates on entitlement reform," says Matt Strawn, chairman of the Iowa Republican party and host of the first GOP presidential contest next winter. "Caucus-going Republicans are going to insist on seeing the details of entitlement reform proposals to see that you're serious about tackling the largest fiscal issue facing this country. A strong message on that has to be part of a successful presidential campaign."

Polling on the issue suggests that while most voters understand the problem, they remain divided on possible solutions. A Gallup poll from October illustrates the challenge. Asked whether the cost of major entitlements "will create major economic problems," 77 percent of respondents said they would. Just 18 percent said no. But only 31 percent of those surveyed said the government should cut benefits to address the issue, while 66 percent said it shouldn't. Similarly, 42 percent favored raising taxes and 56 percent were opposed.

A poll taken last month by Resurgent Republic, a Republican group, was slightly more encouraging but made clear the challenges Republicans face by taking on the issue. By 54 percent to 39 percent, voters agreed that elected officials should make benefit changes to Social Security now to preserve it for those 55 years old and under. But given a choice between Congressman A, who favors taking Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid "off the table" to avoid "balancing the budget on the backs of our seniors and the poor," and Congressman B, who says we cannot balance the budget without tackling those three programs because they take up more than half of all domestic spending, more voters sided with Congressman A—by 53 percent to 41 percent. (Independents agreed with Congressman A in roughly the same proportions.)

If Republicans want to know how to talk about entitlement reform, their freshman senator from Florida

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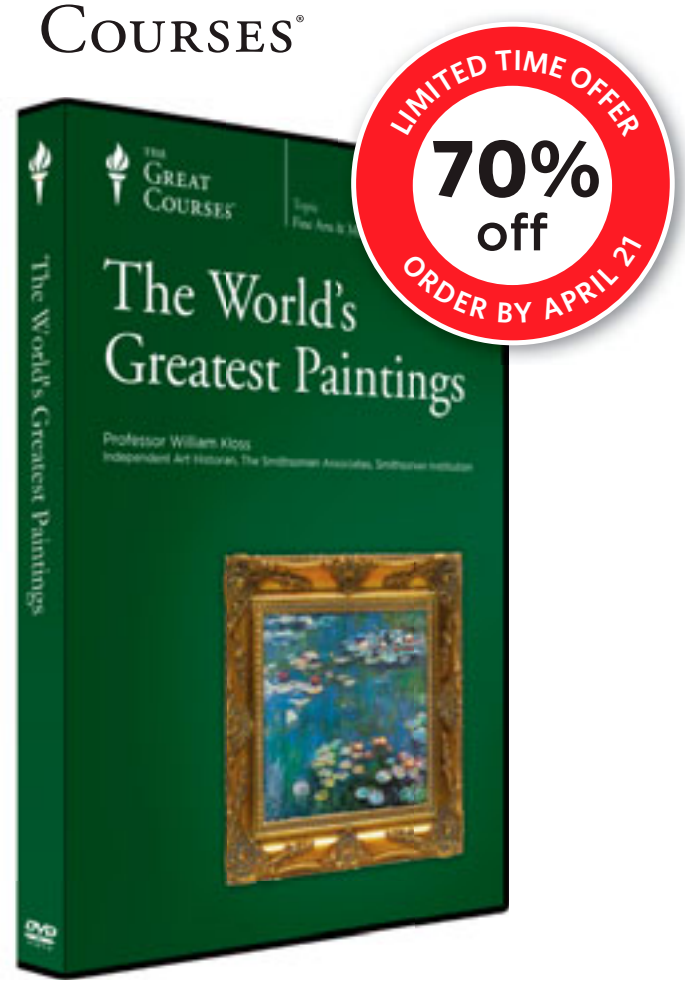

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provides a good model. In a debate on *Fox News Sunday* in March 2010, Marco Rubio explicitly endorsed the bold reforms in Paul Ryan's "Roadmap," including individual Social Security accounts for future retirees. He declared that he would be open to raising the retirement age and making cost-of-living adjustments to Social Security.

"I think all of that has to be on the table, including the way we index increases in cost of living. All of these issues have to be on the table. They have to be options that I would be open to. They are included in the Ryan Roadmap. I think it's the right approach to Social Security reform."

Looking back, the senator says it's clear that those issues didn't hurt him. "The American people aren't little kids. I think if you go to them and explain it in the right way—the American people almost always get it right at the end of the day in terms of how they look at issues," he says. "I didn't campaign on this in the Virgin Islands. I campaigned on this in Florida—in the state that perhaps leads the country in a per capita level of retirees. People understand this."

Rubio won 49 percent of the vote in a three-way race despite his willingness to propose specific entitlement reforms—or perhaps because of it. Rubio campaign strategist Todd Harris agrees. "Charlie Crist attacked us shamelessly on Social Security with millions in negative ads, but even after all that, our tracking showed that voters trusted Marco to protect Social Security more than Crist."

"In this environment voters are looking for authenticity and truth tellers," Harris continues. "Straight talk about Social Security can actually work like a candidate character reference. Voters know if you are willing to tell them the hard truth about entitlements, they can probably believe you on everything else too, because no one lies about the easy stuff."

Harris isn't saying that every Republican should run on entitlement reform; he appreciates the risk. Rubio too says he understands the reluctance of some of his colleagues to go all-in on entitlement reform. But given the potential political upside of dealing with entitlements—and the certain economic ruin of failing to do so—Rubio believes the time to act is now.

"What is politics about at the end of the day? Is this a sport or is this a job? If this is a sport, then all we should care about is winning the election. But this is a job. Our job is to solve problems."

He continues: "There's no guarantees in any of this. All I can tell you is that if things continue the way they are, six years from now when I'm up for reelection and others in my class are up for reelection, I think we're all going to be gone if we don't begin to solve these problems, because the issue America will face by then will be unimaginable."

Indeed. ◆

Pulling the Trigger

California parents take control of schools—and the blob fights back. BY MICHAEL WARREN

How bad is McKinley Elementary School in Compton, California? Bad enough that in late 2010, over half its students' parents petitioned the district to transform their inner city public school into a privately operated, publicly funded charter school.

The Parent Empowerment Act, known colloquially as the "parent trigger" law, was enacted in California in 2010 and provides several ways of making drastic changes to low-performing schools. If the parents or guardians of at least 50 percent of the students sign petitions, they can "trigger" a major change, forcing the school to hire new faculty, hire a new principal, close the school entirely, or convert it into a charter school. McKinley parents were the first to take advantage of the new law. Since filing their petitions in December, however, they have met stiff opposition from the district.

Theresa Theus, an unemployed single mother, says she knew from the beginning she didn't want her child to go to kindergarten at McKinley. Students there, she says, are undisciplined. The school doesn't seem to enforce curriculum standards across grade levels, so many students are not learning at the appropriate level.

"Why should [my child] be held back?" Theus asks in a phone interview. Her older son dropped out in his teens, and she says she doesn't want the same fate for her five-year-old daughter. Says Theus, "I'm not going to let this child be a failure."

It isn't just parents like Theus who recognize how terrible McKinley is. The school ranks 22nd out of 24 elementary schools in the Compton Unified School District, according to California's 2009 index of academic performance, which also places the school in the lowest decile of elementary schools in the state. And last year, an independent audit concluded that across the district too much focus was placed on "adult issues" at the expense of "student issues" and that teachers, administrators, and other staff are "not held accountable for their work."

The parents decided they'd had enough. On December 7, parents and guardians representing 61 percent of McKinley students petitioned the district to transfer the operation of the school to Celerity Educational Group, a charter operator highly regarded in the Los Angeles area.

But the district was unwilling to give in without a fight. Two days after the petitions were filed, it hastily convened a "PTA meeting" at McKinley

Michael Warren is an editorial assistant at The Weekly Standard.

where officials "encouraged" parents to rescind their signatures.

The intimidation didn't stop there. Parents who had signed petitions reported that some teachers were harassing their children at school. And one teacher posted a message on an Internet forum addressed to one of the parents leading the drive: "Ms. Hernandez, you will regret having supported Celerity when your child is rejected by them."

Since then, the parents have been locked in a legal battle with the district over the validity of the petitions. The district's first ploy was to "verify" the signatures—not required by the regulations—by asking every signatory to provide an official photo ID, a conveniently impossible task for many of McKinley's illegal immigrant parents.

In addition, the district claimed that many of the petitions "did not conform to the official state content standards and requirements," though the alleged errors were either inconsequential, like the lack of a proper header, or nonexistent (the district incorrectly claimed the petition lacked the required "affirmation" statement). Because of these "insufficiencies," the school district determined in late March that it could not verify any of the petitions.

"This is a power game," says Linda Serrato of Parent Revolution, a nonprofit school choice group supporting the McKinley families. "It's about maintaining the status quo."

So far, though, the parents and their pro bono legal team have been successful in overcoming the obstacles the school district has erected. The ID verification process has been stopped by a temporary restraining order, and an independent third party is expected soon to determine whether or not enough petitions meet statutory standards.

McKinley is hardly the first would-be charter school to face opposition. In 2009, Birmingham High School in neighboring Los Angeles, for instance, won a lengthy battle to convert itself into a charter school, over the vociferous objections of a powerful teachers' union. The unions are generally hostile to charter schools, since a charter often exempts the school from collective bargaining agreements.

Teachers' unions and a hostile district may be the least of the McKinley parents' problems, though. Governor Jerry Brown recently replaced most of the state board of education with new members, including a former lobbyist for the California Teachers Association, which had fought the parent-trigger bill. The law has been operating under "emergency regulations" since it was enacted last year, and the new board has delayed a vote on permanent regulations until late April.

That has school choice advocates worried the board could make the trigger process even more difficult for parents who want to improve their schools. As McKinley shows, the process is already difficult enough. ♦

Michelle's Machine

Churches get roped into the first lady's obesity crusade. BY MEGHAN CLYNE

Sometimes the most important message of a speech is communicated by the atmospherics—timing, audience, venue. So it's worth noting that, to mark the first anniversary of her *Let's Move!* campaign against childhood obesity in February, First Lady Michelle Obama spoke not at a school or a kids' recreational facility but at the North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia.

At first glance, celebrating with an evangelical Christian congregation might not be the obvious way to highlight the White House's anti-obesity efforts. But the choice is part of a broader push by the Obama administration to get churches on board with the first lady's health agenda.

Working through the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and its satellites at various cabinet agencies, the administration launched the "Let's Move Faith and Communities" initiative in November. Since then, the administration's faith-based offices have been busily recruiting converts for the nutrition crusade. The executive director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Joshua DuBois, has been a cheerleader for *Let's Move!* on the office's blog. The director of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Max Finberg, has joined with John Kelly—the strategic adviser for faith-based and neighborhood partnerships at the Corporation for National and Community Service (a federal agency)—to launch the National Anti-Hunger and Opportunity Corps. The organization is sending new AmeriCorps volunteers to urban and rural areas across the country, where they will work with churches and community groups to sign people up for food stamps.

The centerpiece of the effort is the 52-page "Let's Move! Toolkit for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Organizations," published by the faith-based office at the Department of Health and Human Services. Much of what the toolkit recommends is innocuous—encouraging churches to host kids' intramural sports leagues, for instance. But several sections illustrate the Obamas' strange understanding of the role of religious communities in America and suggest how, under this president, faith-based offices at the White House and in the agencies have changed their mission and purview.

Preaching that old-time, anti-obesity gospel

Some of the proposals seem oddly detached from the actual priorities and challenges of religious congregations. Churches are given detailed instructions for starting community gardens (including the reminder that "It is not a community garden without a COMMUNITY!"). Congregations are encouraged to form "motivational groups" to help members with such activities as "using a shopping list" and to "teach others about preserving local food by organizing canning and preserving sessions." Religious leaders are prodded to work with schools to "create a wellness club for teachers with volunteer instructors from the congregation" and to "help your local school install a salad bar in its cafeteria."

Most worrisome, though, are the administration's efforts to have congregations place themselves in the service of government as recruiters for the welfare state. Congregations are told to "encourage eligible families to enroll their children in [government-subsidized] school meal programs"; if organizations operate day-care or after-school programs, they are advised to pursue reimbursement for meals and snacks through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (a federally funded, state-administered welfare program). Places of worship are asked to serve as feeding sites for the Summer Food Service Program—another federally funded, state-run welfare project. Sections on breastfeeding and supporting pregnant women and new mothers tell churches to "promote participation" in the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

The toolkit's big sell is getting faith-based groups to spread the good news about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. When they sponsor a farmers' market at their place of worship, congregations are told to "advocate for hosts to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits." Churches are also encouraged to:

> Form an outreach group with a goal of helping eligible congregants sign up for SNAP. Train staff and volunteers at your congregation or organization with basic information about SNAP and how to apply. Have an information table before and after

AP / JOHN AMIS

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> services where volunteers help eligible congregants apply for SNAP. Your local SNAP office can partner with you and help provide training and materials. . . . Consider displaying SNAP posters, flyers, magnets, and other materials in your place of worship or organization. . . . Put SNAP information in all bulletins, newsletters, and other print and electronic items shared with the congregation or community. If your organization manages a food pantry, include SNAP information with food that you distribute. . . . Give out recipe cards that also include information about SNAP.

This approach is a marked departure from the original purpose of the White House faith-based initiative. Launched at the outset of President George W. Bush's first term, the initiative was largely intended to allow religious entities to compete on an equal footing with secular ones for grants to deliver social services. When it came to treating addicts, rehabilitating prisoners, mentoring children, sheltering the homeless, and, yes, feeding the hungry, the Bush administration argued that faith-based organizations often had better records of efficiency and compassion than government programs. But rather than reducing the public's dependence on government-run programs by empowering faith-based organizations, this White House seems to view churches, synagogues, and so on as tools to *increase* reliance on programs designed in Washington.

"They're turning this on its head," said Rev. Richard Land, who handles public policy for the Southern Baptist Convention. The wisdom of the original faith-based initiative—about which he was initially skeptical, Land explains—was "to have people who live in a zip code making the decisions about what are the best ways to alleviate the problem in that zip code," rather than being pushed to follow some federal initiative. Under the Obama administration, Land said, "the White House says what your priorities should be." He added, "If Bush had proposed what Obama has proposed, they would have been putting Prozac in the water at the ACLU."

Requests for on-the-record comment from the faith-based office at the Department of Health and Human Services brought no response. But one defender of the Obamas' plan—New York state senator Rubén Díaz Sr., a Democrat from the South Bronx and an evangelical pastor—says that clergy have an obligation to use their influence to do "anything that will benefit the lives of our people," including combating childhood obesity. Though Díaz says he doesn't "want this to be used as a political platform," he believes "churches are better than anybody to do these things."

But even if Díaz is right, is the Obamas' approach the best way to involve churches in the fight against childhood obesity and poor nutrition? After all, any group of people can organize an exercise club, host a farmers' market, or teach a cooking class. And government already spends millions of dollars every year just getting people

signed up for welfare benefits. Having churches do this work makes sense only if one views them as a particularly effective instrument of community organizing—as the Obamas seem to.

This view, however, fails to recognize what is so powerful about houses of worship and to understand their unique role in the lives of the faithful and the nation. Churches—unlike secular civic groups or government programs—speak to Americans about temptation and temperance, sin and redemption, repentance and love. Without apology, the various faiths and denominations, each in its own way, present to their followers a coherent vision of a well-ordered life—whether they focus on character, will power, and self-discipline or on God's grace as the way to achieve it. Over thousands of years, religious institutions have held out spiritual renewal as the predicate to turning lives around; they alone can preach a message of personal transformation.

And this, more than any sustainable garden, is what's required to keep American kids at a healthy weight. Many of the places where childhood obesity is most prevalent—poor urban neighborhoods, African-American and Hispanic communities—are also those that have been most devastated by the breakdown of the family. The behavior patterns that contribute to childhood obesity—lack of supervision, too many meals eaten outside the home, a dearth of physical activity—are related to a shortage of adult attention and investment in children's health and good habits. The evidence suggests that keeping families intact and having parents take more responsibility for their children are beneficial to children's health.

If the Obamas really want to curb childhood obesity, perhaps they ought to use their platform to support some of the nonsectarian messages that faith-based institutions promote—taking responsibility for one's own life and the lives of one's children, keeping families intact—rather than trying to turn churches into sign-up centers for welfare programs and mouthpieces for the first lady's organic food agenda. ♦

All Benefits, No Costs

The false promises of Obama's regulators.

BY IKE BRANNON & SAM BATKINS

Many companies complain that the Obama administration has increased the cost of doing business by issuing loads of new regulations. The administration does not deny being aggressive in issuing new rules or that compliance costs may ultimately total in the billions of dollars. Instead, it has rejected logic and common sense and argues that increasing the costs of doing business benefits the economy. The chain of reasoning by which it reaches this conclusion is breathtakingly audacious, not to say absurd.

Notice the stimulative effect.

When economists talk about the cost of a regulation, they typically refer to how much businesses have to spend to comply with the rules, as well as to the government's cost to administer and enforce those rules. The benefits of a regulation are what society gains from the regulations—such as a cleaner environment or a safer workplace.

Quantifying the costs and benefits is anything but straightforward. For example, the ostensible benefits of a rule intended to limit emissions from all-terrain vehicles might be a reduction in premature deaths due to respiratory disease as well as fewer hospital admissions and workplace absences and a general improvement in the quality of life.

The rule would increase costs by forcing companies that make all-terrain vehicles to purchase emission-mitigation equipment that may also require expensive engineering changes to avoid compromising performance or durability. Estimating the cost involved in such a change, as well as quantifying the benefits from the cleaner environment, can be incredibly difficult.

The complexity means that there is a lot of leeway to justify new regulations from a cost-benefit perspective, which this administration has been quite aggressive in exploiting. This is not new—the Clinton administration tortured the estimates of costs and benefits to justify regulations as well—but the Obama administration has taken the concept of obfuscation to an entirely new level by conflating what constitutes a cost and what constitutes a benefit.

For instance, the additional workers that businesses must hire to comply with a new regulation are typically chalked up as a *cost* in a straightforward economic analysis.

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This administration, however, suggests that such hiring, although it increases the cost of doing business, is actually a "stimulative effect" that *benefits* society.

In its recently proposed regulation governing waste incinerators, the Environmental Protection Agency argues that "an increase in labor demand due to regulation may have a stimulative effect that results in a net increase in overall employment." The EPA didn't end the nonsense there, going on to opine that "regulated firms demand labor workers to operate and maintain pollution controls within those firms." This is not an isolated example: In its industrial boiler analysis, the EPA wrote that "environmental regulations create employment in many basic industries."

According to this bureaucratic ethos, purchasing equipment mandated by the government can be "job creating during the period before firms must comply with the rule." Under the EPA's logic, running an industry out of business could also be a boon for bankruptcy lawyers, creating growth in the struggling legal sector.

Arguing that onerous new regulations create jobs is nonsense, of course. If the government makes a business spend more money, that is a *cost*. The government may or may not have a good reason to make them spend that money. Regardless, what the businesses—and our economy—spend to comply diverts people and capital from other productive uses. To suggest that this is somehow a benefit is duplicitous.

A former colleague now working for a U.S.-based multinational firm just returned from his company's quarterly meeting where they analyze potential investments around the globe. He said that the biggest change in these meetings in the last four years is that U.S. investments now come with geopolitical risk, thanks to the potential impact of the expanding public debt and the threat of more onerous regulations.

It's hard to see this changing under the current administration. ♦

NEWSCOM

A Really Inconvenient Truth

Yes, China is a threat.

BY JOSEPH A. BOSCO

The People's Liberation Army shows off its missiles in Beijing.

Did James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, utter an inconvenient truth last month when he told the Senate Armed Services Committee that China presents the greatest "mortal threat" to the United States?

Several committee members were aghast at Clapper's observation that China and Russia have the actual ability and the potential intention to attack the continental United States with nuclear weapons.

Asked whether any country intended to pose such a threat to the United States, he responded that China did. The stunned senators pressed the DNI to soften his stark judgments and dispel any impression that either China or Russia presently contemplates such drastic action. After a confusing colloquy, Clapper gave ground and said he was describing only those countries' capabilities, not their intentions, barely mollifying the agitated committee members.

But his initial statement clearly meant that he was weighing both capabilities and intent, and his judgment stands up to analysis.

Russia easily surpasses China in both the number and range of ballistic missiles that can reach any part of the continental United States. China's far smaller arsenal can target only the U.S. West Coast.

Nevertheless, despite Russia's clear superiority in strategic nuclear capabilities, the DNI said he ranked China as the greater threat because Washington has a nuclear arms treaty with Moscow. But the New START agreement does not significantly reduce the number of

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Russian weapons or the Russian threat.

Why, then, does the DNI fear China more than he does Russia? One reason might be the fact that China keeps building up its own nuclear stockpile even as the United States and Russia stabilize or reduce theirs. That actually says as much about the countries' respective intentions as it does about capabilities. And it was the combination of Chinese intentions and capabilities that Clapper found so worrisome before the senatorial browbeating changed his answer.

There is good reason for the DNI's concern. In 1995, when China fired missiles toward Taiwan to protest a U.S. visit by Taiwan's president, the United States sent aircraft carriers to the region. Major General Xiong Guangkai of the People's Liberation Army warned Washington to stay out of the dispute because China could use nuclear weapons and "you care more about Los Angeles than you do about Taipei."

Discussing a possible Taiwan conflict in 2005, Major General Zhu Chenghu escalated the message of China's nuclear threat: "The Americans will have to be prepared that hundreds of cities will be destroyed by the Chinese."

Western experts have dismissed those apocalyptic statements as mere military bluster—as if any Chinese general were free to say such things without the Communist regime's authorization. Not only were the generals not sacked, they were promoted.

By contrast, when Russian and American interests collided in 2008 as the United States sent aid to Georgia after the Russian invasion, Moscow did not threaten a nuclear attack on New York. (But it did move short-range ballistic missiles closer to Western Europe, presumably brandishing a "mortal threat" against Paris, Rome, and Warsaw.)

This is an uncomfortable subject for senators (and private citizens) to contemplate. But when the Senate committee confirmed Clapper as director last year, they said they expected him to provide honest assessments of the world untainted by political considerations. That is what he was doing at the hearing, not only on China but also when he predicted that Qaddafi would prevail in Libya despite President Obama's statement that the dictator must leave.

Clapper's comments and state of mind have been the subject of much public comment. But the exchange revealed a lot about the senators' own mindset regarding China's increasingly aggressive behavior and where it could lead—i.e., don't talk about it and maybe it will go away.

As for the president's reaction, the White House issued this statement: "Clearly China and Russia do not represent our biggest adversaries in the world today." Given the accuracy so far of the DNI's prediction about Qaddafi's survival, the president would be well advised to take very seriously his assessment of China's intentions.

Indeed, prior to international intervention, the success of Qaddafi's bloody crackdown when less brutal regimes in Tunisia and Egypt fell must have been vindication for the perpetrators of the Tiananmen massacre and a guide to Beijing's future actions.

Calls by senators and others for Clapper's resignation perhaps reflect the cumulative effect of his earlier controversial comments on terrorism. As one senator put it, "three strikes and you're out."

But if Clapper's career ends abruptly, it may be more because he has touched the third rail of American foreign policy—the growing possibility of military conflict with Communist China. ♦

Bibi's Choice

How Israel should handle pressure for a Palestinian state

By Elliott Abrams

Jerusalem

With the Great Revolt of 2011 shaking Arab capitals, Israel briefly seemed a Middle Eastern Switzerland when March began. There were no demonstrations, there was no dictator to protest, and there had been three years without terror. Gone were the once omnipresent security guards at restaurants, challenging you before you entered with a careful look and the question "Do you have a weapon?" Then on March 11, terrorists savagely murdered five members of a family in the settlement of Itamar, and on March 24, a Palestinian bomber brought back the old days: one dead, dozens wounded at a bus stop in Jerusalem. Israel's short vacation from history had ended.

That vacation had been partial, to be sure. Hamas and other terrorist groups had periodically lobbed rockets and mortars from Gaza into Israel, though here too the pace and range of the shots was suddenly climbing. And no doubt many terrorist attacks were foiled by steady police work. But the confrontation with the Palestinians was stalled, frozen, during the two Obama years. The leader of the PLO, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, has spent these years touring the world, avoiding any serious engagement with Israel. He has been a happy man: Travel is less stressful than the difficult work of statebuilding, which is left to Prime Minister Salam Fayyad; the lack of negotiations means Abbas avoids the controversial compromises a genuine negotiation would entail; and his refusal to negotiate has been arranged and defended by the Obama Doctrine that "settlement activity" is the true obstacle to Middle East peace. For it has been American policy since January 20, 2009, that Palestinians need not come to the table unless there is a 100 percent Israeli construction freeze in Jerusalem and the settlements.

The Obama administration abandoned that doctrine last November, and its champion, George Mitchell, ever since has been an invisible man. No policy has been proposed by the White House to replace its calamitous belief in the construction freeze delusion, at least not yet. But Israelis are sure something is around the corner and are debating whether to wait—or to act.

They fear two developments. The first is a Quartet Plan: a statement by the United States, the United Nations, Russia, and the European Union via the Middle East Quartet that proposes the outline of a final status arrangement. The Israeli nightmare has the leading nations of the world demanding terms about borders, security, and Jerusalem with which Israel cannot live—and then finding Israel further isolated and demonized. The EU is leading this Quartet effort, but every Israeli official with whom I spoke said the United States is waving the Europeans on and hiding behind them.

The second potential disaster is a Palestinian effort at the U.N. General Assembly in September, where the "State of Palestine" would be recognized on "1967 borders" and Israel's presence in the West Bank would become the basis for a further expansion of boycotts, demonstrations, and delegitimization campaigns. These campaigns are well underway and especially in Western Europe would gain great strength from such U.N. action, it is argued.

Now, these fears may not pan out. What if the Quartet proposes new Israeli-Palestinian negotiations based on its outline, but the Palestinians—true to the Obama Doctrine of 2009-2010—yet again refuse to come to the table unless there is a total construction freeze? Palestinian intransigence would deliver Israel from its dilemma. European diplomats claim that Abbas has sworn he will negotiate if the Quartet Plan is sufficiently generous, a clever position that maximizes European incentives to buy his cooperation with language that leans further and further toward Palestinian demands. But unless and until the Quartet acts, no one can know for sure.

Israel may also be saved by moves toward "Palestinian unity," meaning the replacement of the Fayyad cabinet with one consisting of technocrats who represent both Fatah and Hamas. Under the terms that have been discussed, security in the West Bank would remain exclusively in the hands of the PA security forces, while Gaza would remain under Hamas. Such an arrangement could benefit the PA because it would regain a presence in all the nonsecurity ministries in Gaza and begin to

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reestablish itself there. But the American relationship with the PA relies on the absence of Hamas from the government and the presence of an honest and effective prime minister in Fayyad. A Hamas role will raise immediate legal issues under our antiterrorism laws as well as political problems: Will the White House really demand that Israel negotiate with a coalition that includes terrorist groups? Will Congress, and even European and Arab aid donors, fork over cash if Fayyad is not there to guarantee that it will not be stolen?

Here again the outcome is uncertain. Under the Palestinian Basic Law, Fayyad's time to form a new cabinet has already run out, been extended, and run out again, and Abbas must now ask someone else to attempt to form a government. But the Basic Law has been ignored a thousand times and may be again, and Abbas has good reason to worry about any kind of unity government—for if there is unity and cooperation, what is the excuse for delaying parliamentary and presidential elections, both of which appear to inspire no enthusiasm among Abbas and his old cronies in the Fatah party?

So on the international scene and within Palestinian politics, Israel cannot be entirely sure what it will soon face. Much more important, no one can say with assurance where things are heading in Cairo, Amman, Beirut—or now even Damascus. Many Israeli officials therefore counsel waiting, or "watchful waiting," or "letting the dust settle," or a dozen other terms that all mean "Israel should do nothing." This is hardly a moment for bold steps, they argue.

For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the problem of predicting in whose hands the key Arab states (and their armies) will be tomorrow morning is compounded by politics in Jerusalem and Washington. In Jerusalem, any bold move could destroy his coalition, leading Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party to bolt. Lieberman may want to do so soon anyway, wishing to act before his expected indictment this year on a variety of financial charges. Numerically, those Knesset votes could be replaced by the greater number of seats (28 versus 15 for Lieberman) held by the Kadima party, a natural partner for Likud should Netanyahu decide on some initiative, but most Israeli observers think this a doubtful outcome. Netanyahu and Kadima leader Tzipi Livni have been attacking each other regularly in the past year, so personal relations are shot. And with Netanyahu now two years into his term, Livni may wonder why she should rescue him and be his foreign minister when in another year she might be his successor as prime minister instead. Some analysts argue that if Netanyahu undertook a big initiative Livni would have to support it, perhaps from outside the government: She could say she would not use votes of confidence to bring him down as long as some agreed plan was under way. But it doesn't take a genius to see why Netanyahu fears being in that position, his political fate dependent on a party and a person—even if she is serving as his foreign minister—itching for his collapse. So Netanyahu is thinking. In early March his spokesmen talked of a major speech soon, perhaps delivered in Washington, but then backed away from the plan. A big, bold step is attractive to Netanyahu, but not one that turns out to be politically suicidal.

"Bibi is torn," one adviser to the Israeli government told me. "He understands the camp saying the momentum is strongly against Israel now, saying U.N. action to recognize a Palestinian state against Israel's wishes could be dangerous. He understands pressure will grow, isolation may grow, boycotts in Europe may grow. He knows we could be a lot worse off in a year than we are now. But he knows what he wants to prevent, not what to do to prevent it. He has no real policy. He's just like Obama."

And Obama is a critical factor here. Entirely missing is a relationship of confidence between the United States and Israel that might foster boldness or risk-taking. In a situation in late 2003 where negotiations were dead in the water and diplomatic initiatives he viewed as dangerous were surfacing, Ariel Sharon acted: He decided to get out of Gaza. But in reaching and implementing that decision he had the full support of George W. Bush, with whom he carefully negotiated a series of supportive statements and pledges.

Sharon decided to act without an agreement with the Palestinians: "I will take these new steps as unilateral steps; I don't want to be in their hands," he told me at the time. The theory was simple: If there is no real negotiating partner, try to shape Israel's future yourself. Don't wait, and don't limit yourself to what the Palestinians will agree to right now. But Sharon asked Bush for what he called "ideological compensation" to make up for the lack of actual compensation from the Palestinians for his moves. There would be no peace treaty, no Palestinian concessions, no abandonment of claims by the PLO; instead there was Bush's endorsement of several critical Israeli positions in his April 14, 2004, letter to Sharon. There Bush addressed both the refugee and settlement issues. He stated that Palestinian refugees had no "right of return" to Israel and would have to find a future and a solution in the eventual state of Palestine, and he argued that a return to the 1949 armistice lines—a term he used in preference to "1967 borders"—was unrealistic given the existence of the major settlement blocks. To Sharon these statements by the president of the United States were critical gains for Israel, and they were soon endorsed by resolutions in both houses of Congress.

But those statements have been forgotten and abandoned

by the United States, treated by the Obama administration as if they were some kind of private gesture by Bush in a personal note to Sharon. This devaluation of solemn pledges among allies has been a huge Obama mistake, for it undermines the value not only of past American pledges but of his own future words as well and makes Israel far less likely to take risks for peace.

So Netanyahu faces a series of difficult choices with few safety nets in view. Old partners like Mubarak are gone; domestic politics presents the usual Israeli field of battle (President Bush once described the Knesset as a "shark tank"); and the Obama administration is universally viewed in Israel as unsympathetic and unhelpful. Netanyahu can be forgiven for hesitating, hoping that some Palestinian error will save him or that he will find a magic solution that will meet all his needs, avoid risks, preserve his coalition, and escape international censure.

But Israel has not survived into 2011 by such a posture, and it should act—not wait for the EU, the U.N., the Palestinians, or the Americans. If there is a Quartet plan, Israel should accept it unless it is hopelessly and irredeemably biased and should demand immediate negotiations with the Palestinians—not because they will succeed but as a means of shifting pressure away from Israel. Several Israeli officials told me they feared the Quartet would endorse "1967 borders," or "1967 borders with agreed swaps," at least as a basis for negotiations. It is impossible that the Quartet would endorse "1967 borders," for Americans and even the Europeans understand this would put the Western Wall inside Palestine, an absurd result. The swaps formula is manageable: Israel should reply to it by saying, "Okay, then we all agree, just as President Bush said in 2004 there will be no return to the 1949 Armistice lines. We are glad to see the Quartet acknowledging this basic truth."

But Israel should not be frozen in fear of a Palestinian declaration of independence or recognition at the U.N. and should in fact head it off. Perhaps the next country to recognize an independent Palestine should be Israel.

This is, after all, a declared Israeli policy goal. As early as June 2003, Sharon said it at the Aqaba Summit: "Israel, like others, has lent its strong support for President Bush's vision . . . of two states—Israel and a Palestinian state—living side by side in peace and security. . . . It is in Israel's interest not to govern the Palestinians but for the Palestinians to govern themselves in their own state." His successors Olmert and Netanyahu have also endorsed this outcome. It is obvious that Israeli recognition would immediately devalue that Palestinian diplomatic campaign aimed at racking up additional endorsements each week, and could allow Israel to help define what "recognition" means anyway. For example, does Israel "recognize" Syria, a regime with which it has been in a state of war since the day it came into existence? "Recognizing" that Syria exists as a state eliminates none of the disputes between Israel and Syria. Many of the countries that have "recognized" Palestine have used different verbal formulas in doing so and mean different things by them, and Israel's own formula would make that fact even clearer and therefore more confusing.

Israel should say that with this new state of Palestine it has a million practical issues to discuss, beginning with grave border disputes but continuing from customs issues to the management of the Allenby Bridge to possible use of Mediterranean ports. Personal status issues are dangerous and complex: What is the situation of Israelis in areas the state of Palestine views as its own? Is it the Palestinian position that the new state must be *Judenrein*, a position President Abbas has repeatedly taken? Israel should immediately challenge that position in every possible forum, for it is an indefensible racist view that the EU for one will have to denounce. Israel should demand immediate negotiations on all these complex matters, and remind the world that the dozens of statements "recognizing a Palestinian state" actually do nothing to advance the parties toward the resolution of the issues they face. In fact, commencement of practical negotiations on some of these issues between Israel and "Palestine" might lessen their appeal as great causes and turn them from emotional claims into tedious and detailed bargaining positions.

But this is diplomatic gamesmanship to combat diplomatic gamesmanship. Protecting Israel's interests may start with clever diplomacy but cannot end there. If Israelis

Rescue workers after the bomb attack at a Jerusalem bus stop, March 23

AP

are convinced they must separate from Palestinians, who should "govern themselves in their own state," they should begin to change the pattern of their presence in the West Bank. There is a wide consensus in Israel that separation from the Palestinians is right, and safer, and in Israel's long-run interest: Since the second intifada the dream of living together in peace has been dead, but the goal of living apart in peace is not. Yet current Israeli policy treats separation as a prize the Palestinians must win through concessions at the negotiating table, as if it were in the Palestinians' interest but not Israel's. That is a self-defeating stance, incurring growing penalties in international isolation and condemnation while moving Israel no closer to its desired goal. Israel should start to disentangle itself from governing the West Bank and the Arabs who live in it, and if this cannot be achieved through negotiations with the Palestinians it should be achieved through Israeli-designed unilateral steps that maximize Israeli security interests. One example: passage in the Knesset of a compensation law buying the home of any settler who wishes voluntarily to move back behind the security fence, whether to Green Line Israel or a major settlement. Another: turning additional areas within the West Bank over to the PA for normal daily governance. Such moves, which signal an intention to change the ultimate pattern of Israeli settlement in the West Bank, do not require abandoning the IDF's security role there. Nor do they require or accept a total settlement freeze, which would be counterproductive: Whatever the wisdom of a freeze in outlying settlements that will eventually become part of Palestine, to freeze construction in the major blocs that will remain parts of Israel is to send exactly the wrong message.

Current Israeli policy treats separation as a prize the Palestinians must win through concessions at the negotiating table, as if it were in the Palestinians' interest but not Israel's.

Israeli officials should explain the policy to the Obama administration and the Europeans (among whom some consequential leaders, like German chancellor Angela Merkel, are still friendly to Israel): It looks like final status negotiations are not on, and anyway they may take forever or may fail. So Israel will act, trying to shape a better future for itself without harming the Palestinians. We won't wait for them, but nothing we are doing closes off possibilities for future agreements. In fact, reaching those agreements will become easier over time, not harder, if Israel begins to act now. Israel should use as its set of principles the Bush letter of April 14, 2004, in essence demanding that the United States adhere to pledges made about the key issues. No "right of return" for Palestinian "refugees" except to the new state of Palestine; secure and defensible borders for Israel; no full return to the 1949 lines, given the new realities on the ground; final borders to be mutually agreed; Israel as a Jewish democratic state. But Netanyahu will have to act as well as speak, telling both Israelis and foreigners what he will do to begin to shape an outcome where there are no Israelis in over 90 percent of the West Bank. He can maximize the ability of Israel's friends and supporters, not least in this country, to support Israel if he acts with boldness and principle to guarantee the future safety of the Jewish state.

Netanyahu will also need to explain that when acts of terror emerge from the West Bank they will evoke the air and land responses needed to keep Israel safe and keep those territories from terrorist control. In the long run, it is difficult to see a secure Palestine without some link to Jordan, though it may take years to emerge. Whether that is in the end a "dual monarchy" arrangement—one king, two parliaments, two prime ministers, with the formal creation of a Jordanian-Palestinian entity—or a security deal allowing for a significant Jordanian role in trilateral security arrangements among Palestine, Israel, and the Hashemite Kingdom, remains to be seen, but no such options should be discarded.

Netanyahu, who quit his position of finance minister under Ariel Sharon when Sharon began the disengagement from Gaza, now finds himself in a remarkably similar spot. In addition to the coalition troubles he faces, he has a very tough political problem within Likud. Moreover, he must face the settler lobby and decide whether to challenge it now. He should, for at bottom he has a message that the vast majority of Israelis and indeed the vast majority of settlers accept: that the security of the State of Israel is paramount. Zionism aims at a Jewish democratic state, which in turn requires a territory where Jews are the majority. That was the logic of partition in 1948, and it remains the logic behind separation from the West Bank and the 2.5 million Palestinians who live there. Zionism also taught self-reliance, acting to create facts rather than relying on luck or fate or someone else's benevolence to do the job.

The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity, Abba Eban famously said, and their political division and terrorist leaders may save Israel yet again from extremely difficult decisions. But most Israelis understand that relying on Palestinian errors to protect themselves is dangerous: Israel cannot win itself a secure future by watching and waiting and avoiding action. Israel's future requires separation from the Palestinians, and neither the upheavals in Arab capitals nor the presence in Washington of the least friendly president in decades changes that. ♦

The U.N. Effect

Obama's quest for 'international legitimacy' makes for a dishonest Libya policy

By Tod Lindberg

For those who care about "international legitimacy," the gold standard is a United Nations Security Council resolution. The Obama foreign policy team as a whole has been obsessed with legitimacy since the White House was merely a gleam in the eye of the junior senator from Illinois. Indeed, the administration's sense of *amour propre* is grounded in no small measure in feelings of superiority about its care for and cultivation of legitimacy, especially in contrast with its cowboy-unilateralist predecessor. So it is that Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973 form the backdrop for our current adventures in Libya.

It would take a near-invincible skepticism about the utility of the United Nations in international politics to deny that these resolutions have had value for the United States in organizing the response to Muammar Qaddafi's intention to hold on in Libya at all costs. The administration sought and supported them, and apparently got the wording it wanted. Under U.N. auspices, the buy-in among allies and even some Arab countries (following an Arab League request for a no-fly zone) was substantially greater than it would otherwise likely have been, even though the cost in delay was nearly fatal to the Libyan rebels. And the United States has certainly been subject to much less international criticism than it would have been in their absence.

In the view of both supporters and critics, this time it's not neoconservative unilateralism marching the United States off to war. It's liberal internationalism that is on the prowl, both in terms of substance—a humanitarian mission to protect civilians—and in terms of form, namely, through the U.N.

It is anything but clear what liberal internationalists are going to think of themselves in the morning, especially if this project gets messy, as it very likely will. What should be clear by now, however, is that "international legitimacy" doesn't ever come cost-free to the United States. On the contrary, the combination of working through the U.N. and truly believing in its legitimizing powers seriously strains foreign policymaking in the American grain.

The reason is that foreign policymaking in the United States, more so than in most other democratic countries, is based to a very remarkable degree on a principle of saying what you mean and meaning what you say. That's true not only with regard to the way policy develops inside an administration but also for that administration's ability to explain policy choices to the American people and cultivate their support, as well as for its ability to conduct diplomacy.

From the beginning of the Libyan rebellion, the administration as a whole and the president in particular have seemed singularly vague and self-contradictory about what our policy is and what we are prepared to do to pursue it. Some of that is surely the result of internal uncertainty and division. But not all. It's also a product of a U.N. framework that makes candor all but impossible.

If you want a sense of how ubiquitous the "say what you mean, mean what you say" element of American foreign policy is, you need look no further than the massive WikiLeaks dump of internal State Department cables. It's true that the documents were never intended for public release, and that they offer candid appraisals of foreign officials and public figures of a sort no government would proffer aloud. But the real WikiLeaks story is not what the official secrecy concealed. It's that operating in an environment of official secrecy and writing for a closed community of secret-sharers, Foreign Service officers made assessments and proffered judgments that were entirely consistent with stated U.S. policy and with background briefings by "senior administration officials" on the subject of who's who and what's what.

The depths did not contradict the appearance on the surface, but rather confirmed it. Any hard-core left-wing critic of U.S. foreign policy and its supposedly deceptive nature must have been either bitterly disappointed at the absence of evidence of subterfuge or astounded at the immensity of the conspiracy—thousands of officials writing hundreds of thousands of pages over more than a decade, and not a smoking gun in the bunch. Not even Comrade Stalin achieved such discipline among the cadres,

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and he had purges, show trials, and the Great Terror as enforcement tools.

The words matter. When the George W. Bush administration found itself having to rethink American security strategy on the fly in the aftermath of an unprecedentedly devastating attack by a nonstate actor, the vehicle for doing so quickly became the drafting of the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*. An argument over words is not policy, but the result can certainly go a long way toward shaping policy. The Defense Department's *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) is a recurring example: Pentagon policy battles always hark back to the principles adduced in the latest QDR.

The Obama administration's 2010 *National Security Strategy* is rightly understood as an exercise in distinguishing its approach to security from that of the preceding administration—less unilateral than Bush, more focused on institutions and institution-building than Bush, more inclined toward engagement than Bush, a less truculent tone than Bush. True, there has been more continuity in policy with Bush than his critics would ever have imagined, from Guantánamo to Iraq to Afghanistan, but the rationale of policies has shifted in accordance with the new strategy document. The Obama administration's *Nuclear Posture Review* is similarly a document that spells out a vision, a world without nuclear weapons, meant to guide policy. And Hillary Clinton has instituted her new State Department QDDR, modeled on the Pentagon document, with the D's in this case standing for "Diplomacy and Development." Documents such as these are simultaneously the work product of an internal process, often involving heated dispute, by which an administration has clarified its own views, as well as the architectural structure governing consideration of future policy questions. Collectively, they come as close as possible to an answer to the question of what a U.S. administration really thinks.

The United States has placed itself in the position of implementer-in-chief of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, which doesn't align itself at all well with the proposition that Qaddafi must go.

The reason such documents can carry so much weight is that they ultimately bear the president's personal imprimatur. When senior officials cannot resolve a dispute over strategy and doctrine among themselves, it goes to the president for consideration and reconciliation. Unity is imposed from the top. And at the level of specific policy questions, such as war and peace, presidential speechwriters, spokesmen, and senior officials draw on these statements to elucidate the principles on which policy rests.

The United Nations Security Council is an entirely different animal. There is no top, and therefore no imposition of unity. The council takes decisions by majority vote, but five powers have a veto and thus wield vastly more influence. Fundamentally, the outcome is a negotiated instrument reflecting the agreement of sovereign states, some being more equal than others. There is no "executive branch"; the U.N. secretary-general is emphatically not president of the world. Implementation of Security Council resolutions falls almost entirely to states and organizations of states.

The United States can set strategy and policy for itself and then decide on means to implement it. The Security Council, by contrast, "decides" only on ends and then asks states to come up with means. The U.S. government also has the capability of assessing available means and devising policy in accordance with a realistic assessment of what is achievable. The United Nations has to rely at best on promises from states about what they might do. In pursuit of a policy, the United States has the capacity (not to say it's easy) for self-correction, adjusting means or reassessing ends. The Security Council can pass new resolutions in response to changing circumstances, but until it does, its last resolution is carved in stone in terms of what it authorizes, regardless of changes on the ground.

Except, of course, that a Security Council resolution is anything but carved in stone, in the sense that its meaning depends to a significant degree on interpretation by governments, which include both policymakers and lawyers of varying national influence. States have their own agendas that often affect interpretations. Factions within governments may have different views about the best course for policy and cloak their infighting in terms of an interpretation of legality of conduct under the terms of a resolution. Recall that in early 2003, opinion about whether another Security Council resolution was necessary to authorize going to war against Iraq divided rather neatly according to whether a state was ready to act at once or preferred to wait.

The Obama administration's bumbling over Libya is largely a product of the dual position in which the United States now finds itself. We are on one hand the world's biggest power, uniquely capable of entertaining the audacious idea of protecting civilians in far-away places from the depredations of their own governments—moreover, of making a statement like

"Qaddafi must go" and having it mean something, both in terms of pressuring Qaddafi and by heavily vesting the United States in the outcome. If the American president says Qaddafi has to go and he ends up staying, the United States has a problem on its hands that is much larger than Qaddafi himself.

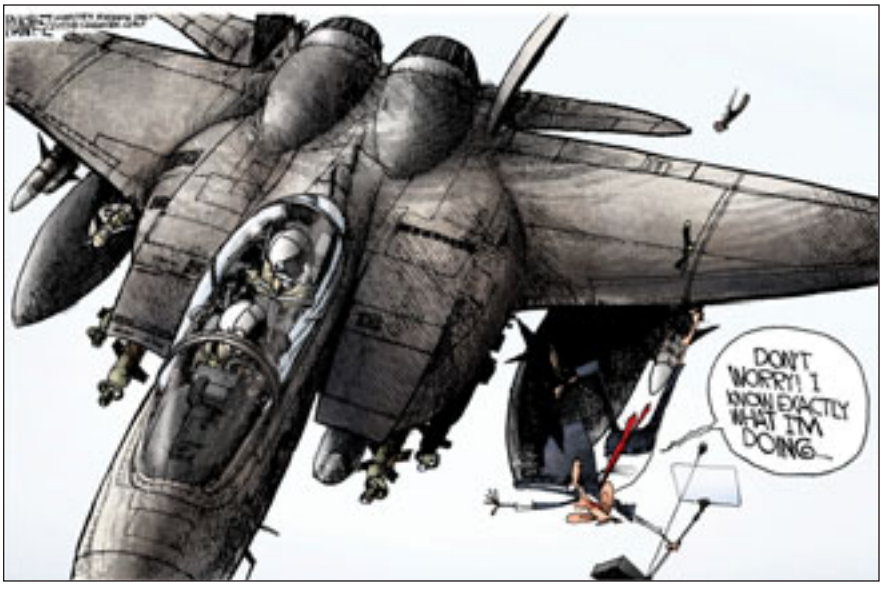
On the other hand, the United States has also placed itself in the position of implementer-in-chief of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973. We wanted it; we got it; we cite it as authority for our actions. And what do you know? It doesn't align itself at all well with the proposition that Qaddafi must go. The resolution forms an excellent basis for a no-fly zone and for civilian protection, but beyond that, we are at best in a very gray area.

When Obama gave his televised speech explaining U.S. policy, he was a president divided against himself. He was at pains to reconcile a U.S. policy of enforcement of a U.N. resolution and a U.S. policy seeking the ouster of Qaddafi by, presumably, some means other than the enforcement of the U.N. resolution but not in contradiction to it. This is not an easy thing to do.

"Of course," said the president, as if there were anything "of course" about it, "there is no question that Libya—and the world—will be better off with Qaddafi out of power. I, along with many other world leaders, have embraced that goal, and will actively pursue it through nonmilitary means. But broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake." That's because, among other things, we have a "U.N. mandate" only for civilian protection and a no-fly zone (and if we had taken no action, the "writ of the United Nations Security Council would have been shown to be little more than empty words, crippling that institution's future credibility to uphold global peace and security"). Trying to "overthrow Qaddafi by force" would likely splinter the coalition gathered around the implementation of 1973 and require U.S. "troops on the ground" to avoid inflicting civilian casualties from the air. Such a course would be too risky and too costly: too Iraq-like.

So we are for regime change, but not through a military mission. The president left unsaid the point that our scruples do not prevent us from favoring regime change through use of our clandestine assets in support of the rebels, and that the CIA operatives now reportedly in Libya do not go in unarmed. The president reiterated what we have a U.N. mandate *for*, but he assiduously did not concede that under 1973, pursuit of regime change altogether, including by covert "kinetic means," is forbidden. Nor did he rule out a "broaden[ed] . . . military mission" short of "regime change."

Let's skip to the extreme case: Okay, we don't want to send our army in to topple Qaddafi. And indeed, we can't under the terms of 1973, which authorizes "all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, *while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory*



MICHAEL RAMIREZ

[emphasis added]." So that's out, right? Except, well, what if we recognized the rebels as the legitimate government of Libya? What if they asked us for help? We would be responding not as occupiers but as allies. If Qaddafi didn't like it, he could always try going to the Security Council to get a resolution to stop us.

Now, as it happens, there is much that President Obama should not say even if he could comfortably say it, including anything and everything along the speculative lines of the previous paragraph. But there is also much that he apparently believes but cannot comfortably say straightforwardly, out of fidelity to his U.N. diplomacy. At least one hopes so, and that the wiggle room he maintained in his speech is a joint product of his conviction that Qaddafi really must go and his unwillingness to tell the American people an outright lie for the sake of upholding U.N. appearances (as might the French).

His administration's U.N. diplomacy was adroit and is in some respects admirable, but not for its contribution to the American tradition of candor in foreign policy. ♦

Jenny McCarthy speaking at the U.S. Capitol, 2008

BRENDAN HOFFMAN / GETTY IMAGES

Bad Medicine

Organized ignorance endangers health. BY TEVI TROY

Over the last few months, we have seen the final and decisive disavowal of the work of Andrew Wakefield. Sadly, the damage this man has done is almost incalculable.

More than a decade ago, Wakefield set off a frenzy of fear when he presented "data" in the British medical journal *Lancet* that cast doubt on the safety of vaccines. *Lancet* eventually retracted the article, and only recently it was revealed that Wakefield may have had financial incentives to publish his spurious findings. Unfortunately, uninformed citizens, sensationalistic journalists, and opportunistic celebrities continue the momentum of his discredited work—endangering individual lives and our public health. As vaccine advocate and expert Paul Offit has said, "You can't unring the bell."

Nevertheless, that is exactly what

Deadly Choices
How the Anti-Vaccine Movement Threatens Us All
by Paul A. Offit
Basic Books, 288 pp., $27.50

Tabloid Medicine
How the Internet Is Being Used to Hijack Medical Science for Fear and Profit
by Robert Goldberg
Kaplan, 336 pp., $25.99

Tevi Troy, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, is the former deputy secretary of health and human services.

Offit tries to do in *Deadly Choices*. Because of the deleterious impact of Wakefield and others like him, this book is a much-needed inoculation to help prevent future public scares. Offit reviews the history of vaccines, their importance, and the various attempts to discredit them over the past few centuries.

According to Offit, Wakefield is not the first anti-vaccine advocate to be thoroughly repudiated. Offit reminds readers of the controversy surrounding the pertussis vaccine, which some charged was a cause of mental retardation. This theory was thoroughly disproven by Samuel Berkovic in 2006, who demonstrated that a very specific genetic mutation caused the retardation in the studied cohort. Nevertheless, as Offit notes, the attack on the pertussis vaccine was a preview of the rules for anti-vaccine radicals—and the aftermath of damage: Despite the Berkovic study, he notes, "Not a single newspaper, magazine, or radio or television program carried the story."

Offit also tells the tale of the creepy and iconic doll Raggedy Ann, which was created by cartoonist Johnny Gruelle after his daughter Marcella died following a smallpox vaccine. According to Offit, Raggedy Ann's floppy arms and legs were supposed to signify a child harmed by a vaccination, despite the fact that "the medical report stated that the child had died from a heart defect."

As these stories show, Offit is clearly frustrated by the superior ability of the anti-vaccine forces to deliver their misleading message with horrifying images or rhetoric. Offit has particular disdain for celebrities like Jenny McCarthy who misuse their fame (such as it is) to frighten parents into not getting their children vaccinated—which is dangerous not only for the children, but for their classmates, friends, and neighbors as well. Particularly irresponsible is Dr. Mehmet Oz who, despite his medical degree, freely admits that he does not get his children vaccinated because "my wife makes most of the important decisions as most couples have in their lives." Oz's wife, like Jenny McCarthy, has no scientific or medical training. Offit also provides a photograph of the happy couple, perhaps to reveal that (also like McCarthy) she has certain external characteristics that may cloud Dr. Oz's decision-making process.

One thing Offit does not do here is describe the degree to which he has been pilloried and threatened by the anti-vaccine movement for his efforts to show that vaccines are not only safe, but also lifesaving. Enter author and medical expert Robert Goldberg, who tells another vital part of the story in his *Tabloid Medicine*. According to Goldberg—full disclosure: I know Goldberg socially, but have never met Offit—Offit has been characterized as a "devil," a "prostitute," and a "terrorist" for his efforts and has been repeatedly sued. He has also been forced to hire security for his own protection. Yet Offit remains undeterred in his attempt to promote the use of vaccines as a public health measure. As Goldberg notes,

> Two things seem certain: Dr. Offit will never pipe down and stop standing up to these instant experts and their supporters, and they will never stop trying to silence him through harassment and intimidation.

Goldberg's book is broader than Offit's, as it looks at a variety of antiscience attacks on medical innovation. Goldberg makes the smart observation that the Internet has tilted the playing field in favor of those trying to scare patients, and against those trying to fight frenzied fiction with sober statistics. Although he acknowledges that the Internet has great potential to advance the cause of science, he also notes,

> Online information can be alarmist or can over-represent the potential for serious illness or side effects, and many websites represent an agenda that can be at odds with the existing scientific data and distorts contemporary information in a way that is misleading and disingenuous.

Goldberg's premise is that people are largely incapable of evaluating risk as it applies to them as individuals. (In this, he is influenced by the pioneering work of the late social scientist Aaron Wildavsky and the Nobel Prize-winning economists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky.) According to Goldberg, the Internet exacerbates the situation by highlighting the sensational and burying the mundane, leading not only to anti-vaccine scares but also "cyberchondria," the mistaken belief that one is exhibiting symptoms read about on the Internet. This is not dissimilar to "medical students' disease"—in which med students imagine they are coming down with the conditions they are learning about in the classroom—but far more dangerous as it potentially affects the entire online population.

Goldberg notes that there are smart, science-based writers out there who can counteract the scaremongering, but they are too often subjected to variations of the attacks that Offit has encountered. One of the most frequent assaults against advocates for sound science is that they are shills for industry. Critics insinuate or accuse them of having conflicts of interest because they have worked for or with pharmaceutical companies or for organizations with ties to pharmaceutical companies. This charge is so broad it probably includes every research university in the country as well as the entire federal government. According to Goldberg, the movement to expunge any potential "conflicts of interest" from scientific study is one with an ulterior motive: to squelch debate and take anyone who has worked with, near, or for pharma out of the game.

We can be thankful that Robert Goldberg and Paul Offit have repeatedly shown the courage to defend the integrity of the scientific process, often at personal and professional risk. These two experts have provided valuable insights into the fractured way our public debate is taking place and the grave potential consequences Internet and media irresponsibility can have for the public health. ♦

B&A

Swans in Motion

Is ballet's future as compelling as its past?

BY GEORGE B. STAUFFER

In *Black Swan*, Nina Sayers, a talented but sheltered young ballerina, comes undone dancing the lead in *Swan Lake*. The director of her company wishes to create a new version of Tchaikovsky's famous ballet, one that requires the Swan Queen to assume a bipolar pose: pure and pristine as Odette, the virginal white swan, and wicked and wanton as Odile, the seductive black swan. Nina is perfect for the white swan, but can she abandon her one-dimensional perfectionism to become a convincing black swan? Pushed by the director, she gives up childish things—her stuffed animals, her domineering mother, her sexual innocence—and enters the adult world. In the process, however, she descends into a psychotic maelstrom, hallucinating and losing all sense of reality. On opening night she presents a brilliant, edgy performance, but wounds herself fending off a perceived rival in the dressing room. Bleeding profusely from the gash, she leaps into the lake at the end of the ballet and dies.

Or does she? By this time in the film, the line between fantasy and reality has become so blurred we don't know for sure if the blood we see is real or another of Nina's delusions. We can only be certain that we are being yanked around by the film's director, Darren Aronofsky, who has created a splendid drama while playing with our expectations. But before purists discount the work as a cinematic debasement of the Russian classic, they should read *Apollo's Angels*, which arrives in time to put *Black Swan* in perspective. There they would discover that *Swan Lake* has a past almost as tortured as Nina's tribulations in Aronofsky's movie.

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Apollo's Angels
A History of Ballet
by Jennifer Homans
Random House, 672 pp., $35

George Balanchine (1965)

As Jennifer Homans relates, *Swan Lake* began as a children's ballet for Tchaikovsky's extended family before emerging as a full-scale story ballet for the Bolshoi Theatre in 1877. The pedestrian choreography (by Julius Reisinger) and the dark, tragic ending (Odette and her suitor Siegfried drown in a fierce storm, unredeemed) did not please contemporary audiences, and the ballet soon faded from the repertory. It was not resuscitated until 1895, two years after Tchaikovsky's death, when it was completely reset by the famous French-Russian choreographer Marius Petipa. But the revival was fraught with difficulties: Petipa, then over 70 and in poor health, delegated the lakeside scenes to his assistant Lev Ivanov, and the conductor, Riccardo Drigo, altered and shortened Tchaikovsky's score. The tragic ending was replaced by a happier conclusion, and the action compressed from four acts into three. The original Siegfried, Pavel Gerdt, was too old for heavy lifting and had to be assisted on stage by a sidekick, Benno, whose presence in the intimate *pas de deux* with Odette turned it into an awkward *pas de trois*. Nevertheless, in this compromised form, *Swan Lake* became a big hit.

The work's later history was no less complicated. In 1909 *Swan Lake* was greatly abridged for performance at the London Hippodrome. In 1950 Konstantin Sergeyev created a Socialist version for the Kirov Ballet, killing the sorcerer Rothbart at the end so that Odette and Siegfried could be united on earth, not in heaven—an allegory for the worldly triumph of the Soviet Union. A few years later in Moscow *Swan Lake* was used as a revenge vehicle for ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, whose triumphant performance with the Bolshoi Ballet forced the KGB to allow her to tour in the West. In the 1960s Kenneth MacMillan produced a Berlin *Swan Lake* filled with psychological probing, while back in Moscow Yuri Grigorovich presented another Soviet rendition emphasizing the emotional struggle between good and evil, with Siegfried and Rothbart as the protagonists. During the Cold War *Swan Lake* became Russia's de facto national anthem, used by the Communist party as proof of Soviet cultural supremacy. Nikita Khrushchev complained that he was forced to attend so many performances that his dreams were haunted by "white tutus and tanks, all mixed together." As we learn in the pages of *Apollo's Angels*, Aronofsky is in good company using *Swan Lake* as a vehicle for his own agenda.

Homans, distinguished scholar in residence at New York University and a former professional dancer, has written a deliciously detailed yet impassioned account. Once a member of the Chicago Lyric Opera and San Francisco Ballet, she has devoted her life to dancing, observing, and studying ballet in its many manifestations. To her, ballet is a discipline as complex as any language, with conjugations, declensions, and rules corresponding to the laws of physical nature. When all is properly synchronized—when body, mind, and soul are fully involved—ballet is an escape from the self; the dancers become part of a

RON CASE / KEYSTONE / HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

grand scheme. Homans describes this sensation rhapsodically: "Yet no matter the crowds and the choreography's increasing demands and complexity," she writes of the first lakeside scene in *Swan Lake*,

> the dancers never break order or rank; nor do they lose their discipline and inner focus. Moreover, they never lose their spatial and physical—or musical—relationship to Odette, their queen. They are her likeness, and their movements and patterns mirror and reflect her own: as they shadow her, they become an outward manifestation of her inner life.

Ballet is also an aristocratic art, with a strict code of ethics. Homans describes with admiration her Russian instructors, who imparted not just steps and technical knowledge but an imperial way of life, one filled with discipline, elegance, and grace. It is in ballet, after all, that classes conclude with a *révérence*, a gesture of gratitude and respect to the teacher. Ballet dancers belong to a special world, she learned. As her instructor Alexandra Danilova expressed it, they are different from "the rest." This stems, in large part, from the aristocratic roots of ballet, whose gestures and etiquette were codified in France by Louis XIII and Louis XIV. Louis XIV, in particular, used dance not just for *divertissements*—large, formal entertainments—but also to reinforce the strict levels of hierarchy within his court. Receptions, meetings, and gatherings were carefully staged and choreographed. Dance became an integral part of daily life, and knowing the proper steps and poses became a social necessity. By 1660 there were some 200 dancing schools in Paris. With an eye to internationalizing French culture, Louis asked his dance master Pierre Beauchamps to work out a notational system, published in 1700 by Raoul-Auger Feuillet. Some 300 dances were preserved in this fashion and promulgated throughout Europe. (Bach, in distant Leipzig, could study classical dance through Feuillet's publication and local French dance masters.) The famous five positions were established, with First Position as the "home" stance and Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Positions serving to prepare the body to move.

From dance, one learned how to become a beautiful being. As the dance master in Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) puts it: "Man can do nothing at all without dancing. . . . All the misfortunes of mankind, all the disasters that fill history, all the bungling of politicians and the mistakes of great generals, all come through not learning to dance." Leaders of the Roman Catholic church saw it differently, however: To them, dancing did nothing but "excite passions, making modesty lose its call amidst the noise of jumping and abandoning oneself to dissolution." Threats of excommunication and denial of a Christian burial did not deter court dancing, however: The Royal Academy of Dance was founded in 1661 with Beauchamps in charge. It was the model for the distinguished ballet schools that later sprang up in St. Petersburg, Moscow, London, Copenhagen, and New York.

Igor Stravinsky (seated) and members of the Ballets Russes (1915)

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

Homans sees two developments as critical to the creation of classical ballet: The first was the introduction of pantomime, which provided a narrative element and allowed individual dances to be linked together to form a continuous story; the second was the rise of the ballerina. Until the French Revolution, dance was the domain of men: kings and male aristocrats. After the revolution, male dancers fell from grace and by the 1830s were discredited and reviled. They were replaced by sylphs, nymphs, and fairies—pure, elusive, unattainable spirits danced by women dressed in white. The age of the ballerina was launched by Marie Taglioni, who is credited with establishing the technique of dancing *en pointe* (on the toes). Taglioni's elevated form was viewed as highly erotic at the time (Homans compares it to the modern effect of stiletto heels), and it allowed her seemingly to float above the stage, a living link between the human and supernatural realms. These developments led to the first modern story ballets, *La Sylphide* (1832, with Taglioni in the lead role) and *Giselle* (1841). Both were products of French Romanticism, exploring the misty world of dreams, imagination, and suppressed sexual desire.

Ballet continued to evolve during the 19th century, reaching a climax not in France, its country of origin, but in Russia. The dance tradition there had been launched in the 17th century by Peter the Great, who pictured himself as the Russian Louis XIV. French ballet was adopted at the court, where it became an imperial art, decisively influenced over time by Russian military training (hence the large, parade-ground-like formations of the *corps de ballet*) and Russian folk tradition (hence the exotic Eastern touches). The result was a colorful, highly disciplined national style. Isolated from the West, dance remained a hallmark of Russian culture, culminating in the classical ballets of the French Petipa, who created large-scale choreographies of dazzling precision and Russian pageantry. The groundbreaking *La Bayadère* (1877) led to the big three: *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), *The Nutcracker* (1892), and of course, *Swan Lake*, all three to scores by Tchaikovsky. The music of Tchaikovsky took ballet to a new level, and Homans

describes well how it envelops dancers, sweeping them away with its compelling rhythms and soaring melodies.

No sooner had ballet reached a golden age in St. Petersburg than it moved back to Paris under the leadership of the great entrepreneur Sergei Diaghilev. Classically trained but deeply committed to Russian folk traditions, Diaghilev launched the famous *Ballets Russes* in 1909. With the mantra "Astound me," he and his creative team of choreographer Mikhail Fokine, dancer/choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, designer Léon Bakst, and composer Igor Stravinsky took Paris by storm with a series of revolutionary, self-consciously Russian works. *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrouchka* (1911) were followed by *The Afternoon of a Faun* (1912), an anti-ballet in which the faun, danced by Nijinsky, orgasms while sunbathing on a rock. These convention-breaking pieces climaxed in *The Rite of Spring* (1913). (This and *Faun* were also choreographed by Nijinsky.) Hailed as "a crime against grace," *The Rite* caused a riot and was performed only eight times before being dropped from the repertoire. But the damage was done: Modernism had arrived.

Ballet climbed to great heights once again in the 20th century in the hands of another Russian expatriate, George Balanchine, who carried both the Imperial and *Ballets Russes* traditions across the Atlantic to New York, where he established The School of American Ballet (the "West Point of Dance") in 1934 and served as dance master of the New York City Ballet from 1948 onward. Working with impresario Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine produced a magnificent series of classical choreographies, including *Serenade* (1934), *The Four Temperaments* (1946), *Symphony in C* (1947), *Agon* (1957), *Stars and Stripes* (1958), and *Violin Concerto* (1972), as well as the modern re-creation of *The Nutcracker* (1954). His works represented a new type of storyless ballet, based on universal, spatial laws that did not require explanation. (Asked what a certain ballet was about, he liked to respond, "About 28 minutes.") Immensely prolific, he enjoyed a special relationship with Stravinsky, whose abstruse late scores are best explained by Balanchine's balletic illuminations. And Balanchine restored the ballerina as the center of dance: "Ballet is woman," he liked to say. "Put 16 girls on a stage and it's everybody—the world. But put 16 boys, and it's always nobody."

There were other influential choreographers in the 20th century—Frederick Ashton in England, Jerome Robbins in New York, Yuri Grigorovich in Russia—but Homans believes Balanchine to have been the best ever, and her writing becomes lyrically animated when she describes his accomplishments. In her view, Balanchine was the last and greatest Apollo, and his death in 1983 produced an irreparable break in the tradition that extended back to Louis XIV. Recent choreographers and dancers seem "unable to rise to the challenge" of creating new work, she says in a moving epilogue entitled "The Masters are Dead and Gone," and the current repetition of old masterpieces has led to stagnation. Ballet appears to have reached a dead end.

"We are in mourning," she laments.

Not everyone, however. *Black Swan* has grossed more than $106 million in the United States and $175 million overseas. Surely audiences are attracted not just to Natalie Portman's superb acting and Aronofsky's horror-movie high jinks but also to Benjamin Millepied's imaginative choreographic glosses on the Petipa-Ivanov original (the *pas de deux* added to Tchaikovsky's orchestral introduction is stunning). *The Adjustment Bureau*, a blockbuster film following fast on the heels of *Black Swan*, also features a heroine who is a professional dancer. Meanwhile, at the New York City Ballet, not an empty seat could be seen during the recent performances of *Swan Lake*, and tickets to the upcoming run of the work at the American Ballet Theatre are selling briskly.

Plenty of people remain interested in ballet. Like all art forms, ballet has experienced ebbs and flows in its long, twisty evolution. The creative tide may be running out just now, as Jennifer Homans observes; but if history is any guide, the tide will wash back in, bringing with it another Apollo, bursting with creative energy, and fully prepared to astound us. ♦

B&A

Perish the Thought

Who killed the spirit of inquiry in Islam?

BY DAVID AIKMAN

The Closing of the Muslim Mind
How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis
by Robert R. Reilly
ISI, 244 pp., $26.95

What happened to Islamic culture?

Why did a civilization that may have produced more books in Muslim Spain alone in the ninth century than existed in the entirety of the rest of Europe subside into a civilizational torpor that is the wonder even of the U.N.? Why do countries of the Arab world always come close to the bottom of a global list that measures things like literacy or schooling for women? Why, in Freedom House's annual compilation of countries that are "free," is there not a single Arab country listed? (The closest to the coveted description are Lebanon, Morocco, and Kuwait, which are only "partly free.") Why, in 2006 to take a recent example, were there more foreign books translated in one European country, Spain, than were translated in the entire foregoing millennium in the

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'The voice of Islam: Rushdie Flee! Flee!' (Paris, 1989)

ALAIN NOGUES / CORBIS SYGMA

entire Muslim world?

These are hard questions, and they call out for a rational, unemotional answer. Robert R. Reilly comes closer to providing a persuasive explanation than any other account I have seen. As Reilly succinctly shows, Islamic civilization, not just in the Arab world but later in Anatolia, in the Indian subcontinent, and then throughout Southeast Asia, threw out of the intellectual window the principles of rational inquiry that the Greeks had first introduced to the West half a millennium before Christ. The collective Muslim *ulema*—theological leaders—decided that it would be too "dangerous" to allow free inquiry—not just of the Koran itself but of the daily reality before our eyes.

The reason, as Reilly makes clear, was a theological controversy within Islam. Formalized Islamic doctrine holds that the Koran existed from all eternity with Allah, and that it was only when the Angel Gabriel revealed its contents to Muhammad that the world was able to hear, through the Koran, what Allah was saying. A sect of Islamic philosophers called the Mu'tazilites, who had great influence in the court of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad in the first half of the ninth century, held that the Koran must have been created at a specific point in time. Otherwise, they said, where would free will be, since the events described in the Koran itself must have been foreordained? The Mu'tazilites believed both in free will and the ability of human reason to discern truth and justice. They considered that Allah must be subject to the moral laws that he, himself, created, and that humans themselves, not Allah, were responsible for any evil they committed.

The Mu'tazilite philosophy at first proved useful to the Abbasid caliphs as they attempted to assert the primacy of their political power over the influence of the *ulema*. But these first caliphs overplayed their hand, requiring all clerics to swear loyalty to the concept of a created Koran, on pain of imprisonment, torture, or worse. Inevitably, there was a reaction, and it then became the turn of traditionalists to insist on the "eternal" Koran and the associated idea that nothing in all of creation could be philosophically or scientifically examined without challenging Allah himself. The opposing school to the Mu'tazilites were called Asharites, after their founder, Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (873-935). The Asharites completely denied that good and evil could be discerned by human reason. Instead, they argued, Allah's nature was, quite simply, his *will*. Will precedes knowledge itself—which is the exact opposite of Christian thought, as it developed in the West. Christian thought proceeded from the assumption that God himself *was* reason, and that since all creation had come into being through Christ, the *Logos*, reason could and should be applied to the examination of all creation.

The Asharites would have constituted a serious blockage to Islam's philosophical development, but even they were topped by a Muslim theologian who nailed down the hatch on the use of reason even more tightly than the Asharites. He was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), one of the most influential thinkers, if that is the right word, in all of Muslim history. Al-Ghazali vehemently rejected Plato and Aristotle in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and insisted that, in nature, there was no such thing as cause and effect: Everything is a direct consequence of Allah's particular will at a particular time. He also said, "Nature is entirely subject to God: incapable of acting by itself; it is an instrument in the hand of the Creator." To question this, subsequent Islamic jurists averred, was to commit blasphemy by implying that there were limits on Allah's power and authority.

One tragic consequence of this mode of thinking was the complete withering on the vine within Islam of the spirit of scientific inquiry. Reilly quotes a prominent Pakistani scientist, Pervez Hoodbhoy, on this subject:

> Science in the Islamic world essentially collapsed. No major invention or discovery has emerged from the Muslim world for over seven centuries now. That arrested scientific development is one important element—although by no means the only one—that contributes to the present marginalization of Muslims and a growing sense of injustice and victimhood.

Another, of course, is the alternative universe in which many Muslims continue to live. Conspiracy theories about 9/11—it was all the Mossad's doing, or Seventh Day Adventists, not to mention the CIA—are widely believed, even in "secularized" countries such as Turkey. Where is the evidence? It doesn't matter. What has evidence got to do with cause and effect?

Reilly has mischievous fun in citing question-and-answer columns from the Egyptian media as recently as 2006. One reader's question: "If a woman gets out of the bath naked and there is a dog in the apartment, has she done

anything forbidden?" Answer from the expert on Islamic law: "It depends on the dog. If the dog is male, the woman has done something which is forbidden." Another conundrum: "While I pray, a woman goes by. Is my prayer valid or not?" Answer: "If a donkey, a woman, or a black dog goes by, the prayer must be repeated. Why? The donkey is an impure animal, the black dog could be Satan in disguise; women are impure regardless." But while such anecdotes can be amusing to outsiders, they illustrate a lunar landscape of the mind where rational thought itself is difficult, if not actually dangerous. The significance for political freedom of Islamic philosophy's intellectual suicide is well stated by Reilly:

> The primacy of reason, theologically and philosophically understood, is the prerequisite for democracy. Otherwise, what could serve as its legitimating source? . . . In such circumstances, man will not go about writing constitutions, for constitutions by their very posture imply a belief in a stable external order, in man's rationality, and in his ability to formulate and establish a rational mode of government, founded in a rational creation.

The absence within Islam of any ontological basis for belief in the equality of human beings is what led to the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, signed in the Egyptian capital by 45 members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1990. The U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that such rights apply to the entire human race, without exception. The Cairo declaration added the chilling stipulation that all rights mentioned in the Universal Declaration were subject to Islamic *sharia*: In other words, they were null and void.

Islamism, or the transformation of the Islamic faith into a political ideology, is the end result of the refusal to apply reason to either scientific or political problems. Ed Husain, a young, onetime British Islamist who abandoned the quest for totalitarian political victory, recalls how his superiors at Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamic organization seeking to reestablish a global Islamic caliphate, ruled that buying insurance polices was *haram*—Islamically unclean—because all natural events such as car wrecks were "acts of God." That was the wake-up call for one Islamist; but what use is reason in the face of the Iranian education ministry official who claims that the Tom and Jerry cartoons were concocted in the United States to improve the image of mice because, during the 1930s in Europe, Jews were called "dirty mice"?

Ultimately, as Reilly demonstrates, the whole human race is in the same boat when it comes to issues like science or the equality of all human beings. "To say that there is an *Islamic* (or a Christian or Hindu) science is, of course, to deny that there is such a thing as science, as what stands scientifically must be the same everywhere for everyone. Is hydrogen *Islamic*? Is there an *Islamic* light bulb?"

No. But that didn't stop some Muslims, in the 1980s, in their attempts to render science sufficiently Islamic, from trying to measure the temperature of hell or study the chemical composition of heavenly *djinns*. As Hoodbhoy (cited by Reilly) notes dryly, "None produced a new machine or instrument, conducted an experiment or even formulated a single testable hypothesis." Or even observed that, to live in a politically temperate climate, you need to employ reason. ♦

B&A

Modern Martyr

The brief, bohemian transit of Amedeo Modigliani.

BY MAUREEN MULLARKEY

I want a short life but a full one.

Amedeo Modigliani got his wish. In 1920, at age 35, he died, toothless, of tubercular meningitis in a Parisian pauper's hospital. It was a sordid end to a confident stride into the trenches of *la vie maudite*. The romance of heroic nonconformity, vital to the cult of bohemia, absorbed the squalor and blessed it. Léopold Zborowski, Modigliani's primary dealer, declared him "made for the stars." Clement Greenberg, writing under the pseudonym K. Hardesh, beatified him as one of the "martyrs of bohemia." Meryle Secrest raises him into a parallel pantheon: that exalted roster of frail consumptives, sanctified through illness and death, who flutter through 19th-century French literature. If our martyr stank of brandy, ether, absinthe, and hashish, it was but cover for his stigmata.

Modigliani
A Life
by Meryle Secrest
Knopf, 416 pp., $35

The credibility of Secrest's portrayal depends on how much porosity you permit in the distinction between facts and atmospherics. This book is significant less for what it tells about Modigliani than as a primer in the devolution of rules of evidence. Facts are few. Dedo, as the family called him, was born in Livorno on July 12, 1884. According to his daughter Jeanne, named after her mother, little more than that can be said with certainty. Her own 1958 study of his life, faulted by Secrest for being too cautious, is prudently concise. Jeanne's contention that a definitive account "does not and never will exist" has not fazed a legion of subsequent hagiographers.

Modigliani was the fourth child of cultivated, middle-class Sephardic Jews. Coddled at home, the boy was resilient enough to survive typhoid in the epidemic of 1898 and an early bout of tuber-

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culosis. With TB an omnipresent killer at the time, his constitution required a heedfulness that his temperament refused. Charm and good looks opened a door to precocious sexual exploits. His taste for drugs and art advanced in tandem. So did a sense of exemption from social constraints. He wrote to a fellow art student: "We . . . have different rights from normal people, for we have different needs which place us above—one has to say it and believe it—their morality." By the time he arrived in Paris, 22 and differently moraled, he was on the *qui vive* for the smart set, café philosophy, and women to put him up for a time. Life is a cabaret, old chum. To prove it, Modigliani produced "at least three" illegitimate children.

He struggled to establish himself as a sculptor before concentrating on painting. Recognition remained elusive. The conventional strains of making do did not sit well with an artist fond of quoting D'Annunzio: "Life is a gift from the few to the many, from those who Know and have to those who do not Know and have not." Modi slid from *dandysme* to dereliction, his last years one long morning after. An ugly drunk, he rambled around Montparnasse in a stupor, sometimes sleeping in gutters. He stayed stoned on Nietzsche and Lautréamont, the lure of the abyss, and whatever narcotic was handy to spur—as he believed it would—his creativity. Within two days of his death, Modi's last bedmate, 22-year-old Jeanne Hébuterne, nearly nine months pregnant with their second child, threw herself out a sixth-floor window. The immolation added an exquisite *frisson* to his posthumous status as a totem of bohemia. His funeral was princely, funded, and garlanded by his brother Emanuele, the "eminent Socialist." Someone—Emanuele?—pulled strings for him to be buried alongside French luminaries in Père Lachaise. Modigliani's ascent to coffeetabledom had begun.

That is the short of it. The long of it unrolls like an ornate *megillah*, a familiar tale embellished, fancifully, in the margins. Secrest's chronicle arrives too late in the *jour* for any compelling archival discoveries. Instead, she picks through hearsay, memoirs, contradictory anecdotes, and the thicket of previous biographies, not to penetrate canonical ardor but to extend it. *Modigliani: A Life* follows Jeffrey Meyers's exhaustive 2006 biography, which bore the identical title, and the Jewish Museum's tendentious 2004 exhibition and monograph *Modigliani: Beyond the Myth*. That exhibition's *raison d'être* was the supposed influence of the artist's Sephardic heritage on his art. An unconvincing effort, it nevertheless refreshed his mystique by shifting ground onto identity politics. It was a consequential move. Claiming Jewishness as a determinant of Modigliani's art

'Portrait of Jeanne Hébuterne' (1918)

silences misgivings, removing it from judgment except at peril to the critic.

An experienced biographer of notables in the arts, Secrest understands the terrain. She opens with an excessive curtsy to Marc Restellini, the French art historian charged with publishing the definitive *catalogue raisonné* of Modigliani's work. Gratuitous mention of the scholar's "French Jewish mother" admits ethnicity into his qualifications. It is the first in a parade of red flags. Restellini introduced Secrest to French collectors with an interest in Modigliani. One was Noël Alexandre, son of physician Paul Alexandre, who had been both patron and pusher, supplying Modigliani with drugs and acquiring his production. Noël is heir to, among other things, the hundreds of drawings Modigliani gave his father. Noël authored his own promotional tract, *The Unknown Modigliani* (1993), based on the father's recollections: "The popular version of Modigliani as a drunk, with women and drugs—people have invented a personality that didn't exist. . . . [He was a] man who lived his life nobly." Secrest angles to reconcile assertions of nobility with the women and drugs that certainly did exist.

She and Restellini attended exhibitions and conducted interviews together, "laughed and argued," and made pilgrimage to Modigliani's old apartment. The coziness of the relationship ("the best friend a biographer could ever wish for") raises antennae: Allegiance to Restellini's intention to rehabilitate Modigliani's image cancels all but a pretense to journalistic detachment. The fragile art of biography, like the historical spirit that informs it, is critical. But the burden of Secrest's narrative is devotional.

Restellini's *catalogue raisonné*, on which fortunes depend, and Secrest's *Life* both appear in 2011. To shortcircuit any chariness on that point, Secrest volunteers that Art was her sole muse: An "interior stir," felt amid the Modiglianis in Washington's National Gallery, prompted the book. "Monumentality—otherworldliness—the transcendental—such thoughts rose to the surface and whirled around my head." It was a Pauline moment, a revelation that points of view "would be turned upside down and transformed." Secrest snubs testimony uncongenial to her predetermined agenda but includes it nonetheless. Reported speech is notoriously unreliable except when it is not. Modi was a high-minded, generous intellectual except when he was not. The result is a clever blend of special pleading, applied belle-lettrism, insinuation, and guesswork.

Her argument is an edifice of conjecture, clogged with the catchwords of supposition. Here, Secrest divines that Modigliani "may even have had" a near-death experience, an extravagant gamble based solely on Katherine Anne Porter's description of her own tubercu-

lar visions. There, she speculates that he "could have" stumbled across Schopenhauer's theories; if so, they "would have been" attractive. On it goes, surmise and improvisation engineering a mood to camouflage material gaps. Among the probablys and perhapses, one is decidedly telling: After describing Modigliani's magnetic effect on women, Secrest adds, "Perhaps he was also loved by men but there is no evidence of this." Quite so—a groundless comment. But useful for working an audience.

Things proceed by elegant bluff: "His death was bad enough, but hers was almost Greek in its tragic dimension. . . . They were star-crossed lovers whose brief, haunted lives seemed made to order for the '*vies romancées*' and '*vies imaginaires*' so popular in the 1920s." That sentence typifies the feints on which the narrative is built. It affirms the myth and belies it at the same time, seeming to observe it from a critical distance. Nothing is known of Modigliani's 1906 arrival in Paris. Undeterred, Secrest dips into the New Historicist kettle for sensations of verisimilitude:

> Perhaps [Modi] was ready to start work but feeling, as John Dos Passos did a decade later, that the day was "too gorgeously hot and green and white and vigorous." . . . Or perhaps, like the American art student Abel Warshawsky two years later, Modigliani arrived one rainy night in the cheerless darkness . . . smelling gasoline mingled with roasting chestnuts.

Maybe it was spring; maybe fall. Tone stands proxy for fact. Little is known of the progress of Modigliani's ill-health. His daughter placed little emphasis on it, and he did not seek treatment. Secrest, by contrast, grants TB its own chapter. "The Blood-Red Banner" diagnoses Modigliani by analogy to one Howard Olmstead, son of an astronomy professor at Yale in 1837 ("the hemorrhage returned in all its violence"), Edvard Munch ("I could feel the blood rolling inside my chest"), Katherine Mansfield ("I cough and I cough") and Keats ("Youth grows pale . . ."). Thomas Mann's Hans Castorp, Chopin, Emerson, Goethe, Schiller, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sidney Lanier, even James Joyce, among others, are called to the examining room. Only Thérèse of Lisieux is missing. The 19th-century lore of early death and redemptive suffering carries the aura of tragic inevitability conjured for Modi.

Secrest alleges that he was a good enough actor to keep his condition secret and disguise symptoms of a highly recognizable disease. If true, was he not cold-bloodedly endangering everyone around him, especially lovers? Yes, but—here comes a shrug and a wink—Modi, a "born aristocrat" to Paul Alexandre, was just a typical Italian peacock when it came to women. And naturally he refused medical attention; he needed the excitement of Paris, not a sanitarium. *D'accord?*

Secrest suggests that Hébuterne's death was a personal rebuke to all who neglected Modi: "The event took on the dimensions of a Greek tragedy. . . . now she had repaid them for their indifference; 'every suicide is perhaps a repressed assassination' as Gustave Flaubert commented." Literary effect gilds a rancid lily. There is a less epic explanation for the suicide. Hébuterne's parents were not the better sort that Modi's family represented. Unpoetic French Catholics, they initially rejected his mother's request to have their daughter, buried in Bagneux, dug up and installed alongside Modi in Père Lachaise.

Why thwart maternal sentiment? Secrest pins the tail on the father: "One imagines Achille was the one who resisted. After all, his daughter was a suicide and a baby killer. How could she deserve a place of honor?" It is a nasty, misleading shot in the dark: Hébuterne's father had no reason to gratify Eugénie Modigliani. Her son, callous and unfaithful, was the agent of his daughter's lethal degradation. Modi had reneged on his many promises to marry Héburterne, leaving her, the child she was carrying, and baby Jeanne nonentities under French and Italian law. (Art historian Carol Mann, writing in 1980, tells of him getting too drunk to make it to the registry office to acknowledge paternity.) Again, it was left to Emanuele to use his resources, this time to finagle eventual legal status for the child.

The real question is: On what grounds did Modigliani deserve *his* place of honor? Little, in the eyes of leading art historians of the period. Modigliani is absent from Meyer Shapiro's authoritative survey, *Modern Art*. Kenneth Clark's classic study *The Nude* ignores him. *The Visual Arts: A History*, by the eminent Hugh Honour and John Fleming, makes no mention of him. Collective silence testifies to the formulaic monotony of an artist who never equaled his sources: Cézanne, Picasso, and Brancusi. Secrest notes the omissions but rushes to attribute them to the prodigious number of forgeries on the market. The politics of fakes distracts from the issue of Modigliani's status as a minor modernist. Yes, Modigliani is one of the most counterfeited modern artists. Like Willie Sutton, forgers go where the money is. ("Nude Sitting on a Sofa" sold at Sotheby's last November for $68.9 million.) The huge number of fraudulent Modiglianis has held up publication of the catalogue raisonné for nearly a decade. But that bears on the market, not the life. (The single plum in this book is Gary Tinterow's admission that the Metropolitan Museum has never risked having its Modiglianis subjected to forensic analysis.) The high-stakes minefield of attribution is outside a biographer's domain, but Secrest plays referee, eager to discredit Jeanne Modigliani (her drinking, her bad haircut) and Restellini's rivals in judgment. Her presumption of tubercular intrigue is less plausible than Carol Mann's insight into her subject's slow suicide: "There must have been a moment when Modigliani saw with great clarity the dead-end his art was heading for, and it must have terrified him."

Much has washed under the cultural bridge since Secrest's 19 biography of Bernard Berenson was shortlisted for a Pulitzer. By now, we are used to the claim that there is no truth; there are only readings. A less partisan reading of Modigliani's life would skip surges of ornamental erudition and go straight to *Paradise Lost*. Milton understood bohemia before its 19th-century manifestation. His Lucifer was the first bohemian: "Non serviam," bohemia's primordial cry. It was the lesion on Modigliani's will, not his lung, that shaped his end. ♦

Plot Without End

One thing leads to another, and then another . . .

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Bradley Cooper

RELATIVITY MEDIA

There's a cynical genius to *Limitless*, which made a lot of money at the box office in its first week. Like the television show *Lost*, it sets up a fantastically intriguing and complicated puzzle and then just doesn't bother to solve it. It's the perfect solution to a creative problem, if you think about it. Imagine writing a mystery novel about the murder of a person in a locked room inside a tank full of piranhas on a space station. That turns out to be a hard nut, and when you can't actually crack it, you just don't. You end the book without solving the mystery.

No one would ever publish such a book; but no such editorial scruples exist any longer in Hollywood. In *Limitless*, director Neil Burger and screenwriter Leslie Dixon certainly establish an undeniably intriguing premise (based on a novel by Alan Glynn I haven't read). The attractive and quick-witted actor Bradley Cooper gets hold of a drug that allows him to use 100 percent of his brain power. He writes a book in three days, he learns languages in a few minutes, and he takes $12,000 and day-trades it into $2 million. He gets his beloved girlfriend back and attracts the attention of a corporate raider played by Robert De Niro.

Limitless
Directed by Neil Burger

But there's a catch. Or rather, there are a bunch of catches. Sometimes when Cooper takes it, time slips away from him. And then he learns that if he stops taking it, he will die. But he has a finite amount of the drug, and others seem determined to get his stash away from him.

What is this drug? Why does an ex-brother-in-law he hasn't seen in nine years give it to him? Why does the ex-brother-in-law get killed? Why does another girl in a hotel room get killed later? Who makes the drug? Where did the ex-brother-in-law get it? Why does it have these side effects? Who is the corporate raider? Why does he want to merge with another corporate raider? How does the drug play into this merger?

It turns out that Burger and Dixon do not have a single answer to any of these questions. So to keep the movie going, they just keep throwing bits of new plot at us to distract us. A Russian mobster gets involved somehow. So does a guy who starts following Cooper's girlfriend. There's a cop after Cooper, and at least six people are killed, but Cooper only ends up spending a few minutes in a police station. A movie about a very smart person actually needs to be smarter than this.

And truth to tell, *Limitless* is itself not very smart, especially when it comes to examining the nature of hyper-intelligence. Burger and Dixon seem to confuse it with social self-confidence, which would have come as a great surprise to, say, John Stuart Mill or Samuel Johnson. Cooper not only remembers everything he's ever seen or read, but manages to use this to get himself on private planes and take trips to Mexico, where he drives a car really fast and goes cliff-diving. This makes no sense. First of all, a person who remembers everything and then tells it to you is more likely to be a crashing bore than the life of the party. And second, why would the smartest man in the universe want to bother cliff-diving with a bunch of dull bankers and Eurotrash?

If the wish fulfillment Burger and Dixon had wanted to explore in *Limitless* was the loss of inhibition, that would have been fine—but by mixing that up with brain power, they make it difficult for us to understand, care about, or root for Cooper's character. Fortunately for them, Cooper is so profoundly likable, in and of himself, that he drags the movie along behind him like a good guy helping a really drunk friend get home.

Burger comes up with a stylish new effect to portray the way time speeds up for Cooper—a point-of-view shot in which you seem to be traveling through the streets of New York near light speed. But cool though it is, it's wrong for the story. *Limitless* is supposedly about the pleasures of focus and concentration, but in its mad jumping-about from place to place and plot line to plot line, it is the opposite of focused. It may be the first film to need Ritalin. ♦

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

"In a new interview with the BBC, Ron Reagan Jr., son of the late president, called his father 'a fetish object for the far right.' Expanding on his point, the younger Reagan calls President Ronald Reagan 'sort of the rubber bustier of the far right.'"

—Washington Examiner, *March 30, 2011*

BBC

TRANSCRIPT: Ron Reagan Jr. Q & A with BBC World News America host Roderick Spode, March 30, 2011

BBC NEWS: Pardon me, did you say "rubber bustier"?

Ron Reagan Jr.: Exactly. Personally I find wearing them needlessly constrictive, much like the narrow Republican agenda. They also make me chafe, which is the same reaction I have to the Tea Party.

BBC NEWS: That's an unusual, uh, metaphor.

Ron Reagan Jr.: Not really. I find fashion a startlingly appropriate comparison to politics.

BBC NEWS: Well, how so? Do you have other examples?

Ron Reagan Jr.: Well, Obama is the Members Only jacket of American politics.

BBC NEWS: I'm not sure I'm familiar with that.

Ron Reagan Jr.: It was an unfortunate American fashion trend of the 1980s. As the unintentionally ironic name implies, anyone wearing said jacket thinks he's much cooler than he actually is. It was a trend discredited long ago.

BBC NEWS: What about Joe Biden?

Ron Reagan Jr.: That's easy—he's the Depends Adult Undergarment of the Democratic party. Certainly the White House wishes there were some way to contain his rhetorical incontinence.

BBC NEWS: You've really thought this through. What about disgraced former senator John Edwards?

Ron Reagan Jr.: Good one. See, he's a Gore-Tex smoking jacket. At first glance he might appear suave, but then you realize he needs a good waterproof fabric to contain the smarminess constantly oozing out of his pores.

BBC NEWS: What about Hillary Clinton? And be nice.

Ron Reagan Jr.: Let's just say she's the one wearing the pantsuit and the sensible shoes in the whole Middle East crisis.

BBC NEWS: What about Rahm Emanuel's documented history of wearing ballet outfits? Doesn't that speak for itself?

Ron Reagan Jr: As you know, I can recommend it highly myself. They might seem effeminate but they can be real nutcrackers.

BBC NEWS: Right-o, then. Did I mention I'm wearing ladies' knickers right now?

Ron Reagan Jr.: Really?

BBC NEWS: Oh yes, it's a time–honored British tradition. We'll discuss it after these adverts.