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1949-2011**

the weekly

Standard



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COVER BY THOMAS FLUHARTY

Christopher Hitchens, 1949-2011

No secrets are being divulged when I report that Christopher Hitchens liked a drink every now and then. Preferably now. He wasn't sloppy about it. In fact, he always seemed in perfect control. (I once saw him steer a beach bike through the streets of Key West without spilling his Scotch.) He just liked to keep the machine well oiled so he could get on to more important things, like liberating oppressed peoples of the world, knocking out his 1,000 words a day, or starting fights with God, assuming there is one, which he didn't. In some ways, his affection for drink brought us together, setting in motion my most vivid memories of him.

As the Iraq war kicked off in 2003, I was holed up in the Kuwait City Hilton—home to unembedded reporters looking to make their way in. While I'd only briefly met Hitchens once before, word had spread through

mutual friends that my hotel room was the last cantina in town. Since the border being sealed meant the black market hooch supply had dried up, we smuggled our amber past customs officials in Listerine bottles. So when Hitchens showed up at my door early one morning kitted for battle with nothing more than his black leather jacket, blue jeans, and a half-smoked pack of Rothmans (he refused to bring Kevlar, saying it made him feel "like a counterfeit"), I offered him a welcome-to-the-war shot of "Listerine," just to be hospitable.

"I don't usually start this early," he said, his glass already gratefully

extended, "but holding yourself to a drinking schedule is always the first sign of alcoholism." With our soldiers already rolling across the desert, the humanitarian channels to thumb rides were gummed up, stranding hundreds of reporters on the bench. But Hitchens would not be deterred. On assignment for *Vanity Fair*, he only had a few days to touch Iraqi soil, and watching him get there was a study in forward motion, as he charged just as hard, if not harder, than Lord Cardigan's Light Brigade.

When we missed by minutes a hu-

waiti Ministry of Information official phrased it. But Hitchens didn't require a bus. "Convoys are an insult to journalism, I think." When a producer friend said his driver had a Syrian uncle who worked at the French embassy who could shuttle us around the checkpoints, he suggested Hitchens make him an offer. "What is this, the souk?" Hitchens said, with the impatience of a man whose mission was being pointlessly delayed. "No Hitchens has ever haggled. Tell him to tell me what he's worth."

As we fortified ourselves with liquid courage out of Apollinaris water bottles, he assured me we'd be in safe hands. He totally trusted this driver that he'd yet to lay eyes on. The driver, it turns out, charged us 500 bucks to take my truck, because he didn't want to get his dirty if we ran into a ditch or were shot in our backs. Meanwhile, Hitchens



A first breath of freedom: Hitchens enters southern Iraq, April 2003

manitarian convoy some three hours after he'd arrived in Kuwait, he considered it an utter professional failure. "This can't be happening," he despaired. When we made the list the next morning to ride into Iraq with the Red Crescent food trucks, I asked if we should commemorate our successful passage with my disposable camera. "No," he said, hoping to avoid a jinx. "Save it for the bloated corpses. Don't say anything, or something bad will happen."

Something bad did happen when enemy booms went off above our bus. The trip was cancelled "due to weather and instability," as the Ku-

took care of provisions in case we got stranded by our lonesome in Iraq for weeks at a time. His original plan entailed digging into the humanitarian cornmeal supply if needed. But he finally caved in to my caution and retrieved for us two cheese sandwich platters and a couple of bananas. "Bananas!" he exclaimed. "It's the easiest way to carry food, plus they're good for you."

At the first checkpoint, we were turned back by a British Air Force policeman who told us passage was unthinkable for security reasons. Hitchens was incensed. "Security is only a word, but it's not a reason, is

it?” When we wished to talk to the Kuwaiti in charge, our efforts to bribe him were met with cool resistance, and our yellow-bellied driver breached his contract and turned back.

We made it onto a humanitarian run the next morning, rolling down the Highway of Death, while being periodically pulled over and delayed for hours as the Kuwaitis—worshippers of all things bureaucratic—kept demanding we fill out more paperwork declaring our affiliations. “Who wants to know?” barked Hitchens, castigating reporter colleagues for complying like sheep, while pointing out particularly egregious offenders: “Look at him, reading the list upside down. Do you sign anything they put in front of you? You’ve got to push back hard or you’ll get too used to being pushed around.”

We finally made it to an impoverished Iraqi border town, watching starving, elbow-throwing Iraqis battle each other in front of the food trucks in desperate displays of aggression in which the strong hoarded and the weak went hungry. Hitch and I passed out Tic Tacs and Marlboro Reds to children begging for smokes as empty goodwill gestures. “Quite a burg, isn’t it?” he said.

Back on the Kuwaiti side, our minder, Yacoub, told us our bus would once again be delayed so the other buses could catch up and we could convoy in safety. “How are six more buses going to make us safer?” protested Hitchens. After a protracted tussle in which Yacoub demanded Hitchens’s press badges, then after a cooling off in which he gave them back, then after a resumption of hostilities when Hitchens decided he didn’t want his Kuwaiti press badge back as the Kuwaitis were proving themselves the trappers of liberty, Yacoub screamed that Hitchens would “leave Kuwait tonight!” It’s pretty hard to get kicked out of a war. But Hitchens almost managed.

Hitch waved off the threat, and went outside for a smoke, restating his golden rule: “Do something every day against Bastards HQ.” The

rest of the press corps, by now, had turned on him, except for one defiant Indian journalist who sidled up to commiserate by whispering, “We are the hollow men. We are the stuffed men.” The lines from T. S. Eliot caused Hitchens to flash his pearly yellows. “You see, only in India do people really bother with English literature anymore,” he beamed.

To say literature mattered to him would be like saying he greatly enjoyed inhaling and exhaling. It was necessity, not luxury—a refuge and a brace against randomness and Bastards HQ. So with the void he’s thoughtlessly left, I’m reminded of a few more lines, ones Christopher sent me just a short time after our travels together when his friend and editor, the *Atlantic’s* Michael Kelly, died near Baghdad. They’re from his beloved First World War poet Wilfred Owen, and Hitchens would probably shudder with horror and humility that I’d dare apply them to this occasion. But if he can witness my crime from beyond, then he has a lot of explaining to do. And so I expect there’ll be silence on his end, sadly:

*What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk, a drawing-down of
blinds.*

MATT LABASH

I wasn’t a close friend of Christopher Hitchens—more like a friendly acquaintance, and an editor grateful for his occasional contributions to THE WEEKLY STANDARD. But he was so outsized a presence, had so fertile a mind, was gifted with such a bold personality, and was altogether so much larger than life that I feel his loss deeply. I lack the gifts to convey what Christopher was like, and will defer to others who will undoubtedly do this with great skill. The morning after his death last week, looking at our email exchanges over the last year or so, I thought one—perhaps precisely because it’s about nothing

at all grand—captured something of his flair and spirit. Here’s Christopher, writing late in the evening of February 9, 2011:

Dear Bill,

Excellent issue on Egypt today. Quite daring in parts, as with RMG’s [Reuel Marc Gerech’t’s] bold humanism. I fear the current efflorescence is more likely to end with the triumph of traditional inertia than the victory of the MB [Muslim Brotherhood], let alone the liberals, but it’s still an imperishable moment.

However: “flout” for “flaunt” in THE WEEKLY STANDARD! Deserves more than a tsk tsk. Also—and this with undimmed reverence—I think Beatrice was more of a divine distraction than a “guide” to Signor Alighieri. Virgil, also, might feel miffed.

I trust you thrive.

As always
Christopher

Matt Labash closes his remembrance with a few lines from Wilfred Owen, ones Christopher sent him shortly after Michael Kelly died, and comments that “Hitchens would probably shudder with horror and humility that I’d dare apply them to this occasion.” Christopher would probably shudder at my mawkishness (and would also mock my limited poetic range!), but it was these lines from Yeats that came to my mind when I heard of his death:

*All shuffle there, all cough in ink;
All wear the carpet with their shoes;
All think what other people think;
All know the man their neighbor knows.
Lord, what would they say
Did their Catullus walk that way?*

Christopher did not walk that way.

WILLIAM KRISTOL

“One way of describing him, as well as of valuing him, would be to say that he was a man at war.”

(*Hitchens on Orwell*,
Grand Street, *Winter 1984*)

My career as a military officer began in what could be considered a unique fashion. My first decisive act as a new second lieutenant, in the immediate

aftermath of the commissioning ceremony, was to accept the kind offer of a ride from Christopher Hitchens to the bar across town where a small celebration was planned.

I remember being surprised that he drove a car, and I recall being more than mildly concerned that the flask he had been given as a gift for speaking earlier in the year at West Point, and which he had been proudly showing to a few guests at the ceremony, was in his jacket pocket. I can remember mentally totting up the number of military checkpoints between us and the bar, and contemplating the possibility that my career might end up being significantly briefer than I had planned. In the end, I concluded, “Well, it isn’t every day . . .”

My friendship with Hitchens began some time before my entrance into the military, but the two relationships had been linked nearly from the start. I was invited to dinner at his apartment in Washington on short notice while I was in the midst of applying for a commission. I had an appointment early the next morning with my recruiter, involving physical exercise, that I couldn’t miss; on the other hand, it isn’t every day . . .

The evening was, I understand, a fairly typical performance. Having recently returned from a few years in the United Kingdom, I noticed that there was a sense of bone-dry irony being employed by Hitchens at the ruthless expense of some of the other guests. It involved him assuming a variety of positions designed to outrage the liberal pieties of the dinner party (“Lesbianism is mere affectation” stands out in my memory) and then refusing to surrender despite what was obviously a lack of rigor on his side of the argument. The joke, of course, was that his targets weren’t in on the joke, a type of humor that anyone who has suffered rough verbal treatment at the hands of a former British public school boy could quickly recognize. This, and other less brutal but impious modes of revelry, continued until about three in the morning, when the mortals among us went home to recover for the following day, which I barely survived.

Piety was Hitchens’s great enemy. This tends to get missed in discussions of the particular objects of his ire, but what tied them all together for him—totalitarianism, religion, dishonest writers peddling received opinion—was that their triumph depended on the unquestioning, unearned respect of nominally free men and women. Earned respect or affection, on the other hand, always subject to rational review, he was entirely willing to show. His admiration for the U.S. military—indeed, for America in general—is a case in point.

While most of those with whom he traveled at the start of his career on the left maintained a doctrinal loathing of American power, Hitchens came to believe that so long as that power was aimed at tyrants and murderers and theocrats, and employed in the defense of human rights and liberty, it was worth admiring. That he came to be considered by some a “neoconservative” for this was, I think, amusing to him. The American Revolution was simply the best revolution going, and anyway, once opposing it became a left-wing piety, his falling out with the pious was only a matter of time.

He admired and corresponded with not a few members of the armed forces, partly from genuine respect for idealistic sacrifice, combined with a powerful gift for friendship and, of course, the benefits that having many friends brings a journalist. The experience of sharing emails or meals with him was clarified for me by a passage in his memoir about meeting Isaiah Berlin as an undergraduate: “Having every opportunity to grow weary of undergraduate naïveté and/or enthusiasm, he betrayed no sign of it and managed to answer questions as if they were being put to him for the first time. This I understood as a great gift”—and one which Hitchens, on the evidence, was determined to emulate. His kindness and graciousness were remarkable, and extended to those he inspired but never met: His article in the November 2007 *Vanity Fair* about Mark Daily, a young army officer killed in Iraq who had

gone to war, in part, as a consequence of reading Hitchens, is among his most powerful essays.

If one wanted to be unkind to Hitchens, a claim could be made that, as a natural belligerent and contrarian, he was in the end drawn naturally to soldiers, whose aggressiveness and courage he admired. Less generous formulations of this argument can be encountered among his critics, but all versions of it are essentially false. It wasn’t so much the fighting which was the point, as the fact that there was so much for a free man—if he wanted to deserve the name—to fight against. If others were unwilling to challenge the slavemasters of the world; well, then, as with Orwell before him, the willing slaves could come in for some rough treatment, too.

I remember that at our first meeting, a lunch in Dupont Circle shared while I was still a student, an old man came over to our table and hoarsely exclaimed the motto of the Greek Cypriot struggle: “*eleftheria i thanatos*”—freedom or death. (It isn’t every day . . .) In the end, Hitchens went to war with death itself. Not just by means of his treatment—a delaying action which was destined to fail in the end—but, characteristically, by going to war in print with the sentimentality and dishonest fluff that attaches to the fact of death. Practicing his craft in a condition in which most of us would be content merely to continue breathing, he went on shattering icons and offending pieties even from his hospital room: a free man, telling the truth about one final tyrant.

AARON MACLEAN

In February 2009, Christopher Hitchens got into a fight with fascists in Beirut. Visiting the country as part of a delegation of foreign journalists hosted by Lebanon’s pro-democracy March 14 movement, Hitchens was walking through the Hamra district with two colleagues when he saw a plaque commemorating a martyr from the Syrian Social Nationalist



Hitchens in Beirut, February 2009

Party. The organization's symbol is a variation on the swastika, the sight of which prompted Hitchens to pull out a pen and deface the placard. Suddenly a gang of SSNP thugs materialized and set upon Hitchens and the others, who were barely able to make their safe escape in a passing taxi.

"Had I really understood what I was doing on my little anti-swastika excursion," Hitchens writes in his memoir, *Hitch-22*, "I would not have done it." On the same street corner the SSNP had previously beaten a local journalist so badly that he was hospitalized for months. Worse, in May 2008 the SSNP had terrorized the neighborhood, killing some of its residents, when its ally Hezbollah attempted a coup d'état. Nonetheless, Hitchens's considered second-thought beggars belief: He would have scribbled an expletive on that plaque even if the only writing utensil at hand had been his own fingernail. Indeed, one way to understand his career is as an anti-swastika world tour, which has now come to an end.

Hitchens wore his bruises from that beating with aplomb, and he blushed when his hosts, including the country's soon-to-be, and now former, prime minister, Saad Hariri, teased him. Hitchens understood they were paying him a compliment: Your enemies are ours, too. Walid Jumblatt, at

the time a March 14 figure, was an old friend of Hitchens, but it was not the SSNP who nearly stood in the way of their reunion.

The delegation was late leaving Beirut, and one of Jumblatt's men explained that to reach the Druze chieftain's mountaintop mansion in time, a journey that normally required an hour along a steep winding road with blind spots throughout would have to be accomplished in half that time. Hitchens rode shotgun and cursed nonstop for 30 minutes.

If the driver knew the roads and the region, as Jumblatt's aide asserted, it is not clear how much English he knew. His cartoon-sized hands could've choked the life out of the journalist, but instead he smiled at every epithet from Hitchens. "It's not funny," Hitchens insisted, even as the sight of him sliding from side to side as his face turned pale prompted his colleagues' laughter. Hitchens was, of course, right: to fall off the side of a mountain rushing to lunch would not be funny, not even to one's enemies, but as stupid a death as there is.

Hitchens's death last week was of a different order altogether. He did not die in the streets alongside his comrades fighting fascists. He succumbed to cancer in a hospital surrounded by his family. And death didn't catch him by violent surprise.

He knew it was coming for a year and a half, and he wrote and spoke about it with courage and wit. He was a writer whose life was shaped by the literature of action, and his dying over the last 18 months was also an action, almost classical in its intent, completing a life in which allies and adversaries, causes and fights, were chosen wisely.

LEE SMITH

My first encounter with Christopher Hitchens was a memorable one. It was February 2004 and my girlfriend and I were in the elevator at Hitchens's Dupont Circle apartment building. We'd come from a swank affair at the Hilton hotel nearby, and had been invited to an after-party in the apartment of a dear friend and old colleague. My friend had already informed me that Hitchens lived in his building, reporting with evident pride that he'd met and become friends with the famous journalist. Which only made sense, because my friend is unbelievably well-read and has an obsession with single-malt scotch. One of Hitch's great talents was that he was an intellectual truffle pig, rooting out anyone in his proximity with an expansive brain or capacious liquor cabinet. Preferably both.

In any event, there he was in the elevator, in the flesh. Since my mother had handed me a copy of *No One Left to Lie To* as an undergraduate, Hitchens had been one of my favorite writers. Momentarily stunned, I had to compose myself before quavering, "Excuse me, but are you Christopher Hitchens?" Hitchens seemed a bit startled and wary. "You know who I am?" he ventured.

His identity established, I honestly didn't know where to move the conversation. My girlfriend, already a few glasses of wine into the evening and knowing my deep admiration for the man, sprang into action. She hiked up her gown, bounded over to Hitch and said, "Of course we know who you are, silly." She then wrapped her hand around the opposite side of

his head, and planted her lips on the side of his face. It was an ultimately innocent gesture, but something rather more emphatic than a peck on the cheek. Hitchens and I were both so surprised we laughed out loud. He quietly said “thank you” as we exited the elevator.

You have to love a woman like that, and so I married her. I like to think that for about five seconds in an elevator seven years ago, Hitchens loved her, too.

I had a few more encounters with him in the years following, but I can't claim any of these were special or that he was even all that familiar with me. Mainly I feel blessed to have witnessed him at the height of his rhetorical powers. I saw him rise, unprompted, at a dinner and give a drink-spewingly hilarious and dead-on accurate stemwinder on how the British Empire's creation of the state

of Pakistan might be responsible for all the problems of the world today. When I think about it now, I'm almost angry no one had the foresight to record it.

That said, while I never stopped appreciating Hitchens's skill with words, I found him frequently exasperating in his final years. I'm thinking here of the atheism thing. As an adult convert to Christianity, I'd given a great deal of thought to religious matters and having someone whose moral clarity I'd previously considered a model inveigh so definitively against God was something of a gut punch. More than that, his arguments, while rhetorically precise, were more wearying than novel.

Which brings me to the night I tried to save Christopher Hitchens's soul. Well, to be fair, it was a team effort. It happened almost a year ago. My wife and I know a couple, mutual

friends of Hitchens, who were then expecting their first child. My wife and another friend of the mother-to-be had volunteered to host a baby shower. Hitchens and his wife, Carol Blue, generous as always, agreed that their large apartment, with its spectacular top-floor views of Washington, should be the venue.

My wife went early to prepare the hors d'oeuvres and giddily informed me that before my arrival a polite older gentleman had made a point of introducing himself to everyone right before he left. It turned out to be Tom Stoppard, another literary hero of mine. Regrettably, she failed to kiss him for me.

The party was a smash. The food was delicious, the bar bottomless, and Carol, who is witty and worldly (in the best sense of that word), was a revelation all her own. The crowd was full of close friends and the

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mood was joyous. The only thing that cast a pall was Hitchens's health. His esophageal cancer had taken its toll, and he was losing his voice.

At some point in the evening, I noticed the crowd had thinned but the coats were still all by the door. I poked my head around a corner and found Hitchens smoking a cigarette and nursing a drink in the adjoining apartment, which had been recently acquired so as not to sully the primary residence with smoke. (His was a fatal diagnosis, so why not puff away? seemed to be the rationale.) He was surrounded by a coterie straining to suppress the usual lubricated revelry so they could hang on his every raspy word. I pulled up a chair.

Another journalist whose work I greatly admire was arguing with him about God. I had no previous indication that this was the case, but Hitch's sparring partner turned out to be a fervent Christian who was not afraid to be evangelical. It probably helped that he'd climbed halfway inside a bottle of very expensive scotch before he decided to challenge the world's most famous atheist on matters of ontology.

I jumped in where I could to challenge Hitch's lack of faith; even two against one with no voice, it was still a fair fight. He may have been deprived of volume, but he was as intense and brilliant as ever.

Meanwhile, girded by faith and single-malt whisky, my brother-in-Christian-arms was ever more emphatic in his pronouncements. It was both comical and inspiring, like watching Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo attitude deployed in defense of C. S. Lewis's faith.

"Damn it, Hemingway! I need the red letters!" he roared, pounding his fist on the table. The words of Jesus in many a New Testament are printed in red ink, and he was overcome with a desire to read from the Sermon on the Mount. A more studious catechumen might have memorized it; I reached for my iPhone. Preach the Gospel always; when necessary use a Bible app, as St. Francis must have said. Alas, Hitchens's apart-

ment had terrible reception. Put your trust in God, not AT&T's 3G coverage.

The debate was friendly enough. It helped that where most atheists are quick to assert empirical certainty, Hitchens would readily admit the limits of his own knowledge. In fact, he amusingly reported that when he appeared with such fellow celebrity atheists as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, they were frequently irked at his response to inquiries about the afterlife: "I don't know."

In the end, Hitchens's animosity to religion was palpable. He related the story of how he was told by a group of Presbyterians that because he had been so vocal in attacking his former faith, he would have to get himself "unbaptized" lest he risk even greater damnation than he was already courting.

By now, my wife had joined the argument. She was something of a ringer; she's an accomplished religion journalist and the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. Immediately, she laid into Hitch and told him she highly doubted the Presbyterian story for lots of obvious reasons that she eagerly detailed. And even if he had been told that, it's heresy that he should dismiss out of hand. I realized I'd seen that look in Hitchens's eye before. Once again, she had left him speechless.

After the news of Hitchens's death, I opened my email and found the following note in my inbox:

We almost had him that January night, didn't we? Maybe not. Probably not. Definitely not. But let's tell ourselves something sunk in, and took. Facing death has a way of re-ordering your worldview. He might have done things nobody will ever know.

I'd tell my friend the same thing he tried so hard to tell Hitchens around that fateful kitchen table: You've got to have faith. December 15, 2011, may be remembered as the day Christopher Hitchens died, but I prefer to think of it as his red letter day.

MARK HEMINGWAY

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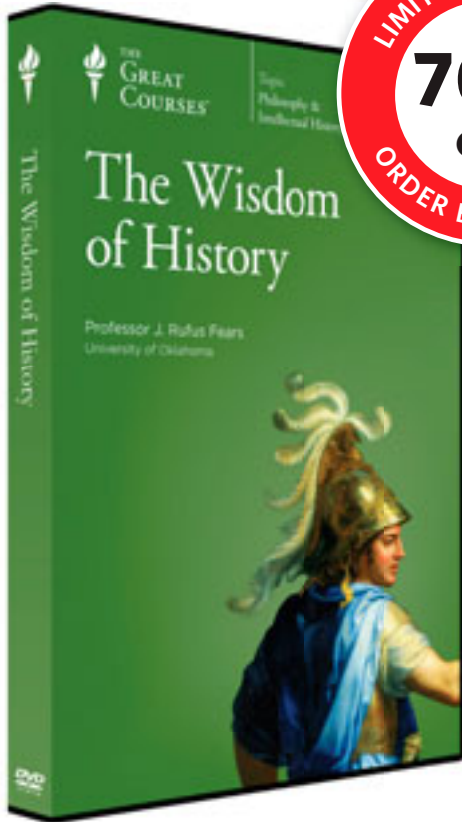
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Goodly Fragrance

Mrs. Johansen always complained. She'd whine about newsprint smearing. She'd grumble that I folded the paper wrong. Never mind that I was delivering to all her neighbors; she knew that some of them, most of them, were waiting for a chance to steal her newspaper, and she'd make me wedge the paper—folded in thirds—between her door handle and the jamb.

Which was fine on a Saturday. But who could get a fat Friday newspaper into that narrow space? So, every time I fumbled at the door, I'd hear her. Well, no, not every time. Memory is a boastful guide, at best. But often enough, she'd be up at six in the morning: a hatchet-thin woman with an angry glare and a terry-cloth bathrobe, snatching open the door to catch me, and I'd mumble something while she snarled that her paper hadn't been delivered earlier, folded just the way she liked.

I tried rearranging my route to reach her at different times, but it didn't matter. She was always there, and she hated me, and I hated her as I trudged through the snow. It was dark and cold, those winter mornings: cold enough that the snow would squeak beneath my boots, and I'd leave a trail of sharp footprints across the lawns. Until I got to Mrs. Johansen's house.

Now, this is a Christmas story—a memory that came back to me the other day as I swept the snow off my own South Dakota porch. It's a commonplace, of course, to say that smell is the most evocative of senses, but the fact is not less true for that. Some scent I caught as I worked seemed to fish down into the ice-ponds of memory and pull up, almost intact, the fra-

grance of old Christmas wreaths on the doors of dark houses. The smell of newsprint. The rich ozone aroma of diesel exhaust from a school bus warming up in a snowy parking lot. The snow itself, for that matter. In those days, the world smelled different to me in snow: crisper, cleaner, harder.

So maybe it was only the winter air—the redolence of snow—that



brought back to mind, for the first time in years, the bitterness of Mrs. Johansen and the Christmas morning I paused outside her house on my predawn paper route. But I had presents to open back home once the family woke, and church to attend, and relatives coming for a breakfast of eggs and toast and that awful grapefruit a cousin always sent a case of in December, which I had to drown in sugar to get down, and candles and carols and all the rest.

And so, at last, I climbed up to her unswept porch to cram her paper in the doorway. And of course it wouldn't fold easily, and of course that gave her time to make her way to the door before I could get away, and there she was, glowering at me, in a brown bathrobe with cotton slippers on her feet.

You know how houses sometimes have a living odor? Not foul, exactly. Just a slightly sour taint, as though the residents don't open the doors often enough. That's the smell I remember, as Mrs. Johansen stood there on Christmas morning. She tore the paper from my hands, glared for a second, and then shoved at me a large, round, pink tin of Almond Roca candy, snatched up from the entryway table. "For you," she muttered. "For Christmas." And pushed shut the door.

I don't know, maybe she had places to go, friends and family to visit. For that matter, maybe she had them coming over, although it seemed doubtful. Almost alone on the block, her house had no decorations. The tin wasn't wrapped, and there was no card or bow, but somehow she had gathered herself enough to go out and buy me a present, because—because I was in her life, I suppose, and maybe she didn't have many people in her life, and it was the Christmas season when we are called to imagine a different way for ourselves, and . . . but no, I've never known, for sure, and I realize that a better

person would have found out. A better person than I was, in those days. A better person than I am, now.

Do they even make Almond Roca anymore? I haven't seen it in years. But the candy was crunchy, wrapped in individual wrappers, and it smelled like toffee and roasted nuts and almond extract, nibbled there in the snow as I walked home. It smelled, in truth, like Christmas.

JOSEPH BOTTUM

A Deliberative Convention



Democratic National Convention in Chicago, June 27, 1932

The late Murray Kempton famously said that “a political convention is not a place where you can come away with any trace of faith in human nature.”

Witty—but wrong. American history suggests we’re entitled to put some faith in political conventions.

In 1787, the constitutional convention that met and deliberated in Philadelphia saved the Union and produced the Constitution of the United States—described by William Gladstone as “the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man.” In 1860, the second convention of the Republican party met in Chicago and nominated, on the third ballot, after considerable deliberation, our greatest president, Abraham Lincoln. In 1932, the Democrats convened in Chicago and nominated on the fourth ballot—after a few days in which the balloting was suspended for deliberation—Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Thus, once every three-quarters of a century or so, the delegates to an American political convention deliberate, and their deliberations produce a notable and impressive outcome. It could happen again in 2012. It could fall to the Republican delegates convening in Tampa, after they have cast their committed first ballot vote and failed to produce a majority for any candidate, to act as a real deliberative convention. It could fall to them to use their judgment to select the best possible nominee for their party and the best possible president for their country.

It would be exciting. It would be nerve-wracking. It

would be unpredictable. It hasn’t happened in quite a while. But it could happen. And it could be a good thing for the Republican party.

It could happen because it’s quite possible no one will emerge from the January primaries with a commanding lead in the delegate count, or a compelling surge in popular support. Four or more of the existing candidates could then continue to split votes—and delegates—through February and March. It would be even more likely to happen if someone new were to respond to a draft and enter the race belatedly, announcing his entry as early as mid-January or as late as early March—missing some primaries, to be sure, but getting on lots of ballots and getting lots of votes in April, May, and June. In any case, it might well happen that no candidate will have a majority of pledged delegates when Republicans enter the doors of the St. Pete Times Forum in Tampa in late August.

And a deadlocked convention, which then became a deliberative convention, could be a good thing, because most sentient Republicans, and most conscientious conservatives, suspect we can do better than the current field.

It may not happen. The delegates in Tampa may end up doing what delegates at recent conventions have done, rubber-stamping a nominee and serving as props in a TV show. But a rush to judgment by political elites and premature closure of the nominating process hasn’t served Republicans, or conservatives, particularly well in the last several election cycles.

AP PHOTO

It's a new political era. Perhaps that era will feature once again a real, deliberative convention—where the delegates, with the ghosts of Lincoln and FDR looking on, choose, on a second or third or fourth ballot, a compelling nominee and a consequential president.

—William Kristol

Hurry Assad Along

Last week the Obama administration's point man on Syria, Frederic Hof, went to Capitol Hill to apprise the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on the Middle East of recent developments. Nine months into the uprising against a regime that has already killed 5,000 protesters, Bashar al-Assad, said Hof, is a "dead man walking."

That's not just the White House's assessment, of course. Much of the international community sees it the same way. Even Hamas thinks that Assad has his back to the wall, which is why this long-term Damascus tenant is now looking to relocate. For the administration, said Hof, "the real question is how many steps remain" before Assad arrives at this final destination. In other words: How many more people will a dead man walking, desperate and with little left to lose, bring down with him before he gives up the ghost?

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in February, observers have contended that Bashar is scarcely as bloody-minded as his father. Hafez al-Assad was renowned for slaughtering tens of thousands in a three-week-long siege of Hama in 1982. Sure, the argument goes, Bashar's security services and paramilitary forces have tortured, raped, and murdered the civilian population at will, but he could never get away with razing an entire city as his father did. After all, times have changed. Bashar's depredations are all captured on YouTube. The whole world is watching.

Thus the Obama administration backs the Arab League initiative, which would dispatch monitors to Syria, and put "witnesses on the ground." "Our view," Hof said, "is that it is much less likely that this regime will do its worst if there are witnesses present."

It is true that the Syrian regime has stage-managed the foreign media—granting, for instance, Barbara Walters an exclusive interview with Assad while barring reporters from the country. But this hardly means that Assad is scared of being exposed as a murderer. A central part of Damascus's counterinsurgency doctrine, rather, is to broadcast its ruthlessness as widely as possible: It posts its own YouTube videos of regime atrocities to show what's in store for anyone who walks out into the street. The

regime is waging a campaign of terror against the opposition. "Witnesses" do not deter terror. They are instead a requisite of any successful terrorist operation—stay out of our way, the terrorists say, or we'll kill you, too. The more people watching, the better to convince the world that the terrorist will stop at nothing to achieve his aims.

Assad still thinks he can win. He is getting help from significant quarters, like Iran, Hezbollah, and now Russia. Moscow last week drafted a U.N. Security Council resolution that condemned the regime's violence—and the opposition's. Russia's call for dialogue between Assad and the opposition is a direct challenge to the American policy that Obama articulated in August: Assad must go. The White House, by choosing not to lead, gave the Russians an opening to make trouble.

When it comes to Syria, the administration has gone into the strategic equivalent of college basketball's four-corners' offense: Spread out the ball-handlers and run down the clock. If the White House assumes that Assad is on his way out, why should it commit any resources to easing his passage?

Yet playing out the clock is not a strategy for which any American administration is well suited. Washington has to be aggressive on offense simply because its interests are spread out across the world and are therefore susceptible to subterfuge in myriad regional contexts.

No doubt the Russians are eager to keep selling the Syrians weapons, even as their draft resolution would place an embargo on arms to the opposition. But there's a larger game for Moscow, as well: As it was during the Cold War, Syria is an arena in which Russia can take on Washington.

The Obama White House hit the reset button with Russia, which the Russians see as a sign of weakness. After accusing Hillary Clinton of inciting violence during the course of Russia's parliamentary elections last week, Vladimir Putin had the administration in a defensive posture. Clinton may not like Russia's draft resolution on Syria, but she's said she'll work with it. And why not? If the Russians want to condemn the opposition's violence, it is the administration that paved the way. As Hof said last week, the White House wants "to prevent this peaceful uprising from morphing into armed insurrection that would discredit the opposition, reinforce the regime's narrative, complicate international support, and most likely lead to a bloody and protracted conflict."

But the conflict is already bloody and already protracted. And the administration has complicated the situation by imagining that there is a legitimacy to the regime outside the presidential palace in Damascus. Everyone else in the world is following the real story, including U.N. secretary general Ban Ki-moon, who last week pleaded, "In the name of humanity, it is time for the international community to act." The subject of his address was not Moscow. It was the superpower in suspended animation.

—Lee Smith

Chaos in Caucusland

Who's going to win in Iowa?
Who knows.

BY STEPHEN F. HAYES



Closing the deal? Mitt Romney at the Missouri Valley Steel plant in Sioux City, Iowa.

“They’re all idiots.” It was a considered opinion, offered by a waitress at a popular northwest Iowa restaurant last week in response to my inquiry about her thoughts on the Republican presidential field. Our waitress was not a Democrat; in 2008, she caucused for Mitt Romney. And she’s interested in the current race, as she demonstrated with a succinct but sophisticated analysis of the candidates. The more she sees them, the less she likes them.

It’s not just Iowa. An NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll taken last week found that 27 percent of registered Republicans believe the Republican field is “weak/hardly any good candidates.” Another 51 percent gave the field only a lukewarm endorsement, saying that the field was “average/some good candidates,” and only 21 percent rated the field “strong/many good candidates.”

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

With less than three weeks to the Iowa caucuses, the race here is incredibly fluid—a fact that reflects at least some level of dissatisfaction with the choices available to voters. A Rasmussen poll taken last week found that 60 percent of likely caucusgoers are uncertain of their vote, and a *Des Moines Register* poll found the same thing at the end of November. Interviews up and down western Iowa last week seem to confirm that finding.

Bob Sievers, standing outside the convention hall after the final pre-caucus Republican debate last Thursday, says that electability is his top priority and he’s undecided but leaning toward Gingrich. “I probably won’t decide until the caucuses, but if I had to vote today, I’d probably vote for Newt.” Swap out “Newt” for “Rick” or “Mitt” or “Michele” and that conversation was typical of ones I had over three days last week.

There are three major questions that will determine the outcome of the caucuses on January 3. How far does Newt Gingrich fall? Does the enthusiasm for

Ron Paul translate into votes? And will Rick Santorum’s old-school approach to the Iowa caucuses pay off?

The growing conventional wisdom is that Gingrich is now on the same what-goes-up-must-come-down trajectory that we’ve seen with Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, and Herman Cain. That could well be true. Polls suggest a softening of support for Gingrich, both in Iowa and nationally. The airwaves in Iowa feature an unceasing torrent of ads attacking the former House speaker, mostly for his Beltway money-grubbing and for the idiosyncratic policy crusades that kept him busy after he left Congress. There is little doubt these ads are working. Iowa voters sometimes use lines from them nearly verbatim in conversations with fellow Republicans and reporters.

But in interviews last week, other voters here offered defenses of Gingrich that suggested a deeper investment in his candidacy—a willingness to explain or rationalize various Gingrich shortcomings or vulnerabilities, even the seemingly indefensible ones.

NEWS.COM

“When they keep drilling on the \$1.6 million that Newt Gingrich took—I mean, he was a private sector man!” said Madonna Lueck of Sioux City. “That’s peanuts! How much do you think Bill Clinton makes?”

This wasn’t always the case. “I used to just cringe at his name,” she says, wrinkling her nose and shrugging her shoulders. “Just because of all of those things you heard—the baggage. The three marriages, asking his wife for a divorce on her deathbed—which isn’t even true! That was a lie. She didn’t even die! And the way things are in the world today, . . .” she says, her voice trailing off.

Doc Zortman, who says he will probably end up caucusing for Rick Santorum, is also an enthusiastic Gingrich defender. “One of the reasons Newt Gingrich is not loved by the career politicians is that he knows where the bodies are buried. And I don’t think they want him coming in there and saying—‘You know what, Nancy? We might have sat on the couch together, but I’m going to start blowing the whistle.’”

Are these voters anomalous, or do they suggest a broader willingness to stick with Gingrich in spite of the attacks from other candidates and the media?

Ron Paul finished fifth in the 2008 Iowa caucuses with 10 percent of the vote. In the intervening four years, his supporters have focused their efforts on a good showing here. In recent weeks he has been getting around 20 percent in polls of likely caucusgoers, and Iowa Republicans say that Paul may well have the best organization in the state.

Lynn Spetman, of Council Bluffs, is one of the thousands of Iowa Republicans to receive a *Ron Paul Family Cookbook* in the mail. She has never been a Paul supporter, and she won’t be supporting him this year. “It’s a folksy, family cookbook,” she says, that has some good recipes.

Brittany Fiala, the Webster County volunteer coordinator for Paul, says the campaign expects 500 volunteers from around the country to descend on Iowa December 27 for a door-knocking, phone-banking effort they are calling

“Christmas with Ron Paul.” Titus Landegent, the Plymouth County coordinator, says the campaign will continue to use unconventional ways to reach voters and to get them to the caucus sites. “I put two magnetic signs on my van and I’m just driving around,” says Landegent, who has been hosting strangers at his home despite the presence of a newborn. “If it snows on caucus day, I’m going to hire a dog-sled team,” he adds with a distant smile. He may not be kidding.

Rick Santorum has approached Iowa with dogged persistence. “I think he moved his family here,” says Lueck. Santorum has visited all 99 of Iowa’s counties, and his campaign says he has attended more than 300 townhalls across the state. He has focused on social issues more than the other candidates. Santorum is also counting on the strong network of home-schoolers in Iowa, whose support helped former

Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee win the caucuses in 2008 with a surprising 34 percent of the vote.

“I think Santorum is being underestimated in the polls,” says Tom Mitchell, who caucused for Romney in 2008 and says he would back Santorum if he thought he could win. “I go to a lot of events, and his support out there is a lot stronger than you’re seeing in the polls.”

The answers to the three questions may determine the winner of the caucuses and shape the primary season to follow. If Mitt Romney wins Iowa after a relatively minimal effort here, he’ll be heading to New Hampshire with considerable momentum and the best national organization of any candidate. But if Newt Gingrich or Ron Paul wins, the volatility we have seen in recent months may prove to have been a harbinger of even greater uncertainty in the months to come. ♦

The Agony of Victory

It’s the age of anxiety for Republicans.

BY FRED BARNES

The thrill is gone. Enthusiasm fired by the Republican sweep in the 2010 election has faded as fear of blowing the opportunity to defeat President Obama in 2012 has grown. Republican control of the House has produced tense relations between GOP leaders (plus many members) and conservative groups upset that Republicans haven’t achieved more. Oh, the agony of victory!

Republicans in Congress agree on just about everything: repeal of Obamacare, entitlement reform, tax reform to broaden the base and reduce

tax rates, serious cuts in domestic spending, no deep reductions in defense spending, right-to-life issues.

Yet success depends on the ouster of Obama. There’s no doubt he’s ripe for defeat, given the facts on the ground. Republicans, independents, and many Democrats regard him as weak and barely competent. The economy, the job market, the housing sector, and government finances are in pathetic shape. And his support among demographic groups that backed him in 2008, except for African Americans, has dwindled.

So you might think Republicans would be optimistic and excited, and initially they were. Now anxiety is

Fred Barnes is executive editor of
THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

setting in, based on the assessment that none of the Republican presidential candidates has a better than even chance of defeating Obama. And if these candidates can't inspire Republicans, how can they arouse independents and swing voters?

Polls show they aren't. A *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll last week found the two Republican front-runners, Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney, facing "large majorities" of independents and Hispanics solidly against them. Should this situation continue, Gingrich or Romney would have difficulty beating Obama.

Okay, it's early. For the past six months, the Republican candidates have been tied down in nationally televised debates in which they quibble with each other. The nominee who emerges will be able to make Obama and his record the central issue of the election, and win. At least that's the hope.

By the way, Republican prospects of capturing the Senate have taken a slight dip too. Democrats have 23 seats at stake next year, Republicans just 10. Fundraising has favored Democratic candidates so far. And North Dakota's open Democratic seat is no longer regarded as a slam dunk for Republicans with the announcement by Democrat Heidi Heitkamp, a director of Dakota Gasification Company and former state attorney general, that she'll challenge Republican Rick Berg. Democrats currently hold the Senate, 53-47.

Among House Republicans, the Heritage Foundation has always been seen as a conservative ally. But they don't feel as warmly toward Heritage's new and very aggressive lobbying arm, Heritage Action (HA). There's no disagreement on issues, only tactics. HA, led by 29-year-old Michael Needham, believes Republicans have settled for less than they could have gotten, especially in spending cuts, in negotiations with Democrats.

Heritage lobbyists have urged Republicans to defeat a handful of bipartisan compromises endorsed by House GOP leaders, including the increase in the debt limit in August.

HA would support the increase, Needham declared, if substantial spending cuts or reforms, like funding Medicaid through block grants to states, were attached. HA believed the cuts were too meager and lobbied against increasing the debt limit.

But it's how HA determines its ratings of House members' voting records that has particularly irritated Republicans. One reason conservatives have gotten lower ratings than they expected: HA includes votes on minor issues and sponsorship of legislation in determining its rating.

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Heritage Action cited four bills on which it considered cosponsorship to be critical. Those who declined to sign on—the bills dealt with welfare, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, education, and energy—got a negative score.

Republican leaders have complained directly to Heritage president Ed Feulner and other Heritage officials about HA. Republican representative Geoff Davis of Kentucky attacked HA publicly as "a worthless organization to the conservative movement." But Feulner has stood by it.

HA was not created as a cheerleader for Republicans in Congress. Rather, it applies pressure on the assumption that strong conservative legislation won't pass otherwise. Needham says HA wants Republicans to "live up to the message of the 2010 election."

Another source of friction is RedState, an influential conservative outfit that promotes primary challenges of congressional Republicans it deems insufficiently conservative. Its top target in 2012 is Fred Upton of Michigan. Erick Erickson, RedState's boss, cites Upton's relatively low HA rating.

Going after Upton is both divisive and childish. As chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Upton has been one of the Republican surprises of 2010, a stalwart on important conservative initiatives on health care, energy, and the environment.

When Majority Leader Eric Cantor issued a list of 10 measures to curb regulatory excess, all 10 had come from Upton's committee, including bills to prohibit the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating greenhouse gases and to force it to withdraw regulations on boilers, cement facilities, and utilities.

Would Obama have taken over-regulation of ozone off the table if Upton hadn't gone after the EPA with such vigor? Not likely. Erickson said Upton, as a member of the bipartisan supercommittee, "seem[ed] hellbent on raising your taxes." Yet he backed a cut in individual and corporate tax rates and opposed any tax hike at all.

Upton has been blamed for passage of the lightbulb bill in 2007 that requires replacement of incandescent lights by compact fluorescent bulbs. In truth, the Energy and Commerce Committee passed the bill overwhelmingly by a voice vote, including Upton's.

When he became chairman this year, Upton promised to repeal the bill. While it appeared nothing would happen in 2011, Upton worked quietly to avoid alarming environmental groups with clout on Capitol Hill. "Our eye was on the prize," a committee staffer says.

The prize was won. In the bipartisan spending bill for 2012, enforcement of the law on lightbulbs was banned. So save your old incandescent bulbs and expect to find more of them on sale again. A small Republican victory, for sure, but also reason for good cheer and less fretfulness among Republicans. ♦

In the Hunt?

In New Hampshire, the former Utah governor is 25 points behind, and gaining.

BY MICHAEL WARREN

Wayne MacDonald, the chairman of the New Hampshire Republican State Committee, has a general message for presidential candidates as the January 10 Granite State primary approaches: “Time’s a-wastin’.” MacDonald’s warning might as well be directed straight at Jon Huntsman’s New Hampshire campaign, which, for the time being, is Jon Huntsman’s entire campaign.

In late September, the former Utah governor and U.S. ambassador to China moved his national headquarters from balmy Orlando to frigid Manchester, recognizing that the sunny early days of the Huntsman campaign, when Joe Scarborough and Jacob Weisberg were fawning over this “different kind” of Republican, were clearly over. In Manchester, only the cold, hard truth remains. If Huntsman has any chance to win the GOP nomination for president, he’s going to have to successfully challenge Mitt Romney in New Hampshire.

And that’s what the campaign has been trying to do, with middling success. Romney can boast endorsements from New Hampshire power players like Republican senator Kelly Ayotte, congressman Charlie Bass, former senator (and former governor) Judd Gregg, and former governor John H. Sununu. The Huntsman camp, instead, touts its “advanced grassroots organization.”

Michael Warren is a reporter at
THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

“We have 140 grassroots leaders in 90 towns,” says spokesman Tim Miller. It’s a start, but it means the Huntsman campaign has had to make its ground game—what Sununu calls the “see me, touch me, feel me” aspect



Jon Huntsman campaigns in Nashua, N.H.

of politics—a top priority. Miller insists, “We’re going to outwork everybody in the state.”

Huntsman has been working hard. He’s made 12 trips to New Hampshire since the end of September, attending over 122 events. Mark McIntosh, a George W. Bush administration veteran and the campaign’s policy director, speaks positively about the growth of the crowds at these events. “We’re getting way over 100 people” at events across the state, McIntosh says.

But without support from the New Hampshire establishment, and without money (the campaign announced in October it was \$1 million in debt), how does Huntsman actually compete against the Romney juggernaut? Huntsman needs to convince New Hampshire Republicans, particularly those moderate conservatives

predisposed to vote for Romney, of two things: that a Romney victory on January 10 is not inevitable, and that Huntsman is the competent-conservative alternative to Romney.

To the first point, Huntsman has found an unwitting partner in the most recent anti-Romney candidate, Newt Gingrich. For now, Gingrich sits atop the national polls and is polling second behind Romney in New Hampshire, presenting the former Massachusetts governor with his most significant challenge so far. If voters are giving Gingrich a look in New Hampshire, maybe they’ll consider Huntsman, too.

That seems to be what the campaign hopes. After the influential *New Hampshire Union Leader* endorsed Gingrich on November 27, denying Romney a feather in his homburg, Huntsman put his own wishful gloss on the news. “I think it reflects more than anything else the fluidity, the unpredictability of the race right now,” he said on *Fox News Sunday*.

On December 12, Huntsman joined Gingrich at Saint Anselm College in Manchester for what was billed as a “Lincoln-Douglas”-style debate. Both C-SPAN and WMUR, New Hampshire’s only major network-affiliated television station, broadcast the encounter. The Huntsman campaign claims its website’s video stream received over 14,000 views. Afterward, Huntsman took the opportunity to needle Romney with an invitation to hold their own one-on-one debate. The Romney campaign has yet to respond.

The second, more difficult task for the Huntsman campaign is making the case for his conservative credentials. For his policy advisers, it’s been a monumental struggle to break the largely self-created perception that Huntsman is a moderate-to-liberal Republican. “I’ve been arguing since summer that this guy’s a hell of a lot more conservative than he’s made out

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to be,” says McIntosh. “That’s been a bit of a frustration for me.”

The strategy has been to emphasize to voters Romney’s deviations from conservative policy and politics while stressing a single theme, that Huntsman is a “consistent conservative.” One devastating web ad features video footage of Romney excoriating John Kerry in 2004 for flip-flopping on issue after issue, with clips of talking heads discussing Romney’s own flip-flops spliced in. The counter-message from Huntsman? “Consistency matters.”

Boyden Gray, a senior policy adviser and former official in the George H.W. Bush administration, points to Huntsman’s conservative positions on Paul Ryan’s “Path to Prosperity” Medicare reform plan (he’s the first presidential candidate to explicitly endorse it), on school choice (he’s for it), and on abortion (he’s

strongly pro-life). And on the issue of health care, Gray notes, Huntsman has a particular leg up on Romney. As governor of Utah, Huntsman rejected the idea of including an individual health insurance mandate in his 2008 reforms. “He didn’t have the mandate,” Gray says. “Romney did.”

So, is Huntsman’s New Hampshire plan working? At the beginning of October, he was stuck in the single digits in the polls, where he remained for most of the next two months. But a new poll from Suffolk University released on December 14 showed Huntsman in third place, with 13 percent support among Republican primary voters, his highest numbers in New Hampshire yet. That’s still 25 points behind Romney, but only 7 behind Gingrich. If Romney underperforms in Iowa and voters decide he isn’t as electable as claimed, maybe they will bolt for Huntsman.

Maybe. The inescapable truth is that there’s a lot of seeing, touching, and feeling left to do, and Huntsman is running out of time. Despite his intense focus on the state over the fall, Huntsman’s name ID there is floating somewhere in the “high sixties, low seventies,” according to Miller. Romney and Gingrich have near-universal recognition.

“Huntsman just hasn’t caught fire,” MacDonald observes. “He came in much later.” Romney was a presence during the 2010 elections, he says, and voters remember that.

The Romney campaign, for its part, doesn’t seem to take a threat from Huntsman seriously. “At some point, the fact that Governor Huntsman is an Obamaite at heart will be part of the mix,” says Sununu. “I don’t think people pay much attention to what Governor Huntsman says.” ♦

Bringing the EPA Back to Reality

By Thomas J. Donohue

President and CEO
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

Is it just me, or does it seem like EPA regulators are writing new rules in an alternate reality? Maybe it’s a gravity-free zone in which the burden of a growing federal bureaucracy doesn’t weigh down the economy, or where the uncertainty of overregulation isn’t a drag on job creation.

Take the Utility Maximum Achievable Control Technology (MACT) rule requiring utility companies to undertake expensive retrofitting or plant rebuilding to control emissions. One of EPA’s costliest rules ever, it could strain our power supply and cast a dark shadow over our economy and job creation at a time we can ill-afford it.

Utility MACT will carry heavy compliance costs. Facing the expenses of replacing power plants, installing compliance equipment, and building new natural gas lines and transmission lines, utility companies may be forced to freeze

hiring or layoff existing workers.

Many plants will temporarily shut down for retrofits. If utility companies aren’t producing power, then utility workers aren’t getting paid. Worse still, others may halt operations altogether. Ahead of the rule being issued, dozens of coal-fired plants signaled they may have no choice but to retire because compliance will be too complicated or costly.

And most utilities will be forced to make the expensive upgrades in an unrealistically short time frame, straining the power grid and threatening the reliability of power in America. Electricity distributors have warned that they may have to ration power to large industrial consumers as utilities work to comply with the rules. Clearly, the EPA hasn’t fully considered how rushed implementation would affect our electricity supply—not to mention the economic impact when the lights go out on businesses large and small.

So what’s the gain for all this pain? A *Wall Street Journal* editorial points out that the Utility MACT rule will result in

\$6.1 million in savings through mercury reductions. But the rule will cost \$11 billion annually—and that doesn’t factor in the indirect costs of slowed economic growth and stifled job creation.

Continued pursuit of sweeping regulations at the expense of our economy signals a stubborn detachment from reality. The EPA’s recent ozone rules were so over the top, and the costs and benefits were so out of balance, that the president had to intervene and tell the agency to slow down. Was that not a reality check?

We’re all for a clean and reliable power supply—but the transition must be cost-effective and executed within a feasible time frame. The president should bring the EPA back to reality again, starting by granting power plants more time to comply with Utility MACT.



U.S. Chamber of Commerce
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A Very Beatable President

But the GOP can still blow it. BY JAY COST



Next year is shaping up as the least favorable for an incumbent president since 1992.

We are a little over 10 months from Election Day, and the Christmas hope of many conservatives is that voters next November will deliver a decisive rebuke to President Barack Obama. Obviously, a lot can happen in 10 months. Nevertheless, many of the fundamentals of the race are already in place. And the news is not good for the president.

Horse race polls are of limited value this far from Election Day. The 10 to 15 percent of the electorate in the middle—the slice of voters who swing elections—aren't paying much attention. Sometimes these voters do not make a decision until the very last minute, as was the case in the 1980 campaign between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter.

Still, the polls offer some guidance. The RealClearPolitics.com average of them shows Obama earning just

43 percent when matched against an unnamed Republican, and only 46 percent when matched against Mitt Romney. This is bad for the president because public opinion about an incumbent is pretty firm and difficult—though not impossible—to move, absent shifts in the broader political context.

And what to make of that context? Each presidential election is fought over a series of shifting national concerns, and the issues of the 2012 cycle are the least favorable for an incumbent president since 1992, and maybe even since 1980. And we know what happened to the incumbents in those elections.

Three issues in particular dominate the discussion, and none of them favors Obama. The most important is the economy, which has been struggling through a decade of weak growth. Consider that between 1951 and 2000, the American economy grew by an average of 37 percent every decade. Between 2001 and 2010,

the pace of growth was less than half that, at just 15 percent.

This has generated an enormous “output gap”—the difference between what the economy would ideally produce and what it has actually done. Over the last decade, the size of this gap is a yawning \$2.5 trillion. The average American has felt the effects in stubbornly high unemployment and stagnant real incomes, and the effort of the Federal Reserve to generate growth by cutting interest rates to the bone means that people who save their pennies earn virtually no interest for their scrimping.

Barack Obama certainly doesn't deserve all the blame, but he will pay a high political price for three reasons. First, he overpromised to an absurd degree when he entered office. He claimed that the stimulus bill would reignite the American growth machine and keep unemployment under 8 percent. Neither happened, so Obama will pay for his unjustified optimism.

Second, he failed to form a bipartisan coalition to tackle the economic problem. The many comparisons made between Barack Obama and Franklin Roosevelt in the heady days of winter 2009 always seemed to overlook the fact that FDR's New Deal, at least in its early stages, was bipartisan, framed as a national response to a national emergency. Obama's approach was to breezily tell congressional Republicans, “I won.” Because the stimulus manifestly failed to deliver the growth that the president promised, Obama and congressional Democrats must bear the weight of that failure all by themselves.

Third, Obama turned his attention away from the economy far too quickly. This points to another difference between Obama and Roosevelt. FDR essentially threw everything at the Depression, including the kitchen sink; the legislating of 1933 and 1934 was relentlessly focused on the economy, and voters had no choice but to conclude that Roosevelt was, at the very least, doing everything he could think of. Not so with Obama. Having passed their stimulus, this president

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and his allies in Congress turned their attention to grander social welfare ambitions, something FDR did not begin to do until 1935, when the economy had already started growing at a robust rate.

Thus, the only real question is how big a price Obama will pay. The December survey of economists by the *Wall Street Journal* found that, on average, they expect 2012 annual GDP to come in at 2.3 percent, far below the postwar average, unemployment to be stuck at or above 8.5 percent for the whole year, and home prices to be flat. No incumbent president since FDR has been reelected when the economy still has so much slack.

Obama's record on the economy is so dismal that, all by itself, it should be sufficient for an able Republican to defeat him. Yet this president faces other daunting challenges. The next big one is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare. It contributed mightily to the GOP wave of 2010, and if the Republicans play their cards right, it will defeat Obama next year.

The reason is reducible to a simple calculation of costs and benefits. The president and his allies in Congress advertised their bill as a cost-reduction package, framing it as a win-win-win: People without insurance would get coverage, people with insurance would see their premiums reduced, and taxpayers would eventually enjoy a lower bill for it all.

However, this argument was a smokescreen. Obamacare focuses almost entirely on coverage expansion. The cost-reducing mechanisms are either very weak, politically impractical, or will eventually hit the middle class square in the jaw. The bill is in fact a win-lose-lose: Those without insurance definitely win, but only because of a transfer of wealth from people with insurance as well as from taxpayers.

Since most Americans already have insurance, this establishes an easy goal for the Republican nominee: Convince the average American that he will be worse off because of

the bill. This should not be a difficult task. Credible, nonpartisan reports, many from government agencies, spell out in great detail how millions of Americans will be made worse off by Obamacare. What's more, Obamacare continues to poll very poorly, mainly because of the messy process that produced it. Most Americans believe that the political system is broken, and that the effort of congressional Democrats in 2009-2010 to pass Obamacare is the prime example of what's going wrong in Washington. Thus, it should be relatively easy for the GOP to convince voters they are bound to lose because bad process produces bad policy.

As with health care, the Republican job on the budget deficit will come down to convincing voters that their intuitions are correct: They are losers because Obama raided the Treasury to pay off Democratic client groups.

The final issue Obama will confront is the deficit. Like the economy, this is an issue that Obama owns politically, even if he is only partly responsible for it. Reduced tax revenues and greater demand for social welfare programs make deficits boom in a recession. And the long-term deficit is almost entirely a function of the runaway cost of Medicare.

Still, the president is politically vulnerable for good reason: He never really tried to forge a bipartisan coalition to tackle deficit reduction. His own deficit commission offered him a sensible, bipartisan plan—the “Simpson-Bowles” plan—that he summarily rejected.

And make no mistake: The deficit is a powerful political issue. The federal budget is massively complex—Rep. Paul Ryan and a handful of wonks at the Congressional Budget Office might be the only people in the country who begin to understand

it. Yet most people grasp that money borrowed by the federal government must one day be paid back, with interest, by the taxpayer. Thus, as with health care, the Republican job on the deficit will come down to convincing voters that their intuitions are correct: They are losers because Obama raided the Treasury to pay off Democratic client groups, leaving the average taxpayer to foot the bill.

All in all, this election will be fought more on bread-and-butter issues than any since at least 1992. Ronald Reagan's question to the nation in the final debate against Jimmy Carter—“Are you better off today than you were four years ago?”—will be the GOP's mantra in 2012. The answer is obviously no, and the Republicans will use the economy, Obamacare, and the deficit to pin the blame squarely on the president.

How will the Obama team counter? The Obama campaign has already telegraphed its strategy for 2012, and it is worth reviewing in some detail, beginning with the demographics of the electorate. Obama's election in 2008 depended largely on an unprecedented haul among nonwhite voters, and Obama's campaign gurus believe that demography can trump economics in the Mountain West swing states of Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico as well as the “New South” states of Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia. Additionally, they are counting on another monumental haul from the youth vote, hoping that massive turnout at colleges like Ohio State and the University of Michigan will keep those important Rust Belt states in the Democratic column.

There is little doubt that Barack Obama will win a majority of the non-white vote and the young next year. Even so, the president and his team are being wildly optimistic (assuming they believe their own spin). For starters, large majorities among minorities and kids are built into every Democratic candidate's campaign. Obama cannot just win these groups; he has to win them by

such overwhelming margins that they cover his massive losses among older white voters.

Proponents of a so-called emerging Democratic majority, who argue that the nonwhite vote will eventually transform the Democrats into permanent occupants of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., consistently make a category error when they discuss these voters. African Americans, no doubt, are solid Democrats who support their party year in, year out, regardless of the national climate. Yet Hispanics are not Democratic loyalists. They are swing voters who tilt Democratic. The difference between these two groups is like the difference between Massachusetts and Pennsylvania—the Bay State almost never votes Republican for president, while the Keystone State does so in a reasonably good year for the GOP.

And Obama's numbers among Hispanics and other nonblack minority groups are less than stellar. The most recent reading from Gallup shows the president earning 52 percent approval from Hispanics, which compares unfavorably to his 67 percent share of the Hispanic vote in 2008. The same goes for the youth vote—again, a swing group with a Democratic tilt. Gallup finds Obama with just 50 percent approval from adults aged 18 to 29, down from 66 percent among these voters in 2008.

So if demographics will not save Obama, what about his message? His campaign team has already made fairly clear their approach to the 2012 election. The president will focus relentlessly on inputs. Obama is going to gloss over the weak performance of the economy to emphasize all of the “important” things he has done to fix the problem. We see this in the daily drumbeat out of the White House: The “do-nothing” Congress has not acted to fix the economy, so Obama will. The idea is to emphasize the energy and vigor of the president in tackling the problem, so people will at least believe he is trying. FDR benefited from this appearance, but that was in large part because he was actually doing everything he could.

With Obama, it is mostly a posture he adopted after the 2010 election.

The other major message will be pure demagoguery: The Republicans are the party of extremists who threaten the republic. This message is reminiscent of the Herbert Hoover reelection effort; in late October 1932, the beleaguered president said:

We are told by the opposition that we must have a change, that we must have a new deal. It is not the change that comes from normal development of national life to which I object, but the proposal to alter the whole foundations of our national life which have been built through generations of testing and struggle, and of the principles upon which we have built the nation. . . . Our people should consider [carefully] whether they will support changes which radically affect the whole system which has been built up by a hundred and fifty years of the toil of the fathers.

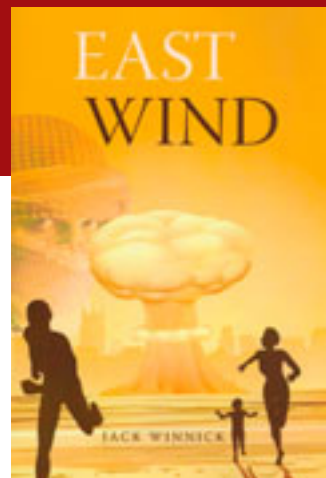
Team Obama will basically make the same case: The Republican program is at its core radical and anti-American. Will it work for them? The best way to answer this question is with another question: *Did it work for Hoover?*

The Obama strategy as it has developed is insufficient to produce reelection. The president is going to need assistance, either from more robust growth or a fumble by the Republicans. Bad demographic math, phony activism, and Hooveresque demagoguery is not enough to win.

Add all this up, and we're left with this conclusion: If things continue on the same trajectory as they have over the last three years, the president will face a near insuperable challenge for reelection. Provided that the GOP nominates a reasonably attractive candidate, it will truly be one for the history books if Obama can be reelected with a terribly weak economy, a massively unpopular health care bill, an obscenely large deficit, and no compelling case for a second term.

It could happen, obviously, but I would not bet my money on it. Not in this economy! ♦

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The Company Ron Paul Keeps

Meet Alex Jones.

BY JAMES KIRCHICK



He didn't pay attention to newsletters that earned his family millions?

The Republican Jewish Coalition announced this month that congressman Ron Paul would not be among the six guests invited to participate in its Republican Presidential Candidates Forum. “He’s just so far outside of the mainstream of the Republican party and this organization,” said Matt Brooks, executive director of the RJC, adding that the group “rejects his misguided and extreme views.”

Paul’s exclusion caused an uproar, with critics alleging that his stand on Israel had earned the RJC’s ire; an absolutist libertarian, Paul opposes foreign aid to all countries, including the Jewish state. “This seems to me

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more of an attempt to draw boundaries around acceptable policy discourse than any active concern that President Dr. Ron Paul would be actively anti-Israel or anti-Semitic,” wrote *Reason* editor Matt Welch. Chris McGreal of the *Guardian* reported that Paul “was barred because of his views on Israel.” Even Seth Lipsky, editor of the *New York Sun* and a valiant defender of Israel (and friend and mentor of this writer), opined, “The whole idea of an organization of Jewish Republicans worrying about the mainstream strikes me as a bit contradictory.”

While Paul’s views on Israel certainly place him outside the American, never mind Republican, mainstream, there is an even more elementary reason the RJC was right to exclude him from its event. It is Paul’s lucrative and decades-long promotion of bigotry

and conspiracy theories, for which he has yet to account fully, and his continuing espousal of extremist views, that should make him unwelcome at any respectable forum, not only those hosted by Jewish organizations.

In January 2008, the *New Republic* ran my story reporting the contents of monthly newsletters that Paul published throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While a handful of controversial passages from these bulletins had been quoted previously, I was able to track down nearly the entire archive, scattered between the University of Kansas and the Wisconsin Historical Society (both of which housed the newsletters in collections of extreme right-wing American political literature). Though particular articles rarely carried a byline, the vast majority were written in the first person, while the title of the newsletter, in its various iterations, always featured Paul’s name: *Ron Paul’s Freedom Report*, the *Ron Paul Political Report*, the *Ron Paul Survival Report*, and the *Ron Paul Investment Letter*. What I found was unpleasant.

“Order was only restored in L.A. when it came time for the blacks to pick up their welfare checks,” read a typical article from the June 1992 “Special Issue on Racial Terrorism,” a supplement to the *Ron Paul Political Report*. Racial apocalypse was the most persistent theme of the newsletters; a 1990 issue warned of “The Coming Race War,” and an article the following year about disturbances in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C., was entitled “Animals Take Over the D.C. Zoo.” Paul alleged that Martin Luther King Jr., “the world-class philanderer who beat up his par-amours,” had also “seduced underage girls and boys.” The man who would later proclaim King a “hero” attacked Ronald Reagan for signing legislation creating the federal holiday in his name, complaining, “We can thank him for our annual Hate Whitey Day.”

No conspiracy theory was too outlandish for Paul’s endorsement. One newsletter reported on the heretofore unknown phenomenon of “Needlin’,” in which “gangs of black girls between

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the ages of 12 and 14” roamed the streets of New York and injected white women with possibly HIV-infected syringes. Another newsletter warned that “the AIDS patient” should not be allowed to eat in restaurants because “AIDS can be transmitted by saliva,” a strange claim for a physician to make.

Paul gave credence to the theory, later shown to have been the product of a Soviet disinformation effort, that AIDS had been created in a U.S. government laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland. Three months before far-right extremists killed 168 Americans in Oklahoma City, Paul’s newsletter praised the “1,500 local militias now training to defend liberty” as “one of the most encouraging developments in America.” And he offered specific advice to antigovernment militia members, such as, “Keep the group size down,” “Keep quiet and you’re harder to find,” “Leave no clues,” “Avoid the phone as much as possible,” and “Don’t fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here.”

If the above were not enough to place Paul beyond the pale for the RJC, what the congressman had to say about Jews and Israel would probably be a deal-breaker. No foreign country was mentioned in the newsletters more often than Israel. A 1987 newsletter termed it “an aggressive, national socialist state,” and another missive, on the subject of the 1993 World Trade Center attack, concluded, “Whether it was a setup by the Israeli Mossad, as a Jewish friend of mine suspects, or was truly a retaliation by the Islamic fundamentalists, matters little.” In 1990, the newsletter cast aspersions on the “tens of thousands of well-placed friends of Israel in all countries who are willing to wok [sic] for the Mossad in their area of expertise.”

This is just a sample of the hateful and conspiratorial nonsense that Paul promoted for decades under his own name. His response to the revelations was nothing short of unbelievable. “The quotations in the *New Republic* article are not mine and do not represent what I believe or have

ever believed,” he said. “When I was out of Congress and practicing medicine full-time, a newsletter was published under my name that I did not edit. Several writers contributed to the product. For over a decade, I have publicly taken moral responsibility for not paying closer attention to what went out under my name.” In an interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer two days after the article appeared, Paul waved away accusations of racism by saying that he was “gaining ground with the blacks” and “getting more votes right now and more support from the blacks.”

Yet a subsequent report by *Reason* found that Ron Paul & Associates, the defunct company that published the newsletters and which counted Paul and his wife as officers, reported an income of nearly \$1 million in 1993 alone. If this figure is reliable, Paul must have earned multiple millions of dollars over the two decades plus of the newsletters’ existence. It is incredible that he had less than an active interest in what was being printed as part of a subscription newsletter enterprise that earned him and his family millions of dollars. Ed Crane, the president of the Cato Institute, said Paul told him that “his best source of congressional campaign donations was the mailing list for the *Spotlight*, the conspiracy-mongering, anti-Semitic tabloid run by the Holocaust denier Willis Carto.”

This sordid history would not bear repeating but for the fact that the media love to portray Paul as a truth-telling, antiwar Republican standing up to the “hawkish” conservative establishment. Otherwise, the newsletters, and Paul’s continued failure to name their author, would be mentioned in every story about him, and he would be relegated to the fringe where he belongs. But Paul has escaped the sort of media scrutiny that would bury other political figures. A December 15 profile of Paul

in the *Washington Post*, for instance, affectionately described his love of gardening and *The Sound of Music* and judged that “world events have conspired to make him look increasingly on point”—all without any mention of the newsletter controversy. Though present at nearly every Republican debate, he has yet to be asked about the newsletters. Had Paul’s persona and views changed significantly since 2008, this oversight might be understandable. But he continues to say and do things suggesting that, far from disowning the statements he has claimed “do not represent what I believe or have ever believed,” he still believes them.

In the four years since my article appeared, Paul has gone right on appearing regularly on the radio program of Alex Jones, the most popular conspiracy theorist in America (unless that distinction belongs to Paul himself). To understand Jones’s paranoid worldview, it helps to watch a recent documentary



Radio host Alex Jones

he produced, *Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement*, which reveals the secret plot of George Pataki, David Rockefeller, and Queen Beatrix, among other luminaries, to exterminate humanity and transform themselves into “superhuman” computer hybrids able to “travel throughout the cosmos.” There is nothing Jones believes the American government isn’t capable of, from “[encouraging] homosexuality with chemicals so that people don’t have children” to blowing up the Space Shuttle Columbia, a “textbook psychological warfare operation.”

In a March 2009 interview, Paul entertained Jones’s claim that NORTHCOM, the U.S. military’s combatant command for North America, is “taking over” the country. “The average member of Congress probably isn’t a participant in the grand conspiracy,” Paul reassured the fevered host, essentially acknowledging that

such a conspiracy exists. “We need to take out the CIA.” On Paul’s latest appearance on the Jones show, just last week, he called allegations that Iran had attempted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States a “propaganda stunt” of the Obama administration. In a January 2010 speech, Paul announced, “There’s been a coup, have you heard? It’s the CIA coup” against the American government. “They’re in businesses, in drug businesses,” the congressman added.

Likewise, Paul’s insistence that America should be a “friend” of Israel is belied by public statements like one from a November 22 GOP debate: “Why do we have this automatic commitment that we’re going to send our kids and send our money endlessly to Israel?” This is an echo of Pat Buchanan’s 1990 claim that if the United States went to war against Saddam Hussein it would be on behalf of Israel, and that “kids with names like McAllister, Murphy, Gonzales, and Leroy Brown” would be the ones doing the fighting and dying. The assertion that American soldiers are risking their lives to protect Israel and not the United States is as false today as it was two decades ago.

Last, Paul continues to be the favorite candidate of those who believe that the United States either orchestrated the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or allowed them to happen in order to create the pretext for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It’s not hard to understand why. In a December 9 speech to supporters in Iowa, Paul had this to say: “Just think of what happened after 9/11. Immediately before there was any assessment there was glee in the administration because now we can invade Iraq.”

Paul’s more mainstream supporters have always explained away his popularity with 9/11 “Truthers” as an unfortunate consequence of his altruistic, if at times naïve, libertarian ethos: The man just loves freedom so much that he’s loath to turn away backers who may think differently from him. To anyone who bothers to look into Ron Paul’s record, that claim is simply not credible. ♦

Mortgaging Our Future

The case against 30-year loans.

BY ELI LEHRER & IKE BRANNON

The conventional wisdom holds that a housing finance system built on the bedrock of long-term, fixed-rate mortgages—the sensible, historic, ostensibly free-market way to buy a home—is the key underpinning of the country’s residential real estate market and the economy as a whole. A closer look, however, shows that fixed-rate mortgages aren’t innately secure and that their ubiquity results from government programs that cost a lot but do little to increase

The U.S. mortgage market works almost entirely because the government transfers risk to the taxpayer in order to let banks market a product that no sane financier would ever offer otherwise.

home ownership. Indeed, today’s economy may require policies that demote or even end the reign of the conventional fixed-rate mortgage.

A typical mortgage in the United States comes with a fixed interest rate, a “self-amortizing” payment schedule of 15 or 30 years of fixed monthly installments, and no prepayment penalties, so borrowers can refinance whenever they please. These features have obvious attractions to consumers because they assure that monthly housing payments will go down in real

terms: Over the last 30 years, inflation alone would have reduced the actual value of a mortgage payment more than 60 percent. And, of course, since prepayment penalties are rare—Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which buy all but the biggest mortgages, won’t enforce them on most loans—anyone who finds a better deal can refinance simply by paying closing costs. As a result, about 90 percent of mortgages in the United States are offered on a fixed-rate basis and very few have prepayment penalties.

Nice as all this is for borrowers, it places lenders in a no-win situation that wouldn’t exist without these government assurances. Banks profit by borrowing money for the short term and lending money for the long term. When long-term interest rates go down, bankers see huge numbers of their best borrowers refinance at a lower rate. On the other hand, if short-term rates go up, lenders need to pay higher rates on deposits and bonds while collecting revenue from mortgages financed at lower rates. The latter state of affairs, indeed, played a role in rendering more than one in six of the country’s savings and loans insolvent in the 1980s. These policies lock the entire housing economy into a boom and bust cycle.

Put simply, banks would not be offering fixed-rate mortgages without prepayment penalties were it not for the numerous interlocking taxpayer guarantees that come with such mortgages. Indeed, in only one other country, Denmark, do banks offer consumers anything like the mortgages in the United States—and even there, stiff down-payment requirements make such loans far less

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popular than they are in this country.

In fact, stripping away the façade of private banks and mortgage brokers who originate the loans, the U.S. mortgage market works almost entirely because the government transfers risk to the taxpayer in order to let banks market a product that no sane financier would ever sell in the free market. A study by economist Michael Lea, a professor at San Diego State University, concludes that no other sizable developed country intervenes as pervasively in its mortgage market as does the United States.

The primacy of the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage makes the promises by members of Congress to rein in Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and various other bad housing actors impossible to keep. In fact, several provisions of the Dodd-Frank bill that congressional Democrats and the Obama administration developed in response to the financial crisis reinforce the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage by offering lenders safe harbor for retaining its current features.

Even House Republicans, willing to play with political fire by calling for an end to the current Medicare system for those under 55, haven't passed any major legislation to curb Fannie and Freddie largely because they can't figure out a way to do so without simultaneously making it impossible to get 30-year mortgages on anything like the current favorable terms. And they're right to be discouraged about this prospect: Any policy that keeps mortgage terms like the current ones in force will require taxpayers to take on the risks, since the very product wouldn't exist in a free market.

That said, eliminating the 30-year mortgage wouldn't be a bad idea. For starters, there's very little evidence that this form of financing is required for current rates of homeownership. Mediterranean economic basket-cases Spain and Greece both have homeownership rates higher

than the United States, despite being some of the poorest developed countries and offering mortgage terms in some respects less generous than those typically found stateside. Canada and the United Kingdom, two places more culturally (and economically) similar to the United States, have about the same homeownership rates even though mortgages there typically come with prepayment penalties and have variable interest rates.

The logical conclusion is that factors related to culture and geography, not mortgage finance, determine homeownership rates. And, even if homeownership did decline without

low doc" loans with zero down payments, happened to be combined with adjustable-rate mortgages.

Australia and Canada, where foreclosures have barely increased during the recent morass, have many more adjustable-rate mortgages than the United States. In fact, some economists have identified such loans as a source of macroeconomic stability, because they help banks keep their heads above water in bad economies. The countries with big foreclosure surges—the United States, Spain, and Great Britain—were all places where gimmicky mortgages became far more common than regulators should have allowed.

Furthermore, many of the supposedly consumer-friendly features of today's mortgages aren't as "friendly" as they appear. Were prepayment penalties more widespread, interest rates would fall by about half a percentage point, economists estimate. And with Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac stripped of any implicit promise of a government guarantee, other enterprises could enter the mortgage securitization business, likely figuring out less risky ways to do it—or at least more efficient ways.

Americans' financial lives have changed in myriad ways in the last several decades: The types of deposit accounts, savings instruments, consumer credit products, and investments that middle-class Americans purchase today are vastly different from those among which their parents chose. But mortgages, for the most part, haven't changed at all. Changing them now—and implementing policies that do away with the implicit guarantees behind the 30-year mortgage—could cut back a hugely expensive bureaucracy and stabilize the financial system, and with little consequence for homeownership rates. Congress shouldn't be afraid of killing the 30-year mortgage. ♦



Forty percent Swiss homeownership, not exactly a disaster

30-year mortgages, that wouldn't be a disaster: A 40 percent homeownership rate has not turned Switzerland into a basket case, and a 74 percent rate in Alabama hasn't made that state's economy the envy of the world. In fact, high homeownership rates in places like Ohio and Michigan have exacerbated those states' woes, by trapping unemployed workers in "upside-down" houses that they can't sell for a price high enough to pay off the mortgage and seek jobs elsewhere.

Likewise, an increase in the use of adjustable-rate mortgages didn't contribute to the financial crisis and might have ameliorated its impact. While it is true that adjustable-rate mortgages had higher default rates than fixed-rate ones, this happened largely because the most gimmicky products of the last decade, such as the infamous "no doc/

Cameron to Eurozone

Drop dead

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

‘A man attending a wife-swapping party without his wife.’ So a very annoyed French negotiator at the latest European summit characterized British prime minister David Cameron’s refusal to trade the future of his nation’s financial center for the approval of the 26 other members of the European Union. Since revision of the basic European Union treaty requires a unanimous vote, Cameron forced the other members to cobble together a new treaty creating a Fiscal Union, rather than draw on existing Brussels institutions to cope with the mounting crisis of the eurozone. An FU to replace the EU, noted more than one wag.

Cameron’s was a considerable achievement, but one he will have to defend from the Brussels bureaucracy, the Europhiles in his Liberal-Democrat coalition and in his Foreign Office, and the German chancellor. Angela Merkel wants to move control over the EU members’ finances—tax policy, spending, labor market regulation—from national capitals to Berlin, with Brussels serving as a fig leaf to avoid stirring up old anxieties about German dominance of Europe. History matters.

Cameron’s win included the following:

(1) He realigned himself politically with the majority of his party, and of his country.

(2) He at least made it more difficult for France and Germany to push through amendments to the EU treaty that would be extremely damaging to British interests, including new taxes on and regulation of the City of London, which accounts for 10-12 percent of Britain’s GDP and which represents the Merkel-Sarkozy *bête noire*, a functioning, sensibly regulated, but essentially free market.

(3) Finally, Cameron just might have taken the first step on the road to liberating Britain from the web of regulations and taxes that doom Europe to slow or no growth. It is possible that we are witnessing a huge change in the focus of British economic and foreign policy—from a focus on Europe, with its declining population, increased

Islamization, rising taxes, and flawed currency, to one of reaching out to the growth areas of the world, as befits a great trading nation. The notion that the EU can retaliate against Britain for the inconvenience it has caused the ever-tighter-union crowd is a bit of a stretch: Europe runs a trade surplus with Britain, and the rules of the World Trade Organization make it difficult for the EU to discriminate against British goods (not impossible, but difficult). This may well be a situation in which Britain can align itself with the world’s growing economies, rather than sclerotic Europe, turning an old joke into a statement of fact: “Fog in Channel, continent cut off.”

The practical and durable effect of Cameron’s move remains to be seen. For one thing, the Conservative prime minister’s Liberal-Democrat coalition partners, Europhile to their core, plan to make sure he goes no further in getting out from under EU regulations. For another, it is always a mistake to underestimate the tenacity of a Eurocracy that has a huge personal stake in pay, perks, and power—jobs for the boys, as an American ward heeler would put it—and a theological belief that only a united Europe will prevent another war. José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, has already announced that existing EU institutions in Brussels can administer most of the new fiscal pact. It should be noted that this discovery of how the fiscal pact can be administered came before the pact itself was drafted and well before its scheduled approval in March. The drafting chore has been assigned to Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council (the Eurocracy includes more than one president). Don’t fuss with the details: Just note that the ashes of the treaty vetoed by Cameron weren’t even cold before the Eurocrats began their Phoenix-like rise.

More important than the Cameron-EU imbroglio is the failure of the eurozone countries to agree to any new program that will unhorse the bond vigilantes, who quickly saw the summit for the failure it was. It did not even attempt to address the fundamental problems that are at the root cause of the eurozone crisis:

■ the noncompetitiveness of the periphery countries (except Ireland, which is back in business as a major exporter and magnet for investment, the latter because of its refusal to bow to Franco-German pressure

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to raise its 12.5 percent rate of corporate income tax);

- the perilous condition of undercapitalized German and French banks, which have loads of Greek and other uncollectible debt on their balance sheets, and have sold \$238 billion of insurance against sovereign defaults, a ticking time bomb;

- the cumbersome nature of eurozone decision-making, which has led to the inconclusive crisis meetings that have shattered investor confidence in the eurozone leadership;

- the growth-stifling ratcheting up of taxes on consumers (VAT has been upped to 23 percent in Italy and Greece), property owners, “the rich,” and assorted geese deemed ready for plucking;

- the structural impediments to growth that have driven youth unemployment to 48.9 percent in Spain and are driving many eurozone countries into recession as they respond to their German paymasters’ insistence on austerity, with no offsetting growth program; and

- the inability of non-competitive countries to devalue their currencies or to organize orderly defaults, so as to set the stage for some kind of economic growth.

There are more, but you get the idea. The EU is unlikely to be a driver of global growth in the foreseeable future. Mean-

while, the eurozone’s leaders hunt for a solution to their more immediate problem: the inability of Greece, Portugal, Spain, and, most important, Italy to roll over their debts on sustainable terms, an inability that just might bring down the European banking system.

In response to these problems the summiters two weeks ago came up with close to nothing, unless you count the usual brimming-with-self-satisfaction communiqué. Countries exceeding structural deficits (excluding the effect of booms and busts) of 0.5 percent of GDP will be subjected to an unspecified “automatic correction mechanism,” which can be made nonautomatic quite easily by vote of eurozone members, each knowing that if it allows outside enforcement of a member’s finances it might be next in line for discipline. Each nation is to adopt a constitutional amendment

requiring a balanced budget, or some similar rule, but there is no enforcement mechanism. If a country’s deficit exceeds 3 percent of GDP there will be undefined “intrusive” measures, although these will not be put in place if a qualified majority of members decides to defer action. Keep in mind that the long-forgotten Stability and Growth Pact, which was supposed to guard against excessive borrowing, had a similar requirement, but when both France and Germany pierced its 3 percent deficit ceiling, discretion was seen as the better part of valor by member nations, and no action was taken against the Franco-German profligates.

Most important, the variety of bailout mechanisms agreed to are woefully underfunded when compared to the enormity of the debt burden with which they are

supposed to cope. For example, it was agreed that \$261 billion in loans would be made to the International Monetary Fund (source of funds unspecified), which would in turn use the money to support the borrowings of stricken countries. Compare that sum with Italy’s external debt, now in excess of \$2.4 trillion. Hopes that China would fill Europe’s begging bowl have been dashed by the Chinese, eager for influence but not notable squanderers

of their newfound wealth. Worse still, it turns out that the IMF cannot put these funds, if they do materialize, into a lock box for use by the eurozone: The money must go into a general fund available to any needy country. Throw in the stated opposition of the Bundesbank, and what we have here is a dead parrot.

Merkel had her way on two important points, both of which rattled already panicked investors. The European Central Bank will not be turned into a lender of last resort, with the power to buy the debt of sovereign nations and print money to pay for those purchases. The Germans have an abiding fear of inflation for reasons obvious to any student of history, and this is an area in which history really matters in Germany.

Nor will there be eurobonds, guaranteed in part by Germany, or the creation of a transfer union that would allow German riches to flow south as, for example, the riches of Texas flowed north to Michigan when the rust



I know—let’s ask God to save the euro.

belt was at its lowest ebb and the oil business was booming, providing tax revenues to cover the unemployment benefits being racked up by laid-off Detroit auto workers. When German voters were persuaded to trade their hard, sound, beloved deutsche mark for the newly printed and minted euro, they were promised that no such raid on their balance sheet and wealth would be permitted. That history matters, too.

The big winner in all of this was Nicolas Sarkozy, who successfully resisted Merkel's efforts to have Brussels act as enforcer of rules against excessive borrowing. Facing a tough reelection campaign, and already charged with ceding too much sovereignty, the French president succeeded in preserving the authority of each nation to react to the objections of Brussels to its budgets, taxes, and spending. Merkel had wanted to have the existing EU treaty revised to give that power to multinational institutions in Brussels so that it would not seem as if Germany, already hearing cries of a "Fourth Reich," were seeking to dominate the countries of Europe.

There were three losers in all of this. First were those antinationalist, pro-European-unity advocates who predicted that the creation of the euro would bring the nation-states of Europe closer together, rather than become the divisive force it now is, with several countries likely to join Cameron in opposing this Franco-German effort to get around the provisions of the original EU treaty, to which they are signatories. Second were Italy and similarly situated countries who had hoped that the summit would reassure investors and bring down the interest rates the markets are demanding; it didn't. Third was the United States, fearful of a new Lehman Brothers moment if the euro crashed. President Obama sent Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner to advise the Europeans, who told him that a representative of a country with a higher deficit-to-GDP ratio than the eurozone as a whole should go home and solve his own problems.

As if these problems were not enough to make the summiteers look foolish, it turns out that Cameron's refusal to go along, which forced the forging of a new arrangement outside of the EU treaty, makes the entire agreement of doubtful legality. The president of the German parliament says he doubts that the arrangement is legal, and Van Rompuy admits, "It will not be easy . . . legally speaking." Indeed.

Little wonder that markets were unimpressed, and that interest rates demanded by investors for taking on Italian debt resumed their rise, and the euro its fall, dropping 2.6 percent in the two days

following the summit to an 11-month low. Or that rating agencies are in the midst of downgrading the debt of France, which has not had a balanced budget in decades, and several other eurozone countries.

We are watching two battles. The first is democracy vs. rule by elites. And democracy is losing. The Eurocrats, with Merkel and Sarkozy pulling the laboring oars, forced democratically elected governments to resign in favor of unelected technocrats in Italy and Greece. The Eurocracy demanded as a condition of continued bailouts that the elected Greek government be replaced by a coalition, undermining it and allowing the appointment of Lucas Papademos (economics Ph.D., MIT) to run the country. And the humiliation Sarkozy and Merkel heaped upon Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's high-living prime minister, was the final blow to his political viability. He was replaced with another unelected economist-technocrat, Mario Monti (graduate work in economics, Yale), a serious loss to the tabloid press that happily chronicled Berlusconi "bunga bunga" parties. One can't help having a soft spot for a man who describes himself as "pretty often faithful," although that sort of thing undoubtedly does not amuse the rather straitlaced Frau Merkel any more than does Italy's almost 120 percent debt-to-GDP ratio.

The second battle is a struggle between politicians and the markets. Over a year ago Merkel announced, "We must reestablish the primacy of politics over the markets." As European politicians see it, they are in a battle with "speculators," "hedge funds," "profiteers," and the like—known in other places as markets—for control of the tax and spending policies of their governments. They will lose, unless they are willing to accept ever-higher borrowing costs and ever-lower living standards for their aging, shrinking populations.

Only a permanent transfer of German wealth and credit standing to Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and any other countries that find themselves in difficulty can save the euro as it is now constituted. And even Angela Merkel, who has said that if the euro fails, Europe fails, doesn't have the nerve to ask her voters to write so large a blank check.

So down the road the can was kicked once again. "More tests will obviously come, and soon," said former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer. And J.P. Morgan Asset Management chief market strategist Rebecca Patterson adds, "The more you hear from the European leaders . . . the more skeptical you are." Another can-kicking exercise is scheduled for March. Markets won't wait that long to render a verdict on the most recent practice of that sport. Indeed, they have already rendered it. ♦



The Art of Winding Down

SEARCHING FOR
THE PERFECT
WINTER GETAWAY

BY LAURA POWELL

If the recent past is any indication, this winter is likely to be long and brutal throughout much of the United States. Even the hardiest cold-weather enthusiast is likely, at some point, to be driven to get the heck out of Dodge. And if Punxsutawney Phil decides the cold will extend six weeks beyond Groundhog Day, a winter getaway will go from a maybe to a must.



From January through March, people usually seek out the sun. Naturally, thoughts turn first to islands or cruising. But don't forget, if you go south of the border...south to the Southern Hemisphere that is...it's summertime. South America is often overlooked as a winter destination, but with archaeological treasures like Machu Picchu and Easter Island, along with natural wonders like Iguazú Falls and the Galapagos Islands, it's a continent that should definitely be placed on the map of winter possibilities. While flights to South American countries can be lengthy, jet lag is rarely an issue, as most of the continent shares its time zones with the United States.

If you don't want to go beyond the equatorial beltway, however, a tropical escape to the Caribbean or Hawaii can be the perfect elixir to whatever SAD symptoms you may be feeling. Aside from escaping the cold, other advantages of traveling to islands in January and

February are a lack of crowds and shoulder season rates. Even five-star resorts are known to discount during these months, which fall between the busy holiday travel season and spring break.



The same season delivers value on the high seas. The big news in cruising these days is the proliferation of home ports outside of Florida. That is particularly helpful in the winter, as cruisers can avoid the potential of airport delays by driving directly to their ship of dreams. On the East Coast, winter port options now extend from Florida to Charleston, South Carolina to as far north as New York City (with Baltimore in between). Most of the ships sailing from these ports during the winter are Bahamas-bound. If you want to sail farther into the Caribbean, the Florida ports are still the best option, although there are also winter trips scheduled out of Galveston, Texas.





Winter golf getaways are par for the course in some of the country's southernmost states. If you want to shoot for a multi-sport winter getaway, remember that it's easy to hit the greens and then sample the succulent fruits of baseball during Grapefruit League season in Florida and Cactus League season in Arizona.

Of course, for some folks, a winter sports vacation can only mean one thing—skiing. The good news about ski resorts in places like Colorado, Utah, and Idaho is that while the weather is cold, it's also generally sunny and dry. So the cold doesn't feel as intense.

If you want to go to a legendary ski resort without the crowds, Sun Valley, Idaho may be America's best-kept secret. Although it lays claim to being the country's very first ski resort (thank you, Averill Harriman, circa 1936) and a former mecca for Hollywood movie stars (circa the 1940s and 1950s), most folks nowadays find it challenging to locate on a map. While the Hollywood scene is far more low-key these days, star power still exists in the form of present and former winter Olympians who call the town home. And if these moguls of the mountains consider Sun Valley a gold medal winter sports destination, the peak is worth the trip.

In Europe, the Forecast is Flurries with Culture

Sure, you can go the sun and fun route in the winter. But hop across the Atlantic, and you can experience a bit of warmth (depending where you go), some hot deals, and a whole lot of culture to boot. Another virtue of Europe in the wintertime is that the tourist hordes are gone and low-season airfares are at their peak.

Speaking of bargains, you can contribute to the foundering European economy by doing a little shopping during a winter break. In many European countries, the timing of major sales is regulated by the government. So, for example, one of the few times of year you can say bon jour to bargains at upscale Parisian department stores such as Printemps or Galeries Lafayette is between January 11 and February 14. Italy, Portugal, and Spain share similar regulated sales periods. The timing may be limited, but the savings are huge on high-quality, high-fashion goods.



Not in the mood to shop? How about experiencing Carnival a la Continent? Two of the biggest in Italy are Carnival in Venice, which falls between February 11 and 26, and the Viareggio Carnevale from February 4 through March 3. Venice's celebration is marked by masks and a high society party atmosphere. Meanwhile, Carnevale in Viareggio is less chaotic, less expensive, but every bit as festive. Among its highlights are the Sunday parades padded with satirical papier-mâché floats. Less expected may be the festivities in Belgium and Germany. During the six weeks before Easter, Germany sheds its straight-laced image with endless Carnival capers. Cologne and Düsseldorf are especially well-known for the scale of the revelry. In Belgium's French-speaking section, the concept of carnival dates from medieval times. In fact, Belgium's most famous carnival, taking place in the small town of Binche from February 19 through 21, is on the UNESCO World Heritage list.



Carnival is also big in Nice, France. But if Carnival isn't your cup of tea, how about a lemon twist? The Fête du Citron (February 17-March 7) in the seaside town of Menton is the French version of the Rose Bowl Parade (with lemons replacing the flowers). While visiting, you can be among the first to visit the new Jean Cocteau Museum which opened there in November. The collection consists of more than 2,000 works encompassing all art mediums, including drawings, photographs, slide shows, and film.

The Travel Gift List

It's the perfect time of year to pick up that long-desired travel accessory for a loved one...or for yourself. These suggestions may be just the ticket.

Tumi teams up with Italian motorcycle manufacturer Ducati for a luggage line rooted in a shared passion for design excellence, award-winning performance, and technological advancement. Tumi's Ducati travel cases are ideal for those who demand stylish form and superior function. This carry-on features a durable lightweight polycarbonate shell, two external pockets, and a TSA integrated lock. Price: \$545

Available at Tumi Stores and www.tumi.com

Through a combination of technical materials and advanced engineering, the new Briggs & Riley BRX collection provides a lightweight solution with extreme performance capabilities. Two bags in one, the BRX Exchange Duffel 26 easily converts into a backpack. Simply zip away the back panel for access to a padded backpack harness with sternum strap. Since the duffel compresses, it is perfect for squeezing into small spaces, like overhead bins. Price: \$160

Store locator available at www.briggs-riley.com

Seventy Eight Percent focuses on functional fashion accessories for creative professionals. Agnetha is a new line of tony iPad cases made from Italian vegetable-tanned leather and Japanese cotton canvas. The case includes a small pocket with room for money, credit cards, and other flat items. Price: \$195

Available at www.shopthemessenger.com

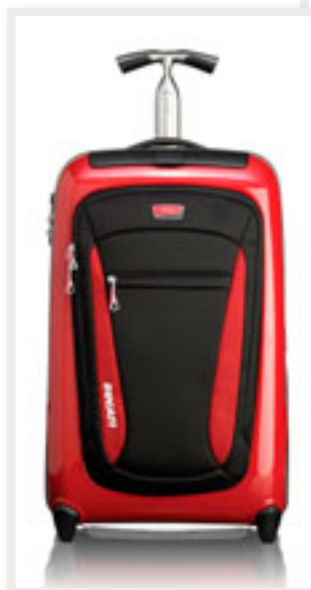
Gallivant around the country with the stylish, secure, and sturdy Piel Satchel Travel Bag. The spacious main compartment is complemented by a large side zippered

panel. Made of high quality leather, the bag is available in Saddle Brown, Black, Chocolate Brown, Red, and Apple Green with Black trim. Price: \$253

Available at luggage and leather retailers nationwide

Business travel just got easier on the ears with Clear Harmony Active Noise Canceling Headphones from Able Planet. The headphones provide a rich scale of sounds from just about any electronic gizmo while simultaneously shutting out extraneous noises. The technology is such that even those with hearing problems may be able to experience the perfect pitch. Price: \$299.99

Available at www.ableplanet.com or www.amazon.com



Tumi's Ducati travel case



Clear Harmony Active Noise Canceling Headphones



Piel Satchel Travel Bag

High School Monumental

How much education does \$124 million buy?

BY ZACK MUNSON

Washington, D.C.

Last year, I happened to drive by my old high school, Woodrow Wilson in Washington, and I saw something very encouraging: The school was being demolished. Why was this encouraging? Well, the sprawling, red brick building had been standing, with little modification and not enough maintenance, since 1935. It lacked basic amenities that people who went to normal schools might take for granted, like functioning light fixtures and a supply of toilet paper. (We did have an indoor pool for a while, until one of the walls said “screw it” and collapsed.)

But as I discovered later, to my dismay, the school wasn't being razed. Turns out, in 2007, the District of Columbia initiated a 15-year, \$3.5 billion plan to modernize the city's public schools. Or rather a \$5 billion plan. Or is it \$2.5 billion over 10 years? It depends on whom you ask. This project was part of a broader package of education reforms instituted by then-mayor Adrian Fenty and his firebrand, anti-union school chancellor Michelle Rhee (who, for her efforts, was run out of town on a rail, leaving a transcontinental trail of tar and feathers from here to her new home in Sacramento). Wilson was being renovated, modernized, reborn.

The school was given a budget of \$85 million with which to saw and sand and furbish and refurbish to its heart's content. At least, \$85 million was the initial budget. The school shuttered its doors for the 2010-2011 school year, sent its students packing to an office building on the campus of the University of the District of Columbia, and got to work building, as current principal Peter Cahall calls it, “the model urban high school in the United States.” Of course, when building the model urban high school in the United States, \$85 million is bound to balloon a wee little bit. The price tag, as of October 2011, was a cool \$124 million.

Having made a narrow escape from the institution back

in 2001, I had managed to avoid ever revisiting the place. Not that I'm one of those people who hated high school: I had a pretty good time, putting on plays, playing baseball, and driving with my friends to the other side of Rock Creek Park in search of friendly cashiers to sell us cigarettes and beer. But Wilson . . . Wilson was a strange place.

The facility itself was a monument to late-20th-century urban decay. Despite the fact that the building had about a dozen entrances, students, for the sake of security, were only allowed to enter through one. So every day, 1,500-plus teens would cram through a dark hallway cluttered with an X-ray machine and metal detector, then down another dark, crowded hallway, with dark walls of graying, peeling paint, to the main dark, crowded hallway, lined with dented, graffitied lockers, past the dark main office, then up a dark stairwell to the upper hallways and classrooms. If you were lucky, you had a few classes on the windowed hall that curved toward the gym, which allowed in just enough vitamin D for students and teachers to make it through the day without developing rickets. It was dark, in case I left that part out.

If you had gym class, you could head down into the locker room, the perfect setting for a grisly, *Walking Dead*-style zombie battle: musty, mildewed showers barely illuminated by the intermittent flicker of fluorescent tubes hanging over rows of rusty lockers. Or if you had swimming, you could make your way to the soon-to-collapse indoor pool, the floors and walls of which were coated with a layer of grayish permafalth. If in need of a break from the mundane duties of the school day, you could repair to the “Atrium,” a prison-style concrete courtyard bounded on all sides by the red brick of the school's walls, replete with garbage and overturned tables. Or to the “Rose Garden,” a roseless courtyard full of dead trees and rusty desks—a sort of diorama of what the earth might look like after the apocalypse.

As for what went on inside: The school was essentially segregated, with a special “academy” set up in the early 1980s to attract the middle-class whites who were fleeing the city's schools (and the city in general) while Mayor Marion Barry was hard at work smoking crack cocaine. When I was there, the white kids were expected to succeed,

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and generally did, while the black kids weren't, and generally didn't—a fact purported to have earned Wilson the nickname "Yale or Jail" in some quarters downtown. The average SAT score, displayed prominently in the main hall, was always somewhere between 850 and 950 (out of 1600).

The principal was a 50-year-old white guy with an ear-ring who insisted on being called Doctor, despite the fact that he could not prescribe the Xanax you would need after talking to him. His main duty, as far as the students could tell, was walking through the school without making eye contact with us, which did little to discourage the maelstrom of yelling and dancing and shoving and shouting that filled the halls.

You could, if you wanted to, get a good education and go on to a good college. And there was a handful of very good teachers. But the majority were an odd assortment of aging hippies, incompetents, and outright loons. An English teacher impressed students by showing off a stump where a finger used to be—which he proudly claimed to have chopped off to avoid going to Vietnam. A gym/health teacher led the students in a game called "STD Jeopardy," and warned that, contrary to what you might see in Val-trex commercials, if you got a certain STD, you would not be riding around on a horse smiling. My younger sister had a teacher (well, a substitute, but still) who informed the class that he used to be white until he'd been injected with hormones by the CIA that rendered him "incognegro."

When I was in 10th grade, a physics teacher punched a friend of mine in the face for no reason. This instructor spent much of our class time devising odd role-playing games that involved 12-sided dice and imaginary nuclear holocausts. And he, at that time, had the longest tenure of any teacher at the school. After clocking my friend, he was fired immediately. Oh . . . wait. No, he wasn't. The school administration, ever vigilant, conducted a thorough investigation of the *students*. About a year later, the physics teacher finally "resigned." But not before (unsuccessfully) suing my friend for \$1 million for making him go temporarily deaf and blind and ruining his world-class fencing career (truly, the teacher was insane).

And this was, then as now, the best public high school in our nation's capital.

So, \$124 million later, when the school reopened this fall to much fanfare and excitement, I was curious enough to set foot inside Wilson for the first time in 10 years. Principal Cahall agreed to give me a tour

on a Monday morning. Though some of the old building had been torn down and replaced, much of the shell was left intact and gutted—repurposed, as we like to say nowadays. The new entrance is situated next to the old entrance. It is a wide, semicircular wall of tall glass doors that lead into a large foyer (still crowded with X-ray machines and metal detectors). The foyer opens up into the Atrium, and . . . I am speechless.

The old prison yard is gone. It is now . . . well . . . beautiful. The exposed red brick is still there, and the entire space is illuminated with natural light shining through a massive glass roof. It is dotted with fancy tables and benches of odd geometric design and a healthy supply of flat-screen TVs. Oh so many flat-screen TVs.

I find my way to the main office, and meet Mr. Cahall—relieved he is not Dr. Cahall. Like most educators, Cahall tends to speak in platitudes. He has "a deep conviction and belief that every kid can learn." He walks around the school and sees kids "not being passive learners—they're active learners." The school is generally safe, but, you know, "kids are gonna be kids." Cahall himself seems to be something of a platitude: the type of guy a Hollywood producer would tap to play the principal of an unwieldy city high school. He is the Stern-But-Caring Large Man. (Think Morgan Freeman

in *Lean on Me*. Only white. And bald. And minus the baseball bat. You know what, don't think Morgan Freeman.)

Standing about 6 foot 3, with broad shoulders, a booming voice, and a Telly Savalas hairdo, he walks buoyantly through the school, gladhanding and kibitzing like the proprietor of a mid-1970s Miami Beach cocktail lounge. He seems to know every student's name, and they seem genuinely glad to see him and chat. "*Que pasa*, Hector?" he shouts to one student (who I assume is named Hector). "You know you can't play no volleyball," he joshes another, as we walk through a gym class in progress. "*Asalaam alaikum!* How was your weekend?" he asks yet another, and seems actually interested in the reply. He stands at the entrance each morning and welcomes the students. He spends the lunch period picking up trash and collecting trays in the cafeteria. I'm not sure which part of the building fund went towards repurposing the burnt-out, hostile administrators of my day, but it was money well spent.

Mr. Cahall beams as he shows me around. And why shouldn't he? The school is unrecognizable (for \$124 million, it had better be). The once gloomy and decrepit halls are awash in light. The peeling paint is gone, the warped lockers have been replaced, and the flickering fluorescent

At Wilson, there was a handful of very good teachers. But the majority were an odd assortment of aging hippies, incompetents, and outright loons.

is now a halogen glow. The Rose Garden is a beautiful outdoor eating area with what appear to be actual rosebushes. The men's locker room, inhospitable to zombies, leads to "an NFL quality underground tunnel" that leads, in turn, to Wilson's happily updated football field. The old gym was flattened and replaced with an acoustically paneled auditorium and stadium seating for 850. The old auditorium was crushed to make room for *two* exquisite new gyms, the smaller of which comes complete with a "green" roof (courtesy of a \$200,000 federal stimulus grant).

The green roof concept needs some explaining. According to Alex Wilson, the school's academic director, there are two main elements: First, it has a tank to collect rainwater and prevent rapid runoff, which is a threat to the adjacent Rock Creek Park ecosystem. Second, it has plants on it. Or it will eventually. Most haven't actually grown yet, and some that did were eaten by birds. But they now have scare-owls in place to fend off the birds, so pretty soon those plants will be oxygenating the air, absorbing the rainwater, and also, in theory, helping to moderate the temperature in the building. Rainwater from the Atrium roof will be piped to a cistern underneath the school, from which it can be dispensed whenever a toilet needs flushing. There are solar panels on the new, sturdy-walled aquatic center, and even an ecolab, which is a greenhouse that "can create any type of ecosystem." Its first use will be to grow some hydroponic plants (which actually harks back to the Wilson of my era).



The new Wilson

These green elements are among the most highly touted features of the new school. D.C. now requires that all schools be built in accordance with LEED Silver certification, a stringent environmental building code that includes crucial requirements for, among other things, "promot[ing] biodiversity" and "reduc[ing] sky-glow to increase night sky access." Wilson is aiming even higher, for Gold Certification, perhaps a quixotic goal. As Alex Wilson concedes, the overall environmental impact will probably be a wash, what with all the new flat-screen TVs and halogen bulbs glowing away. But a quixotic goal is still a goal. And if I learned anything when I was at Wilson, it's that goals are important.

The classrooms have teleported from the 20th century to the 21st and beyond. Gone are the projectors and VCRs and LaserDisc players (yes, that cutting-edge technology that reigned supreme for a good year or two). The whole building has Wi-Fi. There is a cyber café and a media center, the

latter a white, glowing sea of brand new Macs. There's even a TV production studio! The whole place is really, really nice. Not just nicer than it used to be; nicer than the college I went to. I'm ready to reenroll. Hell, I'm ready to move in. There is a robotics lab, and a robotics team that competes nationally (in what I like to imagine are pall mall, steel-cage robot death matches). And as Cahall tells it, each class has a flat-screen TV, or an LCD projector, or a Promethean Board. What, you might ask, is a Promethean Board? It's a fully interactive, touch-screen projection device—a somewhat less awesome version of Tom Cruise's work screen in *Minority Report*—though Cahall admits that many teachers still just "do PowerPoint on them" and haven't quite mastered the interactive element. But hey, it's early. I'm just glad all the bathroom stalls now have doors.

Apparently, \$124 million gets you an awful lot of stuff. Wilson certainly won't be worse for it. But I can't help think-

ing: Wilson's most famous alum, Warren Buffett, never had an ecolab in which to observe the mating cycle of sub-Saharan insects, and yet he somehow managed to not completely fail at life. Hundreds, thousands, of graduates have gone on from Wilson to the finest universities without the assistance of magic chalkboards that nobody really knows how to use, or cyber cafés, or the 80-inch plasma screen outside the new auditorium (now

showing "Passing Time," an interactive, video-art installation, basically just a montage of multicolored clocks). If the last 40 years have demonstrated anything, it's that dumping money and technology onto faltering public institutions often does little but waste the money and create massive warehouses of rapidly obsolescing technology.

But maybe my sensibilities just aren't well tuned to the needs of today's students. Maybe, though I've only been gone a decade, I'm already an old fogey. Because there are some signs that the changes at Wilson aren't just physical. As Cahall explains, "I walk around the school, grinning from ear to ear, because the halls are quiet." And they are. During class, the halls are empty. That may seem normal to someone who went to a normal school, but it's a recent development at Wilson. There is no trash, no graffiti. Suspensions are down 20 percent and attendance up 3 percent compared with this time last year. I am so euphoric after my tour of the new Wilson that I actually want to be encouraged, and these things do offer some small shred of hope.

But shortly after my tour, a group of students set a few of the school's refurbished bathrooms on fire, causing \$150,000 in damage. So emphasis on "small" and "shred." ♦



Leonard Bernstein conducting a 'Young People's Concert' (1958)

Dwight's Dream

The demise of middlebrow America BY ANDREW FERGUSON

If I thought of Dwight Macdonald every time I came across a PBS pledge drive, I would think of Dwight Macdonald much more often than I do. But I do think of him now and then, and the pledge drive is usually the occasion for it. When America stares wide-eyed as its intellectual public TV network shills for itself with doo-wop concerts and Suze Orman get-rich pep talks, we can thank Macdonald. He's the spiritual father to the pledge drive.

Andrew Ferguson is a senior editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

Masscult and Midcult
Essays Against the American Grain
by Dwight Macdonald
NYRB Classics, 320 pp., \$16.95

A witty magazine writer who thrived from the forties through the early seventies, Macdonald was a steady contributor not only to "little magazines" like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* but also, in a rare instance of journalistic crossdressing, to the high-paying slicks: *Esquire*, the *New Yorker*, *Fortune*. He died in 1982, already well on the way to the boneyard of soon-to-be-forgotten hacks. If he is known today, it is for "Masscult

and Midcult," a long piece published in 1960. It's still a useful marker for anyone interested in the decline of American culture. The *New York Review of Books*—where the decline is not only celebrated but seems to occur before your very eyes—has now republished the essay along with nine others, in an eponymous collection assembled by John Summers, editor of the left-wing journal the *Baffler*. An introduction has been tacked on, too, written by (inhale) the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of English at Harvard University, Louis Menand, who has not yet begun his own trip to the boneyard.

GETTY IMAGES

Menand takes a weirdly sniffish approach toward the man whose book he's introducing, but he does a nice job summarizing the theme of Macdonald's most famous essay. At the time Macdonald wrote, it was common for intellectuals to divide culture phrenologically, into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. Good intellectuals were of course highbrow (*The Rite of Spring*, *Ulysses*, the houses of Frank Lloyd Wright); the masses they condescended to, and pretended to champion, were content with the low (Louis L'Amour novels, "Come On-a My House," Levittown).

But for Macdonald, "the real enemy," writes Menand, "was the literature, music, theater, art, and criticism of middle-class high-mindedness." These productions broke down the wall between high and low and created the third category: "a debased form of High Culture," neither High nor Low, that Macdonald called Midcult. In Menand's phrase, it was "the culture of middlebrow aspiration." He took it as an affront. In Midcult, Macdonald wrote, "everything becomes a commodity, to be mined for \$\$\$\$, used for something it is not, from Davy Crockett to Picasso. . . . [It is] a corruption of High Culture which . . . is able to pass itself off as the real thing."

He could be devastating and cruel in describing its artifacts, and most of the essays that accompany "Masscult and Midcult" are demolition jobs of a high order. Their energy and brass make them splendid reading. Nothing quite like them is being produced today, treating serious questions with rarefied (and funny) wisecracks and a total disregard for collateral damage. He takes down the novels of James Gould Cozzens, the Book of the Month Club, the Great Books Series, and magazines like *Horizon*, *Saturday Review*, and the slicks manufactured by Henry Luce and Time-Life.

Life magazine, for example, was designed to appeal to everyone alike by homogenizing its content.

The same issue will present a serious exposition of atomic energy followed by a disquisition on Rita Hayworth's love life; photos of starving children picking garbage in Calcutta and of sleek models wearing adhesive bras- sieres; . . . nine color pages of Renoir paintings followed by a picture of a roller-skating horse. . . . Somehow these scramblings together seem to work all one way, degrading the serious rather than elevating the frivolous. . . . Just think, nine pages of Renoirs! But that roller-skating horse comes along, and the final impression is that both Renoir and the horse were talented.

again the size. Television networks (all three of them!) set aside time for productions that could educate viewers into a greater appreciation of art: *Omnibus*, for example, and Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts. Ed Sullivan made sure his audience got to see Topo Gigio or Elvis—but he also gave them, with an instructive reverence, Andrés Segovia and Roberta Peters.

Menand is right to recognize that aspiration was the motive force behind the middlebrow, but the more crucial point is that aspiration of this kind assumed that some pleasures, some works of imagination, were simply better than others—more likely to cultivate the mind and heart and lead to a fulfilling life. And aspiration being a close relative of humility, it was understood that an appreciation of excellence required an education at the hands of people who knew more than you did.

All of this is long gone, of course. In the original introduction to *Against the American Grain* (1962), from which Summers selected most of the pieces in the new book, Macdonald saw two solutions to the "problem" of "everyone getting into the act," culturally speaking: We could make "(a) an attempt to integrate the masses into high culture; or (b) a contrary attempt to define two cultures, one for the masses and the other for the classes." He favored the second option, thinking the first was a fool's errand.

But a third option never occurred to him: that high culture would cease to exist, or at least disappear almost entirely from the general scene.

And that's what happened. High culture and the middlebrow died one after the other. Both were victims of relativism—the quasi-religious faith of post-sixties eggheads, who abandoned any notions of objective excellence as culturally determined, or as mere artifacts of exploitation, or as mechanisms of social control, or as all of the above. When the idea of objective merit—one



Dwight Macdonald hosts an SDS meeting (1968).
Tom Hayden in doorway.

This is sharp and funny and, in the case of some small number of *Life* readers, surely true; it's also wrongheaded and finally destructive. Macdonald wrote at the apogee of America's middlebrow era. *Saturday Review*—whose editor, a bag o' wind called Norman Cousins, was a favorite target of Macdonald's—had 600,000 American readers; today a magazine with comparable content would be lucky to break 40,000, in a country half

thing is better than another, and here's why—went away, the aspiration to seek it went away, too.

The embrace of relativism meant that the second-rate would be conflated with the sublime. In the years after Macdonald's essay, Menand writes approvingly, "a great river of pop, camp, soulful, performative [?], outrageous, over-the-top cultural products flooded the scene, and Macdonald's system of cultural judgment was left stranded on the far shore." As premier examples of this "culture of sophisticated entertainment," he mentions such unwatchable movies and TV shows as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *All in the Family* and the vastly overpraised music of Motown and Bob Dylan. In an amazing coincidence, all this sophistication matched the taste of Baby Boomers like Louis Menand and his peers. (Funny how that works.) Soon enough, being overschooled and under-educated themselves, they could take up their tenured professorships and apply tools of criticism that had been built for Henry James and Maurice Ravel and apply them to Alice Walker and Lou Reed, until the latter seemed as worthy as the former. I mean, who's to say?

Relativism has the effect of Gresham's law: The bad sooner or later drives out the good, and the low the high. Its triumph would have horrified Dwight Macdonald, to judge by the essays, while it bothers the Harvard professor not at all. Macdonald's chief complaint about Midcult was that it would fudge distinctions between the genuinely beautiful and profound and its slipshod imitators. Macdonald always considered himself a man of the left, but in this collection you'll find passages of surpassing right-wingery. In 1962 he published a furious protest against the just-published *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, in which the lexicographers officially abandoned the attempt to distinguish between the correct and incorrect usage of words.

There are several reasons that it is important to maintain standards in the use of a language. English, like other languages, is beautiful when properly used, and beauty can be

achieved only by attention to form, which means setting limits. . . . The kind of permissiveness that permeates [Webster's Third] results, oddly, in less rather than more individuality, since the only way an individual can "express himself" is in relation to a social norm—in the case of language, to standard usage. . . . If the very idea of form, or standards, is lacking, then how can one violate it?

I doubt that Macdonald knew the destructive power of his mockery of the middlebrow. He wasn't a nihilist, as passages like this one prove. But he was a trendsetter, and when he and the other left-wing highbrows of his generation assailed bourgeois aspiration so devastatingly, so amusingly, the fashion-conscious intellectuals who followed him were bound to find all that striving for excellence *infra dig*—just too terribly middle class.

That's why a PBS pledge drive

often brings him to mind. Public broadcasting was one of the last great groaning exertions of the middlebrow. When it was consolidated by the federal government in the late 1960s, E.B. White provided a letter that the first public broadcasters took as a credo:

Non-commercial TV should address itself to the ideal of excellence. . . . I think TV should be providing the visual counterpart of the literary essay, should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills. It should be our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's, and our Camelot.

If only! I don't know what your vision of Camelot is, but I'll bet Suze Orman isn't in it. ♦

BCA

Wrong Telegram

The mysterious reputation of George F. Kennan.

BY JOHN BOLTON

Yale professor John Lewis Gaddis has written an impressive biography of George Kennan, the Cold War strategist, Soviet expert, and intellectual icon of the liberal establishment. Well worth reading, it nonetheless raises the basic question of whether Kennan's concrete contributions justify the many accolades he has received. While Gaddis may not have intended it, his exhaustive research, in fact, demonstrates how marginal Kennan's public career

actually was, but for a single, fleeting period. There is less to the Kennan mythology than meets the eye.

With two spectacular exceptions, Kennan's strategies were losers—losers which, we must concede, became over time the American left's prevailing strategic doctrines. In one brief, shooting-star moment, Kennan achieved his reputation for "grand strategy" by writing the legendary 1946 "long telegram" from Moscow, and the article signed "X" in *Foreign Affairs* ("The Sources of Soviet Conduct"), articulating the policy of containment which undergirded America's Cold War policy toward the Soviet Union.

George F. Kennan

An American Life
by John Lewis Gaddis
Penguin, 800 pp., \$39.95

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Undoubtedly, both essays are essential to understanding the Truman administration's strategic thinking and its ramifications. But however astute and timely those two essays were, do they justify a reputation for "greatness" and the obeisance from universities, editorial boards, and the chattering classes that followed? Did they shift policy, or did they simply give voice to inchoate policy ideas which would have crystallized anyway? Is Kennan important simply because of constant repetition, there because he's there?

X wrote unambiguously that America required "a policy of firm containment designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world." We had to recognize that Moscow's policy combined both the Communist imperative to world domination (being a scientific philosophy obeying ineluctable dialectical laws) and historical Russian expansionism, both of which Kennan described compellingly.

Nonetheless, as Gaddis recounts, X's article had not even appeared before Kennan began backing away from it and the Long Telegram. Kennan complained vigorously that he was being distorted, that he had never favored "counterforce," threatened or actual, to the extent new converts to containment believed necessary. But his complaints ignore what he said repeatedly at the time. Whether or not he later choked on these words, they were his. The notion that he did not foresee containment almost inevitably requiring a significant military component is fanciful. Gaddis ruefully concludes, "After 1947, [Kennan] could never regard the doctrine with which he was credited as his own. That produced a dejection extending over dozens of Kennan birthdays to come."

Kennan rarely seemed taken with his native land, writing his sister Jeanette in 1935: "I hate the rough and tumble of our political life. I hate democracy; I hate the press . . . ; I hate the 'peepul'; I have become clearly un-American." In words

those enraptured by China today would enjoy, Kennan said in 1936 that it was "time to drop 'the angel of democracy' as well as 'the bogey-man of dictatorship.'" Little wonder that Gaddis stresses "one of [Kennan's] most persistent paradoxes: that he understood the Soviet Union far better than he did the United States." It certainly explains Kennan's views of the Reagan administration, which he described as "ignorant, unintelligent, complacent, and arrogant; worse still is the fact that it is frivolous and reckless."

And as his private writings reveal, Kennan gives pessimism and depression a bad name. His almost unrelievedly bleak diaries virtually compel the conclusion that his jaundiced views of mankind infused his erratic strategic thinking. Gaddis concedes that "Kennan always had trouble keeping his emotions apart from his strategies" and possessed "an inability to insulate his jobs from his moods." Having interviewed Kennan's family, friends, and coworkers, Gaddis concludes that, in daily life, Kennan was not nearly as gloomy as in his private musings, which perhaps provided a release valve so his tensions and concerns were not inflicted on others.

Of course, personality traits are not sufficient explanations of his grand strategies, which must stand or fall on their merits. A great power cannot be dependent on the mood swings of its supposed savants.

Moreover, Kennan's tangible diplomatic achievements were nothing to write home about. Most spectacularly, the Soviet Union declared him *persona non grata* for committing what today we call a gaffe: telling the truth at the wrong time. While visiting Berlin shortly after becoming ambassador to the Soviet Union, Kennan compared contemporary life in Moscow to his detention (along with other diplomats) by the Nazis at the outbreak of World War II. Being the first and only American ambassador to Moscow to be "PNG'd"—and by Stalin, no less—might be a badge of honor for some, but not for Kennan.

Before Moscow, he was the first head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, often labeled the department's "think tank." But "S/P" (as it is known in the bureaucratic nomenclature) has always struggled to find its niche, perhaps futilely, since its role depends entirely on the incumbent secretary of state. Does he or she want a stable for speechwriters and special assistants, or truly strategic thinkers? And how do "policy planners" relate to the regional and functional bureaus that carry out State's day-to-day responsibilities? Pushed in one direction, S/P becomes little more than a perch for second guessers; pushed in the other, as Kennan did, the Policy Planning Staff becomes simply irrelevant ("a failure," as Kennan confided to his diary). Thus, even his bureaucratic crown jewel was badly flawed, and Gaddis writes that, after just a year, "Kennan found himself becoming a policy dissenter once again. He had, he discovered, lost his footing. He never quite regained it."

And that was in 1948! Kennan's considerable reputation beyond X and the Long Telegram stems substantially from the innumerable opportunities for criticism his longevity afforded him. Whether that reputation is warranted, however, is a different story—as, for example, in the extent of his role in formulating the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.

In reality, he was simply a verbalizer for ideas already swirling at the State Department, particularly those of Dean Acheson and Will Clayton, undersecretary for economic affairs. (Joseph Marion Jones's classic account, *The Fifteen Weeks*, makes precisely this point.) Further, Kennan disagreed with Truman and Acheson on politico-military matters, opposing NATO's creation as "a final militarization of the present dividing-line through Europe." Kennan also reversed course on Germany, initially favoring its division to stabilize Europe, then advocating its demilitarized reunification, well before Western European economic recovery and rearmament. Fortunately, his path to

reunification never became American policy, since it would have opened a Central European power vacuum ripe for Soviet exploitation. Dean Rusk correctly judged that “that approach . . . allows you to be nibbled to death, like ducks. Kennan couldn’t see that.” Remarkably, in November 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, Kennan wrote in the *Washington Post* that it was too soon to consider reunification!

At the outset, containment was seen as the weaker of the competing alternative grand strategies, with many Republicans arguing for “rolling

your thinking done for you, which is what the Policy Planning Staff stood for, was alien to Dean. . . . [He] was a man of action. He wanted actually to get things done.” Kennan had a more disdainful view: “[Acheson] was basically a Washington lawyer, not a diplomat. The fact that he looked like a diplomat confused people, but it didn’t make him one.” When Kennan, in a 1957 series of lectures, criticized NATO while advocating reuniting Germany outside it, Acheson roundly denounced him as one who “has never . . . grasped the realities of

gan “better red than dead.” Indeed, Kennan’s views ultimately prevailed over the Achesonian Democrats, who either fled as refugees to the Republican party or, if they stayed behind, now seem like lights blinking out one by one on a distant shore.

On Vietnam, Kennan reached a political zenith in his blistering 1966 attack on Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam policy in hearings before Senator Fulbright’s Foreign Relations Committee. And on strategic arms policies, his antinuclear views became increasingly unrealistic—but undoubtedly central to the regnant arms-control theology, now revived again by President Obama. Characteristically, Kennan’s later views on nuclear weapons were far removed from his 1947 stress on “the deterrent effect of overwhelming retaliatory power in the hands of this country.”

Ironically, in 1967, Kennan garnered enormous attention for his scathing condemnation of the New Left, saying, “that these people are embattled is unquestionable. That they are really students, I must be permitted to doubt. . . . The fact of the matter is that the state of being *enragé* is simply incompatible with fruitful study.” This was a cultural attack rather than a disagreement on Vietnam or broader policy, but that got lost in the ensuing controversy. His fellow academics, having fought the anti-Communist barbarians in the 1950s, could not grasp that the protesters were their intellectual progeny, and that the barbarians were no longer outside the university but in their classrooms, denouncing them as establishment tools, or worse.

Today, Professor Gaddis is perhaps the foremost teacher of “grand strategy,” often over sullen opposition from political scientists who deride his work as mere “history.” But the popularity and reputation of the Yale grand strategy program he leads with Charles Hill and Paul Kennedy, and widely emulated at other universities (over the opposition of other sullen academics), testify to the vitality of his approach. “Grand strategy” in academia is substantive international-



Policy Planning Staff, Department of State (1950), Kennan fourth from left

back” Communist advances. (Who can forget Richard Nixon’s critique of “Dean Acheson’s College of Cowardly Communist Containment”?) Yet when the Eisenhower-Nixon-Dulles team took office, it adhered rigorously to containment, including allowing Soviet tanks to crush the Hungarian Revolution rather than intervening militarily.

The shadow figure lurking in Gaddis’s biography is Dean Acheson, far more successful politically, diplomatically, and, arguably, conceptually than Kennan. As the British ambassador Oliver Franks put it, “Having

power relationships, but takes rather a mystical attitude toward them.” Even Harry Truman jumped in, saying Kennan was “not a policymaker” and only a good ambassador when Acheson was there “to tell him what to do.”

This debate reflects a lasting, ultimately destructive, cleavage within the Democratic party, which Gaddis vividly portrays. Typically unsuccessful in persuading others while at State, Kennan was much more successful as a scholar in weakening our national resolve, culminating in a May 1987 interview when he accepted the slo-

affairs scholarship, not what political scientists, who believe more in algorithms and statistics, now churn out. While they are researching the globe's political capillaries, mere historians like Gaddis are unraveling how American diplomatic strategy actually unfolded during critical decades.

Given the Cold War focus of Gaddis's scholarship, it was no surprise he would be Kennan's biographer; but it is quite surprising that the weight of the evidence reveals Kennan not to be the transformative strategist of mythology, certainly not on a sustained, consistent basis. Ultimately, the real strategist transforms his thinking into reality, or perhaps more accurately, transforms reality to be consistent with his thinking. This Dean Acheson accomplished, but George Kennan did not. While the Truman-Marshall-Acheson policies are remembered through X's language, X was more a reflection of Washington's evolving postwar thinking than an independent, causative force. And beyond the thinkers were the real actors, whom Kennan aspired to join but never did.

These recalibrations do not make Kennan irrelevant. Gaddis argues forcefully that Kennan's skill as a historian and writer constitute greatness, and he doubtless spoke influentially in our national debate—wrong-headed though he was, if rarely so in government. Better appreciating what he achieved, and what he did not, is important background for the 20th century's second half. Nonetheless, *George F. Kennan* leads to the conclusion that its subject was, like the proverbial stopped clock, right twice a day—or in Kennan's case, twice in his lifetime. This judgment may be (in Dean Acheson's phrase) "clearer than the truth," but not by much. Kennan's two most famous essays were distinctly out of character, idiosyncratic not because of his personal peculiarities but because of the vagaries of his own thinking on grand strategy. And that paradox justifies carefully reading this biography, to understand the realities, not the myths, of Kennan's life. ♦

BCA

Opus Maximus

A comic master's comic masterpiece turns 100.

BY SARA LODGE

A great English comic novel celebrates its centenary. The funniest *femme fatale* of all time turned 100 this year.

Zuleika Dobson by Max Beerbohm, first published in 1911, is a quintessentially English comic novel: sparkling with irony and affectionate critique of a country, constrained by decorum, where form is always more important than content. It tells the story of an Edwardian "It" girl, sultry granddaughter of the Warden of Judas College, who takes Oxford by storm during a short visit in which she snubs all her admirers while parading about in flamingo-pink dresses and pink and black pearl earrings that have a habit of finding their way into men's shirt studs.

So electric is her effect upon the male undergraduate population that, in a couple of short days, she becomes the toast, the idol, and then the nemesis of the university, as the student body by common consent plunges into the river, determined to die for what it cannot possess: shouting the name "Zuleika" (pronounced as in "shrieker" not "hiker") from lips that can come no closer to her than her name. Zuleika is momentarily contrite, considers entering a nunnery, but then on reflection instructs her maid to book a Special Train to Cambridge—presumably to wipe out Britain's second-oldest university, too.

Mass suicide is rarely hilarious. But Beerbohm makes it so. He is, of course, teasing. His novel instructs us from its first pages that it isn't to be taken at face value: Like Zuleika herself, it is an essay

in style, so artful that it remains always just beyond the reader's reach.

In the story, Zuleika's grandfather disinherited her parents. She was a poor orphan, forced unwillingly to work as a governess, who accidentally learned a few cheap conjuring tricks. Given the extraordinary magnetism of her appearance, however, she has become a sensation as a female magician, breaking hearts from New York to St. Petersburg. In a sense, her trip to Oxford is a revenge mission. She is about to disinherit her grandfather. He will be left presiding over a college that exists only in form: a bastion of classical tradition whose students are as extinct as Latin and Greek. The lesson Zuleika Dobson teaches the academic establishment is quite similar to the lesson Eliza Doolittle will teach Henry Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, written in 1912: Looks trump books.

In a sense, *Zuleika Dobson* is also Max Beerbohm's loving revenge on Oxford. He read classics at Merton College in the 1890s, but failed to take a degree. Instead, he was busy sketching and writing ironic essays with precocious flair. This was the era of Oscar Wilde's reign as the leading wit, dandy, and intellectual of the hour. Aesthetics ruled. Realist novels were hypocritical and (worse) dull. Life imitated art, and beauty, not truth, was the end of art. Max drew an imaginary Oxford exam paper; it was on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Implicitly, it argued that posing your own questions was much more interesting than answering other people's.

After Oxford, Beerbohm—a slight, camp figure, impeccably dressed—became himself a celebrated character, publishing quirky essays in literary magazines, reviewing theater, and

Sara Lodge, a senior lecturer in English at the University of St Andrews, is the author of *Thomas Hood and Nineteenth-Century Poetry: Work, Play, and Politics*.

drawing brilliant caricatures. He settled in Italy and lived quietly at this cultural remove, pretending to be out-dated while producing *Zuleika Dobson*, a novel that is, despite its pretensions to triviality, an important work in the history of the comic novel in English.

Beerbohm's brilliance lies in his self-conscious play with the conventions of genre, voice, and plot. He pretends to have got special permission from Clio, the muse of history (who is a secret pulp fiction addict), to be both factual and omniscient. He depicts himself floating above Oxford, hovering at windows and observing men and women arranging themselves in front of the mirror. He deploys language theatrically, creating magical scenes while simultaneously inviting us to peek behind the curtain and acknowledge the artifice in which we collude.

Zuleika's appearance, for example, is described in terms of pastiche and exaggeration, the very qualities Beerbohm's own prose purveys:

Zuleika was not strictly beautiful. Her eyes were a trifle large, and their lashes longer than they need have been. An anarchy of small curls was her chevelure, a dark upland of mis-rule, every hair asserting its rights over a not discreditable brow. For the rest, her features were not at all original. They seemed to have been derived rather from a gallimaufry of familiar models. . . . The mouth was a mere replica of Cupid's bow, lacquered scarlet and strung with the littlest pearls. No apple-tree, no wall of peaches, had not been robbed, nor any Tyrian rose-garden, for the glory of Miss Dobson's cheeks. Her neck was imitation-marble. Her hands and feet were of very mean proportions. She had no waist to speak of.

Each of the heroine's faults is in fact an erotic magnet. She is unoriginal—and irresistible. Beerbohm plays with paradox. Zuleika is smitten with the Duke of Dorset, the very model of an English aristocrat, precisely because he pays her no attention. His indifference is wildly arousing. When, however, he falls in love with her, Zuleika is bitterly disappointed. She can only adore a man who doesn't adore her.

The Duke of Dorset, meanwhile, finds himself in an equally impossible

situation. Honor demands that, spurned by the only woman he has ever loved, he should commit suicide. But Zuleika clearly isn't worth it. He wrestles with the quandary and decides to live. But too late. According to tradition, the night before a Duke of Dorset dies, two black owls perch, hooting, on the battlements of his ancestral castle. On the morning when he has decided not to drown, the Duke of Dorset receives a telegram from his butler:

Deeply regret inform your grace last night two black owls came and perched on battlements remained there through night hooting at dawn flew away none knows whither awaiting instructions Jellings

This is a masterstroke. The Duke of Dorset is a figure titled by and belonging to history. Hence his decision to



Max Beerbohm, 1908

change his mind in the present and give himself a future is completely futile. He has been pre-scripted. He thus dresses himself in the full regalia of a Knight of the Garter and plunges into the river, followed by the rest of the male undergraduate population. Beerbohm here is commenting slyly on the self-defeating aspects of the British class system. As Zuleika says, when the Duke proposes to her, offering her land, ceremony, and peasants: "I think you are an awful snob." On the whole, although Zuleika is shallow and vain, we don't blame her for her disastrous effect on Oxford

because we perceive that the love she inspires is essentially narcissistic and has deep roots in the institution she has overwhelmed. It is a love of the unobtainable ideal—the paradox of self-fulfillment in self-destruction—which originates with Romanticism, with Byron and Shelley, and finds its apotheosis in the decadent pose of Wilde: his open self-love, yet self-destructive wantonness and preoccupation with death.

Zuleika Dobson is, then, partly a commentary on Oscar Wilde's aesthetic cult in Oxford. Beerbohm channels Wilde's theatrical energy: his self-conscious love of epigram, irony, and pastiche. But he also parodies the excesses of the late Romantic *frisson* in Oxford: the susceptibility to sentiment, to celebrity, to style above every other consideration.

It is intriguing that Beerbohm's novel, in which an overwhelmingly male university is sunk by female power, was published in a decade when women were fighting for the vote and for equal rights in education. *Zuleika Dobson* could be seen as espousing the cause of the New Woman, determined to enter the male Establishment. The character of Zuleika is, however, far from intellectual. Her arts are very traditionally female: She adorns her body, she performs tricks that draw attention to her own bewitching form. Indeed, in one of Beerbohm's illustrations to the novel, it is very noticeable that Zuleika and the "Demon Egg-Cup," her conjuring tool, are identical in shape.

Rather than arguing for a new deal for women, Beerbohm's novel raises a camp eyebrow at classical ideals of masculinity. The Duke of Dorset is a model of masculine virtue, who excels at every sport and study; but he loves nothing better than to dress up in his cape and garters, and when he catches a cold (Zuleika having poured cold water on him), he is terrified that he will expire. Beerbohm compares the undergraduates' enthusiasm when they all swear to die for Zuleika to "the noise made on the verge of the Boer war." Zuleika inspires a kind of hysterical virility—which turns them into a "great passive monster" bent on pointless self-sacrifice.

It is an oddly prophetic text. Between 1914 and 1918, Oxford, like every other

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town in Britain, *was* emptied of its young men. The novel's blackly comic finale became a tragedy of real and devastating proportions as men flung themselves, at Britannia's bidding, into the jaws of death. It is too much to say that Beerbohm foresaw the needless self-slaughter of World War I, but he does point a suspicious finger at jingoism and the mob effect.

Although *Zuleika Dobson* was a popular success, some critics were mystified by it. Arnold Bennett wrote Beerbohm a letter complaining that:

I must be serious and raise great issues about this book, as it raises great issues in our art. . . . Can a humorous work end tragically, with propriety? I doubt it. By which I mean that I know damned well it can't.

Bennett hadn't understood that Beerbohm's novel was deliberately thumbing its nose at the kind of pofaced social realism that Bennett himself practiced. It dared to mix the plausible and the absurd, the comic and catastrophic. In doing so, it unpicked the rules of the Victorian novel (where orphan governesses advance through marriage) and opened the door to something much more modern. Virginia Woolf and Evelyn Waugh were among those who understood and learned from Beerbohm's style. To Waugh, he was simply "The Master." Waugh's ruthless comic precision owes much to Beerbohm's influence.

If you take a trip to Oxford now you can see Arnold Bennett's recently rediscovered letter to Beerbohm in an exhibition at Merton College that also features some wonderful caricatures by Max. Here are Dante Gabriel Rossetti (a plump Machiavelli) and Algernon Swinburne (a long-haired elf). Here is the bewhiskered Warden of Merton College from Beerbohm's undergraduate days, and here is Max himself, making fun of his own bad habits. One drawing shows the youthful Max stealing a book from the Merton library and a bent, white-haired figure (Max in imaginary old age) finally bringing it back.

Beerbohm loved appropriating books, in various senses: His copies are full of doodles and fake footnotes,

sketches of the author and other graffiti—he transforms existing literature into something of his own making. In his world, books outsmart their authors and fictional characters often prove stronger than their inventors.

You might even take this centenary opportunity to do a Zuleika tour of Oxford. You can see the spot outside the Sheldonian Theatre where Zuleika performed her magic tricks; wonder which house on Broad Street was inhabited by the Duke of Dorset; and visit Wadham College, with its Judas

tree, which some say is the original of Judas College. You could indulge in a decadent afternoon tea with champagne in the Randolph Hotel, which is adorned with Osbert Lancaster's 1952 illustrations to the novel.

If you do, I hope you will raise a toast to Beerbohm's wayward but winning heroine. Siegfried Sassoon pronounced *Zuleika Dobson* "perfect." The lady herself would have accepted the adjective as no more than her due. After all, Helen of Troy only launched a thousand ships. Zuleika capsized an entire generation. ♦

BCA

Life Is Earnest

No wings for this angel, but Mr. Potter was right.

BY MEGHAN CLYNE

Christmas is nigh, and so are the nonstop showings of Frank Capra's beloved 1946 classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. As they do every year, millions of Americans will take in the tale of small-town mortgagee George Bailey—who, with a little help from his guardian angel, reminds us that true success is measured by the love of family and friends.

Part of what makes *It's a Wonderful Life* so affecting is that the endearing Bailey (portrayed by the equally endearing Jimmy Stewart) has a truly sinister foil: Henry F. Potter, played brilliantly by Lionel Barrymore. Potter, a protobankster, is introduced by the angel Joseph as "the richest and meanest man in the county." His ruthlessness and avarice are the antitheses of everything Bailey—and decent society—stand for. And Old Man Potter has certainly incurred society's loathing: In 2003, the American Film Institute ranked Potter Number Six among all the villains of American cinema.

Meghan Clyne is managing editor of National Affairs.

But while Americans hate Potter, we also love visionaries. And Potter is nothing if not a prescient genius. So this year, might the old miser not deserve another look?

Consider the foresight Potter shows in the field of home financing. George Bailey's father, Peter, was the founder of the Bailey Building and Loan Association; after his death, Potter—who is on the institution's board—questions the wisdom of its approach to lending. Potter explains that Peter Bailey

was a man of high ideals, so-called, but ideals without common sense can ruin this town. Now, you take this loan here to Ernie Bishop. You know, that fellow that sits around all day on his brains in his taxi. You know, I happen to know the bank turned down this loan, but he comes here and we're building him a house worth five thousand dollars. Why?

A good question. Potter understands that romantic notions about the moral virtues of home ownership are dangerous when decoupled from economic reality. George Bailey slams Potter for saying that people have "to wait and save their money before they even ought

to think of a decent home.” But if there had been fewer George Baileys among federal policymakers, and more Henry Potters, the subprime crisis never would have happened.

Of course, that crisis did happen. And one suspects Potter would have known how to deal with it. Earlier in the film, he spars with Peter Bailey, who doesn’t have \$5,000 he owes Potter:

Potter: Have you put any real pressure on those people of yours to pay those mortgages?

Bailey: Times are bad, Mr. Potter. A lot of these people are out of work.

Potter: Then foreclose!

Bailey: I can’t do that. These families have children.

Potter: They’re not my children.

Bailey: But they’re somebody’s children.

Potter: Are you running a business or a charity ward?

Potter grasps that artificially keeping delinquent borrowers afloat means unfairly passing the bill on to someone else. One imagines he would have been apoplectic at the notion of cramdown legislation, or at the Obama administration’s “Making Home Affordable” program to prop up underwater homeowners. (These schemes, incidentally, are financed by the charitable institutions known as “taxpayers” and “consumers.”) In the aftermath of the subprime crisis, Potter would surely have let the real-estate market hit bottom, allowing for inventory to be cleared and an economic rebound to begin more swiftly—with beneficial implications for the very working poor Peter Bailey wants to help.

Potter is generally smart about responding to crises. When a run on the bank leads to a credit freeze in Bedford Falls, it’s Potter who steps in to quell the panic:

George, I’m going all out to help in this crisis. I’ve just guaranteed the bank sufficient funds to meet their needs. They’ll close up for a week, and then reopen. . . . I may lose a fortune,

but I’m willing to guarantee your people, too. Just tell them to bring their shares over here and I will pay them fifty cents on the dollar.

One firm losing a fortune by taking on another firm’s toxic assets, all to preserve the stability of the financial system? Potter’s proposal wasn’t a shotgun merger forced by the Treasury Department; but one imagines that Bank of America and Merrill Lynch would still recognize the basic concept.

Potter makes other attempts to fold the Building and Loan into his operations. At the board meeting after Peter Bailey’s death, Potter claims the institution is not necessary and moves



Lionel Barrymore as Henry F. Potter

to dissolve it. Later he takes a more subtle approach, attempting to lure George to work for him (and thereby abandon the Building and Loan). As early as the 1930s, Potter knows that competition among banks is a passing fad. He also knows who really holds the keys to prosperity in the financial kingdom. During a meeting with his rent collector, Potter’s secretary informs him, “Congressman Blatz is here to see you.”

In short, Potter was ahead of two important curves: bank consolidation and crony capitalism. The old man anticipated Dodd-Frank before it was a gleam in the New England lawmakers’ eyes.

Then there’s the film’s climactic dilemma. George’s absent-minded

Uncle Billy (Thomas Mitchell) is at the bank to deposit \$8,000 in Building and Loan cash; while taunting Potter, Billy folds the cash into his newspaper, shoves it in Potter’s face, and merrily bumbles off to make his deposit. Minutes later, Billy realizes he’s missing the money, and Potter opens the newspaper to discover what’s inside.

One can argue that Potter should have returned the money. But Potter knows that financial firms can’t just go around losing their customers’ cash. As a stockholder and member of the Building and Loan board, he cannot tolerate the Baileys being so reckless with investors’ deposits. When George Bailey comes begging to Potter for \$8,000, Potter sees a teachable moment, contacting the state bank examiner and asking for authorities to swear out a warrant for George’s arrest.

In the end, of course, George’s friends and family bail him out, and not another thought is given to Bailey’s negligence. Even the bank examiner kicks in a contribution. Only Potter stands for responsibility and the rule of law.

And here, too, Potter is ahead of his time. Bailey’s predicament calls to mind

former New Jersey senator and governor Jon Corzine, whose bankrupt brokerage firm, MF Global, is “missing” a vast sum of customer money—estimated at \$1.2 billion (in Bernanke dollars, the rough equivalent of Bailey’s \$8,000). Do most Americans want to see Corzine’s friends in finance and politics get him off the hook? Of course not. We want to call in Potter.

The truth is, whether we want to see fairness, economic good sense, and the rule of law triumph over fuzzy ideology, or whether we welcome (and participate in) the new rule by mega-bankers and their Washington allies, Henry F. Potter blazed a trail for all of us. George Bailey may be a model of some wonderful virtues, but in modern-day America, We Are All Potters Now. ♦

Slow Motion Smiley

A remake of a television version of the espionage novel.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

The new version of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*—John le Carré's 1974 novel made into an indelible 1979 miniseries with Alec Guinness—isn't really a piece of storytelling. It's more of an art installation, a series of beautifully conceived and executed pictures designed to convey the mood of le Carré's novel. Bleak and dour and chilling, as strikingly monochromatic as any movie made in color has ever been, Tomas Alfredson's film is a stunning achievement in cinematography and art direction. Every frame is perfectly composed. Every sequence is beautifully lit. The visual and thematic control Alfredson exercises here marks him as a master of a kind.

But not of a storytelling kind.

Alfredson's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* evokes le Carré's convoluted plot without actually doing anything to unfold it. Instead of characters, it presents faces. It moves those faces around like chess pieces in a match between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer, when the gap between moves might last three hours.

Everybody in *Tinker, Tailor* talks and moves as though they are submerged in invisible Jell-O—that is, when they move or talk at all. Gary Oldman plays George Smiley, the pivotal character essayed by Alec Guinness, as though his blood had been replaced with embalming fluid; when he speaks, Oldman (who has been the recipient of the most baffling praise for an astoundingly dull performance in my memory) literally sounds like Guinness on

a 45-rpm record slowed down to 33.

I've never seen a movie that takes so little interest in helping its viewers learn the names of the people we're watching, their relations to each other, or the specifics of what they do. Over the course of its two-hour running time you are supposed to figure out the rules of the chess game yourself, and the outcome as well.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

Directed by Tomas Alfredson



Only it's a cheat. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* is an adaptation of a novel millions have read and a shortened version of a landmark television drama tens of millions of people have seen. If I hadn't read it (30 years ago) and seen it (twice, the last time 25 years ago), the goings-on would have been entirely incomprehensible. As it was, with my memory of the plot and the characters dimmed by time, I could barely make it out.

This *Tinker, Tailor* only works as a narrative, if it works at all, because Alfredson and his screenwriters, Bridget O'Connor and Peter Straughan, rely on the fact that they are using familiar characters who are playing out a familiar story. Cheekily, the creative team seems to assume that a viewer's likely familiarity with the characters and the story excuses them from the responsibility for providing even elementary storytelling detail—because doing so might take away from their obsession with the artistically elliptical.

Consider "Karla." For the first hour, the characters—all of them senior officials in British intelligence in the early 1970s—mention Karla. They invoke Karla. They mumble about Karla. If you don't know that Karla is the name of the Soviet

spymaster with whom British intelligence is jousting—and you would have no way of knowing that unless you brought that knowledge with you to the theater—you might think Karla is a spicy waitress at the local pub. Eventually, I suppose, you would suss it out, but why make this a piece of the puzzle?

The denial of information to a reader or a viewer is key to any mystery or spy plot, but what we're denied here by Alfredson's style is information that was clear on every page of le Carré's novel. For example, a key character is named Alleline. I knew who he was in the novel because it would say "Alleline said" or "Alleline glowered." But for the first hour of the movie I had no idea which of the five main players was playing Alleline. It could have been the big swarthy guy or the little Truman Capote-looking guy. I don't mind not knowing if Alleline is a good guy or a bad guy, a Soviet double agent or a dupe. But why shouldn't I know which one he was?

Alfredson understands that what made le Carré's work memorable was the gloomy, mordant, overpoweringly cynical atmosphere—the result of le Carré's deeply offensive assertion that there was no difference between being a spy working for the West against communism and being a spy working for the Communists. That was an enormously provocative assertion—provoking praise from many people who now pretend they were part of the anti-Communist fight all along and provoking outrage from those who knew the truth and were willing to fight for that truth. And the provocative nature of le Carré's vision charged his novels and the films and television shows made from them with a certain urgency.

That urgency is gone now that we live in a time when no sane person would even think to argue the democratic West and the Stalinist East were morally equivalent. Le Carré's Cold War nihilism belongs in a mausoleum of discarded ideas. Perhaps that explains why this new *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* has the feel of a mausoleum—beautiful and impressive and inert and cold as hell. ♦

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

**“The Obama administration has delivered a formal request to Iran for the return of a U.S. surveillance drone captured by Iranian armed forces, but said it is not hopeful that Iran will comply.”
—Associated Press, December 13, 2011**

PARODY



December 12, 2011

His Excellency Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
The Presidency
Pasteur Avenue
13168-43311 Tehran
Islamic Republic of Iran

Dear President Ahmadinejad,

How are you? How are the wives and kids? Get all your shopping done? I don't know what's on your wish list (perhaps another khaki-colored windbreaker?) but on my own list, I'm hoping for a new pair of sneakers, a wool sweater, and one of those hybrid golf clubs. But most of all, I would really, really love an RQ-170 Sentinel drone. I don't suppose you might have one?

Seriously, what landed in your backyard is nothing more than a radio-controlled toy. All those bells and whistles are just to impress the rugrats. It doesn't actually have any communications intercept equipment, pod sensors designed to receive satellite transmissions, or surveillance cameras underneath its wing surface. Quite frankly, the thing must have run out of batteries, which is how it flies—don't think for a second that General Electric TF34 engine actually works!

Your scientists (and I hope you aren't planning on sharing any of this with the Chinese or Russians) might have also noticed the lightweight nature of the RQ-170. I'm embarrassed to admit it's light because it's made of plastic—and not some highly classified stealth material developed at Skunk Works and Area 51.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) once said, “The most generous is he who fulfills that which Allah (SWT) has deemed obligatory upon him.” Don't you think it's kind of obligatory upon you to return our Sentinel drone? Perhaps we can work out an exchange? Next time you're at the U.N., would you like to catch a basketball game? Those Knicks are supposed to (finally!) be good this year. Or maybe a different show at Madison Square Garden—the circus, pro-wrestling, Justin Bieber? Let me know!

Sincerely,

Barack Obama