the weekly Standard

TWO MONTHS TO GO

FRED BARNES • STEPHEN F. HAYES
WILLIAM KRISTOL • JONATHAN V. LAST

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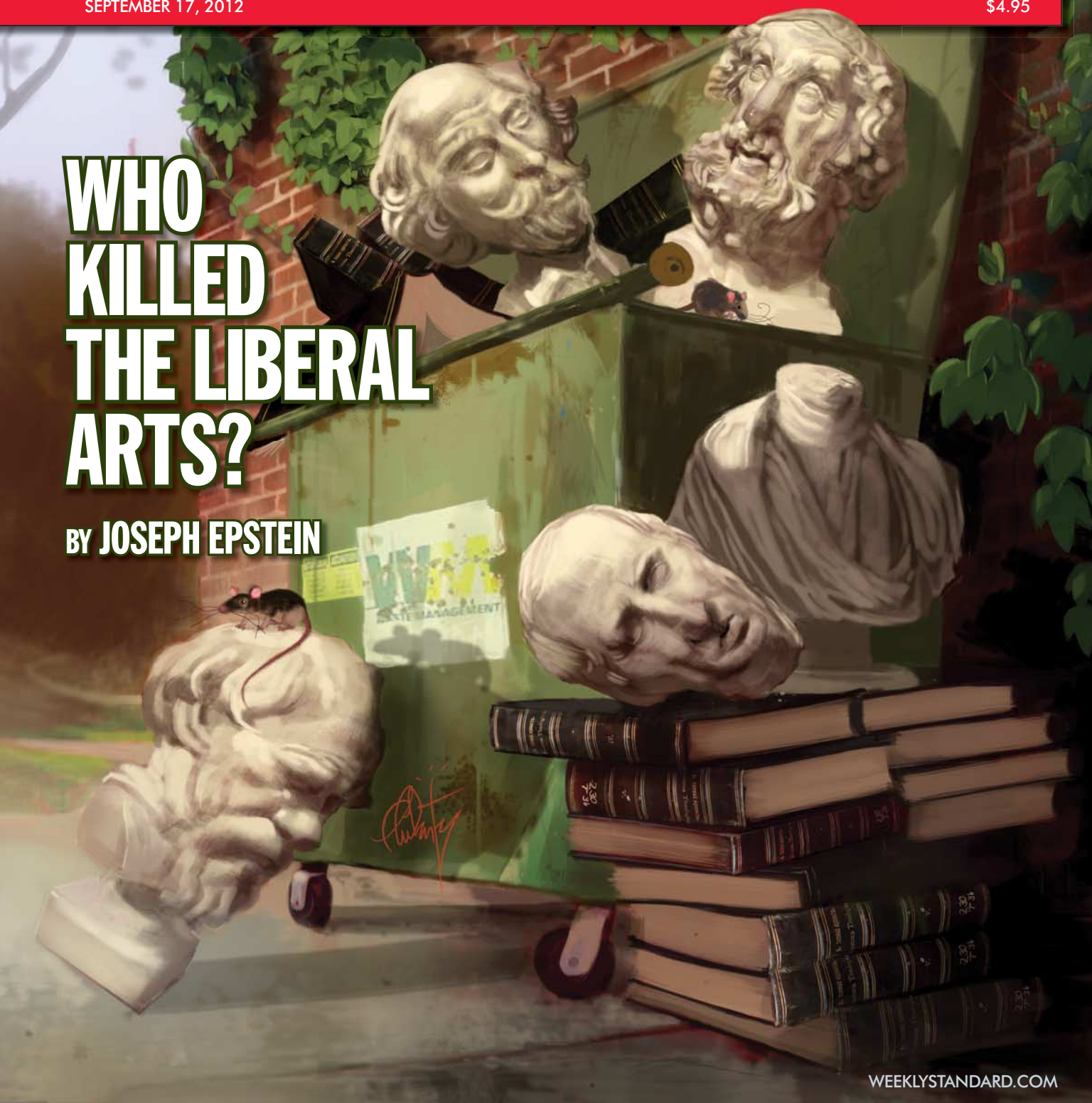
WHO KILLED THE LIBERAL ARTS?

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN



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COVER BY THOMAS FLUHARTY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHAKESPEARE, HOMER, CICERO, AND SOCRATES)

‘Communities’ Organizer

There’s added confirmation for our colleague Jay Cost’s thesis about the Democratic party from a surprising source. In his new book, *Spoiled Rotten*, Cost argues that the Democrats have increasingly become less a traditional political party than an agglomeration of client groups, who band together to feed at the federal trough. As he wrote earlier this year in these pages:

> Over the decades, the Democrats have added scores of clients to their operation: trade and industrial unions, African Americans, environmentalists, feminists, government unions, consumer rights advocates, big business, and big city bosses and their lieutenants. All of them are with the Democratic party in part because of the special benefits it promises them when in office, and all have a major say in how the party behaves in government.
>
> With more and more clients who needed constant tending, it became harder and harder for subsequent Democratic leaders to focus on the public good. . . . [U]nder the Obama administration, clientele liberalism has achieved a kind of apotheosis. The stimulus, the health care bill, cap and trade, and the financial reform package were all designed with heavy input from the party’s clients, and ultimately each reflects their priorities, so much so that any kind of national purpose the legislation might have served was totally undermined [“Spoiling Julia Rotten: The Democrats’ Clientelism Problem,” May 21].

As it turns out, the Democratic party itself embraces the essence of Cost’s analysis. On the convention website you’ll find prominently displayed the “Communities” page (www.demconvention.com/communities/overview), with the following explanation: “The Democratic National Convention provides a platform for representation by people of many different origins, orientations and backgrounds. To get involved with a group, find the community that best fits you and see how you can connect with others.”

The browser of this page is encouraged to select his or her community from a list of 14: African Americans, Americans With Disabilities, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, European and Mediterranean Americans, Faith Caucus, First Americans, Labor, Latinos, LGBT, Rural, Seniors, Veterans and Military Families, Women, Youth. (For those uninitiated in Dem-speak, First Americans = the group formerly known as Native Americans.)

You might think only a right-wing crank like The Scrapbook finds this balkanization off-putting. You’d be wrong. We found the website page not by browsing the DNC’s site (The Scrapbook is many things, but masochistic is not one of them). Rather, our attention was drawn to it by *Time* magazine’s Joe Klein, who wrote a column lamenting the Democratic party’s “drift toward identity politics, toward special pleading.” Wrote Klein,

> If I’m a plain old white insurance salesman, I look at the Democratic Party and say, What’s in it for me? These feelings are clearly intensifying in this presidential campaign. . . . If the Democratic Party truly wants to be a party of inclusion, it must reach out to those who are currently excluded from its identity politics. It needs to disband its caucuses. It needs to say, We are proud of our racial and ethnic backgrounds, our different religions, our lifestyle differences. But the things that unite us are more important than the things that divide us. We have only one caucus—the American caucus.

The Scrapbook feels for Klein. We encourage him to affiliate with the European and Mediterranean American caucus—and perhaps the Seniors caucus, too—and make his voice heard.

Vice President Al Gore was roundly mocked for a speech in January 1994 in which he said, “We can build a collective civic space large enough for all our separate identities, that we can be *e pluribus unum*—out of one, many.” Yes, he got the Latin wrong, but as a Democratic party leader, he was ahead of his time. ♦

D.C. at the DNC

Sure, like everyone else The Scrapbook was mesmerized by the Democratic convention: those three yea-or-nay votes on God and Jerusalem, ex-governor Jennifer Granholm's emotional tribute to financial bailouts, Eva Longoria's plea to pay higher taxes. But The Scrapbook was also sniffing around the edges and discovered an amusing, if minor, complaint about the proceedings.

It was issued by Robert McCartney, a *Washington Post* Metro page columnist, who was furious that the Democrats had "disrespected the District [of Columbia]'s quest for full voting rights" by barring any prominent D.C. officials from addressing the subject in Charlotte. So appalled was McCartney, in fact, that he approvingly quoted Marion Barry's angry tweet on the subject: "Let's be honest," the ex-mayor for life wrote to his Twitter audience. "Does D.C. have to be 'gentrified' to get voting rights? Is that what we are waiting for? Democracy has no color, right?"

Marion Barry's immediate resort to racial demagoguery is par for the course. But given the politics of race these days, it is worth noting that while the Republican platform is opposed to statehood and "full voting rights" for the District of Columbia, its opposition is based almost exclusively on politics: Washington, D.C., which is about evenly divided between black and white residents, is overwhelmingly Democratic—Barack Obama won 92.5 percent of the vote in 2008—and Republicans see no reason to hand Democrats any electoral advantage. Unfair, perhaps, in the eyes of some, but a purely political calculation.

The Democrats, by contrast, made a racial calculation. The D.C. officials who were barred from speaking in Charlotte—Mayor Vincent Gray and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton—are both black Democrats, and, as McCartney acknowledges, their exclusion was the judgment of "Obama's campaign operation in Chicago [which] wanted to avoid publicizing African American leaders or causes that might perturb some white voters or hand Republicans an issue to exploit."

THE HOKEY CONVENTION

And what might that issue be? Well, Delegate Norton and her husband once failed to pay their District income taxes for seven straight years (stiff fine, no prison time), and the *Post* has been expecting Mayor Gray's indictment any day now for fraud and campaign law violations. The convention's judgment to keep these prominent Democratic faces off-camera is, at the least, understandable.

But are voting rights for the District a matter of race, as Marion Barry and Robert McCartney believe, or partisan politics? Well, in The Scrapbook's view, it is essentially neither. And therein lies an interesting tale, seldom told. The problem with "full voting rights" and statehood for the District of Columbia lies in the Constitution, which in Article 1, Section 8, very carefully defines the District as the "Seat of the Government of the United States" and places it exclusively under the control of Congress. Self-government has come and gone over the years—Washington currently enjoys a healthy measure of home rule, with indifferent congressional oversight—but there is a general legal consensus that any basic alteration of the District's political status would require a constitutional amendment.

Beyond that, it's just politics. Democrats favor statehood because

it would confer two new Democratic senators on America, and Republicans oppose it for the same reason—as well as the constitutional complications described above. Republicans have also suggested that Washington, D.C., simply revert to Maryland, out of which it was carved in 1790; but District Democrats have grown attached to the idea of statehood—they even have a name for the 51st state, "New Columbia"—and Maryland shows little enthusiasm for gaining territory largely under federal control, as well as a political establishment personified by Marion Barry.

So there you have it: The Obama campaign at its convention wanted to "avoid publicizing African American leaders or causes," in McCartney's words. The Scrapbook can only imagine the furor if a Republican convention had done the same. ♦

Compare and Contrast

The Scrapbook attended both parties' conventions this year, and beyond the obvious ideological distinctions, we noticed a few other differences. In Tampa, the prevailing mood was subdued. Anxiety permeated the convention hall, as if the Republicans in the stands seemed unsure how the rest of America would react to their speakers.

Meanwhile, from the arena to the streets of Charlotte, the convening Democrats were a raucous bunch. The speakers fed off the crowd's energy, and the people were loud—deafening at times.

Does this mean the GOP's much heralded enthusiasm advantage has been overhyped? Probably not. Rather, it reflects the fact that the personality cult surrounding the president is alive and well among the party *engagés*. The evidence was there in the paraphernalia that littered Charlotte: Messianic images of Obama on clothing, pins, stickers, and posters. "We Love Our President," read a typical T-shirt. The official logo of the convention was set against the iconic Obama "O" to which we have all grown accustomed.

One more difference. Besides the delegates, Charlotte was full of political tourists, liberal activists, professional progressives, and left-wing gadflies, many of whom had probably hoped to see President Obama at Bank of America Stadium, before his speech was moved back to the Time Warner Cable Arena. At the Republican convention, on the other hand, there were few such hangers-on.

There was kitsch in Tampa, to be sure. But the wares for sale were more anti-Obama than explicitly pro-Romney. Republicans, even those who like Mitt Romney, just don't view their candidate with the same devoted fervor. There was nothing to match the pro-Obama calendar spied by *Slate*'s Dave Weigel in Charlotte, which cited John 3:16 and described the president as "Heaven Sent." All in all, that's probably a good thing for Republicans. ♦

Leiter Reading

The Scrapbook likes forthright, no-nonsense arguments, even ones we disagree with. Our interest was piqued when we discovered that Princeton University Press will publish, this coming October, a book called *Why Tolerate Religion?* In it, Brian Leiter makes the case that "no one has been able to articulate a credible principled argument for tolerating religion qua religion." Bold!

But who is this Brian Leiter? Princeton's press release describes him only as a "popular University of Chicago blogger," specifying that he is "host of the popular philosophy blog Leiter Reports." That makes Leiter sound like one of those street "characters" who never really graduate and just sit around Hyde Park playing hacky sack or guitar or chess.

Well, no. Leiter is actually the Karl N. Llewellyn Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Chicago Law School. None of this is mentioned anywhere in Princeton's press release. What does it say about the prestige of higher education when one of the best academic publishers in the country chooses to conceal its author's departmental affiliation and to present him as a blogger instead? ♦

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BPA WORLDWIDE

The Ungreening of America

In the great Nefud Desert—on the sun's anvil—of my south yard, the noonday heat rises in shimmering waves and burns like ancient, unforgiven sin: the primal fault of the world laid bare. "From here until the other side," my wife says as we stare out from the back porch, "no water but what we carry. For the camels, no water at all. If the camels die, we die. And in 20 days they will start to die."

Lord knows, we tried to save that yard this year. Early in the spring we ordered natural prairie plants by what seemed like the bushel. Sprouting up from dozens and dozens of square little plastic pots, they transformed the front rooms of the house into a steamy botanical garden while we waited for the winter's chill to break. Hardy seedlings of Indiangrass and Canadian wild rye. Big bluestem and little bluestem. Prairie dropseed and tall stands of switchgrass.

They died, once we got them in the ground. And then their replacements died. And all summer long, the sun sneered at us, vindictive and personal, as the red clay of the bare soil baked around the yellowed skeletons of the lifeless grass. This is the dead land. This is cactus land. Here the dead plants are raised. Here they receive the supplication of a failed gardener's hand.

I don't fully understand why I have been chosen to tend this particular patch of gehenna. I mean, I live in the forest of the Black Hills. Well, in a town in the forest. Actually, on the southern edge of the forest. Where it's drier and the red clay of the ancient seabeds was pushed up into hills almost by accident, two billion years ago, when the great granite beast of the central Black Hills to the north hunched its back and rose as mountains. But still, you'd think a tree or two would have grown up at some point to shade the brutal ground.

We did put in a cherry tree on the north side of the house. It grew well, until the deer ate it. And those grapevines we planted by a pergola to the east. They grew well, until the deer came back. Some berry bushes to the west. I think it was the rabbits that got them. Or maybe the raccoons and skunks.

MATT COLLINS

But the point isn't the cuddly forest creatures dining on the expensive feast we lay out for them every spring. The point is the feast itself: Everywhere else in the yard, plants are willing to try. They would thrive, if the deer would let them. They would spread their green branches, if they could, and they seem to relish the cool nights and hot days of a mountain summer. Everywhere, that is, except on the accursed yard to the south, maybe a third of an acre of local hell. Nothing wants to grow there. Nothing can grow there. This is the dead land. This is cactus . . . I know I said that already, but man, did T.S. Eliot know his stuff.

My wife tried fertilizing the whole thing and sowing the seeds of supposedly sun-and-clay-friendly plants: prairie aster and lupine. Indian blanket and weeping lovegrass. Lance-leaf coreopsis and Cornflower. Butterflyweed (*asclepias tuberosa*, *var. clay*).

They, at least, didn't die. Plants have to sprout first, in order to die. The seeds lay on the hot ground unmoved, ungerminated, not even tempting the birds—until at last the rain came and washed them into the storm sewers and out to the watershed. The other day, along the banks of the Fall River, down toward the junction with the Cheyenne, I saw a lovely stand of butterflyweed (*asclepias tuberosa*, *var. clay*) growing in the warm sun near a stand of old cottonwood trees. Good to know, I suppose, that those prairie seeds are finding a home, out on the prairie.

As a last resort, I had a sprinkler system put in. Which raised our water bill considerably but managed to make nothing else grow. The sprinklers merely wash the clay to a slick red surface, as most of the irrigation runnels off to the alley (where the milkweed and dandelion are spreading beautifully, thank you). The moistened yard itself takes on the look of a slightly damp pot just before the kiln bakes it to a glaze, and the main effect of all that watering has been to turn our yard into a dull red terracotta plain.

As fall closes in, forcing us to contemplate next year for our sad yard, I'm thinking of drawing wavy black lines and Kachina figures across it—advertising that south expanse as the world's largest piece of Hopi Indian pottery. Or maybe I'll just pour concrete over the yard, paint a circle, and pretend we have a heliport.

Or maybe I'll learn, finally, just to let it be: a permanent reminder that we didn't make this world—and some things, some yards, are simply beyond our control.

Joseph Bottum

the weekly Standard

Speak Up, Mitt!

AP PHOTO / PATRICK SEMANSKY

"So here we stand. Americans have a choice. A decision."

—Mitt Romney acceptance speech, Republican convention, August 30, 2012

"But when all is said and done—when you pick up that ballot to vote—you will face the clearest choice of any time in a generation. . . . On every issue, the choice you face won't be just between two candidates or two parties. It will be a choice between two different paths for America. A choice between two fundamentally different visions for the future."

—Barack Obama acceptance speech, Democratic convention, September 6, 2012

Mitt Romney and Barack Obama are agreed: The 2012 election presents the American people with a choice, not an echo. And the candidates are also right that it's a choice of uncommon clarity and consequence.

Two roads diverge in the wood of American politics: Obamacare or patient-centered health care reform? The Ryan or the Obama budget? Supreme Court appointments in the vein of Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan or in the spirit of Samuel Alito and John Roberts? A (slight) military buildup or (severe) defense cuts? Religious freedom or "free" contraceptives? The list goes on.

And yet, in their respective convention speeches, the president and his challenger did little to clarify the nature of the choices being presented to the voters. Obama mentioned his signature legislative achievement, the Affordable Care Act, not at all; Romney cited it twice. You couldn't have had less budget detail from either candidate—and indeed the word "budget," presumably judged by both camps to sound too harsh and restrictive, was mentioned once by Romney and not at all by Obama. Neither man mentioned the Supreme Court, though Romney did name-check the Constitution once—one more time than Obama. The military was judged worthy of brief discussion by both candidates for commander in chief—though Romney couldn't be bothered to mention Afghanistan or the troops fighting there, and Obama went out of his way to make clear that he didn't expect to do much war-fighting in his second term: "After two wars that have cost us thousands of lives and over a trillion dollars, it's time to do some nation-building right here at home." Romney did

mention freedom of religion, while Obama neglected to mention free contraception—but he may have felt his fellow Democrats had exhausted that topic.

In sum, listening to Romney and Obama, to all of their windups and throat-clearing about how much is at stake in 2012—and then listening to their reticence, not to say timidity, in explaining just what is at stake, one couldn't help but be reminded of the playground taunt: Are you a man or a mouse? Squeak up!

Perhaps this is unfair. Convention speeches aren't policy documents. And it's not as if, beneath and beyond the squeakily cautious speeches, it isn't clear that there really is a lot at stake. It really is a big choice. Voters sense it. The candidates know it.

And the candidates also know that though they could avoid coming to grips with their choices in prepared-text speeches before their own party conventions, they will have unscripted moments over the next two months. They will have interviews. They will have debates. They'll have to say more. They'll have to speak up.

Mitt Romney in particular will have to speak up. Barack Obama went into the conventions a bit ahead in the race. We suspect he leaves the conventions still ahead—perhaps a little further ahead. Romney gained some ground when he chose Paul Ryan. But now he seems to be back to a pre-Ryan sort of campaign. When a challenger merely appeals to disappointment with the incumbent and tries to reassure voters he's not too bad an alternative, that isn't generally a formula for victory. Mike Dukakis lost.

As the examples of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and Bill Clinton in 1992 suggest, successful challengers don't just jab lightly, parry punches, and circle the ring. They go for at least a few knockdowns. It's not enough to float like a butterfly. You have to sting like a bee. No sting, no victory.

—William Kristol

The Party of Abortion

The Democratic party underwent an ideological evolution in Charlotte last week. They are no longer a pro-choice party. They're the party of abortion.

In the first prime-time speech of the first night of the convention, the Democrats featured "former Republican" Maria Ciano (she's been a registered Democrat since at least 2006). "[Republicans] want to deny me the power to make the most personal decisions about my life," Ciano said. "The America I love respects the dignity of women. The America I love is a place where, when we say 'freedom,' we mean my freedom to make decisions about my life, not someone else's freedom to make them for me."

Ciano was followed by NARAL president Nancy Keenan, who opened by insisting that "the Democratic party believes that women have the right to choose a safe, legal abortion with dignity and privacy." Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick agreed a short while later in his remarks from the stage, saying, "We believe that freedom means keeping government out of our most private affairs, including out of a woman's decision whether to keep an unwanted pregnancy."

'Former Republican' Maria Ciano

On the second night of the convention, the Democrats continued to make appeals based on abortion rights. The head of Planned Parenthood, Cecile Richards, opened the 8 o'clock hour on the convention stage by claiming that Mitt Romney is campaigning "to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*," and "we won't let him." Later, liberal icon Sandra Fluke promised that if President Obama is reelected, women will retain "the right to choose." The message was unmistakable: The Democrats believe abortion rights should be a central facet of their appeal to voters.

That in itself is different. As Ramesh Ponnuru reported in his book *The Party of Death*, in 2004 the Democrats kept abortion talk at their convention to a bare minimum. At the time, this move was not seen as a mistake—rather the opposite. Democrats believed that it helped them keep the election close. As John Kerry told a group of Democratic strategists in an after-action strategy session, "they needed new ways to make people understand they didn't *like* abortion. Democrats also needed to welcome more pro-life candidates into the party." Nancy Keenan was appalled, but Democrats such as Dianne Feinstein and Donna Brazile agreed. As Brazile said, "Even I have trouble explaining to

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my family that we are not about killing babies." "We're not the party of abortion," said Howard Dean.

That was then. Today's Democrats didn't just make abortion rights a key theme of their convention. They also changed the way they talk about abortion. They used to present it as a tragedy, but something they were prepared to abide for various reasons. They argued that abortion represented a failure of the social system—somewhere along the line the women seeking one had been let down, by inadequate education, or by their families, or by men, or by a health care system that denied them access to contraception. The choice to abort should be protected, but it should also be regretted.

That's why, for a dozen years, Democrats—beginning with Bill Clinton—claimed that they wanted abortions to be "safe, legal, and rare." In Charlotte, the word "rare" was dropped from the party's platform and never appeared in any of the speeches.

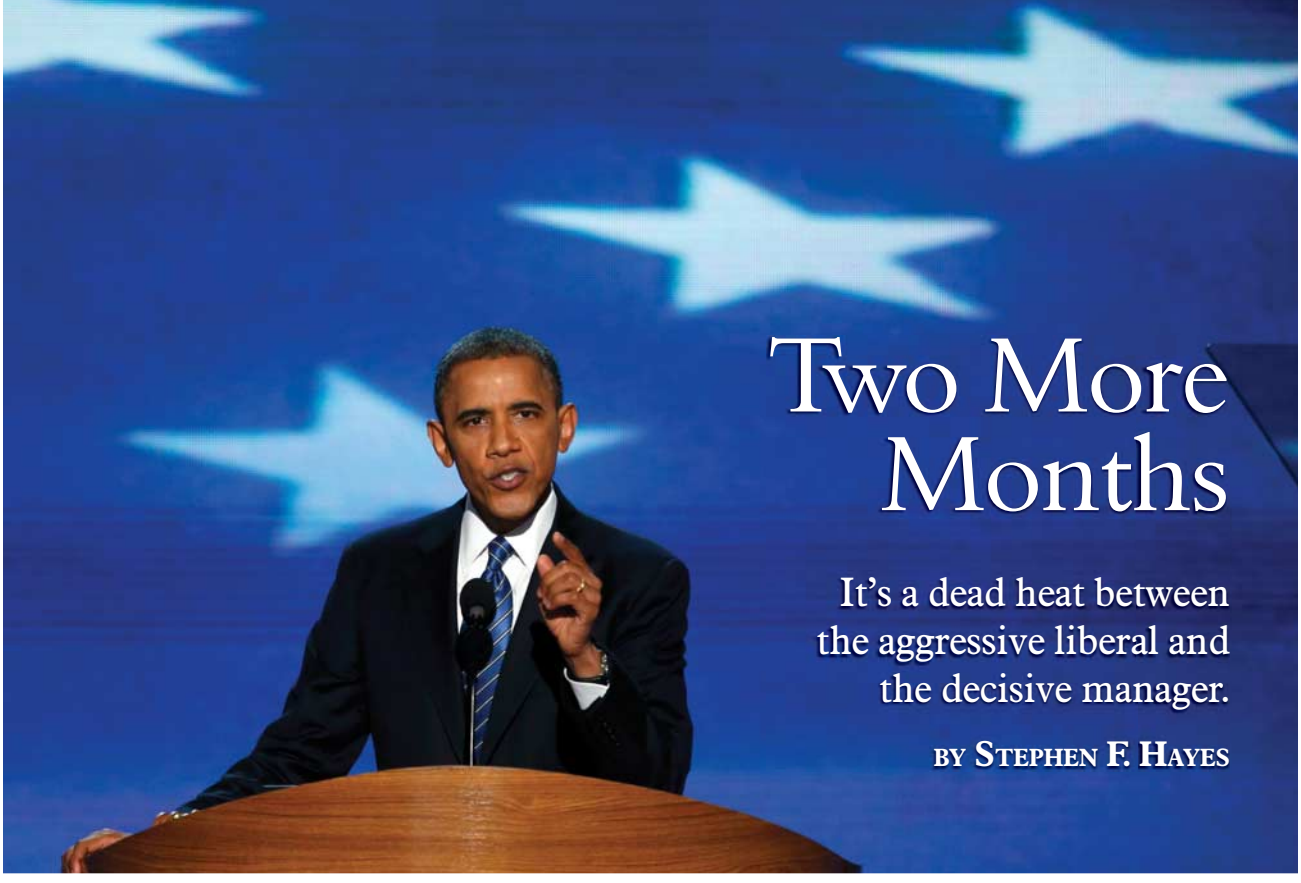
The practical cause for this evolution is Obamacare, which paved the way for federal funding of abortion. The passage of the unpopular bill required the Democrats' handful of remaining antiabortion congressmen to cave and follow the party. Many of them—Kathy Dahlkemper, Lincoln Davis, Jim Oberstar, Steve Driehaus, Travis Childers, and Bobby Bright, among others—were defeated as a result of their Obamacare votes. With pro-life Democrats now nearly extinct as a caucus, the abortion-rights wing of the party was free to talk about abortion the way they really think about it.

What's strange is that the Democrats have moved one way on abortion as the country has moved the other. In surveys since 2009, Americans have been increasingly identifying themselves as "pro-life," as opposed to "pro-choice." In Gallup's last poll on the subject, the gap between the two was 9 points in the pro-life direction, the widest it's ever been.

The Democrats' new position on abortion is probably good for the Republican party. Doubly so because Republicans didn't even have to draw the contrast—there was barely a word said on the subject in Tampa—the Democrats eagerly drew the contrast for them.

But what's good for the GOP will not be good for the fight against abortion in the long term. Moving away from America as a land of abortion-on-demand requires national consensus, which can only be built through moral persuasion. Moral persuasion is possible in an ideological contest. Yet once the debate over abortion passes from the ideological to the partisan, persuasion becomes more difficult. Still, the only alternative now is for the pro-life party to win, and then successfully to advance a pro-life agenda. Otherwise the Democrats will remain, it appears, a party of pro-abortion extremism.

—Jonathan V. Last



Two More Months

It's a dead heat between the aggressive liberal and the decisive manager.

BY STEPHEN F. HAYES

Charlotte, N.C.

One day after the Democratic convention ended here, and a week after the Republican convention wrapped up in Tampa, and American politics is basically all tied up. Here's the top line on Real Clear Politics 60 days before November 6: The RCP average for the presidential race shows a dead heat (Obama +0.7 percentage points), the Senate is 46-46 with 8 tossups, and the generic congressional ballot is tied.

And while the conventions gave us little indication who will win in November, they offered some insights into how the campaigns think they can achieve victory. Mitt Romney is running as a decisive but largely nonideological manager. Barack Obama is running as a proud, even aggressive, liberal whose policies just need more time.

In his address to the Democratic National Convention on September 6, Obama offered the country a full-throated, unapologetic embrace of government. Solving our challenges, he said, will "require common effort, shared responsibility, and the kind of bold, persistent experimentation that Franklin Roosevelt pursued during the only crisis worse than this one." The speech was the apotheosis of a campaign that has glorified government at every turn. There was the bizarre website featuring a fictional "Julia" who relies on government assistance to get ahead at every stage of her life, and there was Obama's "you didn't build that" riff—both the comment and the context—diminishing individual accomplishment and celebrating government good works.

On the final night of the convention, shortly before Obama spoke, Barney Frank departed from his prepared remarks to offer the progressive view of self-government, a view that all too often ignores the crucial institutions between the individual and the state that make up civil society. "There are things that a civilized society needs that we can only do when we do them together," Frank declared. "And when we do them together, that's called government." And the gathering in Charlotte opened with a video that declared: "Government is the only thing we all belong to." Even Bill Clinton—who once famously declared an end to the era of big government—went all in to defend the sprawling and expanding government of Obama's liberalism.

In Tampa, the Republicans emphasized competence over ideology. Their critiques of President Obama, particularly in the 10 P.M. hour when most people were watching, focused on his mismanagement of the economy and not his misguided views. And the tone was one of disappointment, not anger. "I wish President Obama had succeeded," Romney said, "because I want America to succeed." Although Obama has expanded the government more than any president since Lyndon Johnson, and arguably since Franklin Roosevelt, none of the prime-time speakers at the Republican convention labeled him "liberal."

That's odd.

More voters identify themselves as conservatives than liberals—one reason conservatives are usually happy to apply that label to themselves and liberals often prefer euphemisms like "progressive." The latest Gallup survey on ideology finds 41 percent of Americans consider themselves "conservative" and just 23 percent "liberal" (with 33 percent preferring "moderate").

The same poll finds that conserva-

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Stephen F. Hayes is a senior writer at The Weekly Standard.

tives do even better when the question concerns the economy. Some 46 percent of Americans consider themselves "conservative" on economic issues, while just 20 percent describe themselves as "liberal" on economics (and 32 percent say "moderate"). Shouldn't Romney be using these labels at every opportunity?

There is some grumbling from conservatives that this is the latest example of the Romney campaign playing it too safe for fear of alienating the suburban housewives in Ohio and elsewhere they believe will decide the election. Many conservatives expected the campaign to change dramatically when Paul Ryan was added to the ticket. The campaign, they thought, would broaden its message from an almost exclusive focus on Obama's short-term economic record to a larger critique of his leadership. And for the first week or so, with a strong offensive on Medicare and a sustained attack on Obama's worldview, it looked as though the direction of the campaign had indeed changed. But since then, the critiques have felt smaller.

In an interview on September 6, I asked Paul Ryan whether he believes the campaign is still offering a big, bold choice on the direction of the country or whether the campaign is consciously shifting its emphasis back to the critique of Obama's stewardship.

"I don't see these as mutually exclusive paths or strategies," Ryan said. "I'm talking about that choice—just look at my speech in Colorado Springs today. My convention speech was *very* philosophically clear when it comes to the choice between governing philosophies. And we also tried to highlight the president's failed record. It's both—running on Obama's failures, but also making clear that we have an affirming choice of better ideas, better solutions of the American idea and what makes it tick."

So there's been no reversion to the more cautious strategy?

"No, I think what we're trying to do is highlight the fact that this isn't working and, number two, show—'here's what we're offering.' You want to win an election by acclaim, by affirmation. We want to earn this victory so that we have a mandate to fix this mess."

Ryan continued: "The worst thing that could happen is for Barack Obama to get reelected. The second worst thing is that we win by default without a clear mandate of how to fix this mess. We want the mandate so that people know what they're getting when they vote for us. That's what worked in Wisconsin—I think we've just proven that—and we think that's what people are hungry for. They want leaders of conviction, of clarity—and that's exactly what we're trying to do. So you have to first say, this guy isn't working, it's failing, look at the kind of campaign he's running—and here's what we're saying, here's what we're going to do, here's who we are, here's what we believe, and if you vote for us this is what we'll do. And that's the kind of election we want to earn. It's a two-step thought process."

Still, Ryan strongly rejected the view of some Republicans and many in the conventional-wisdom caucus that the fate of the campaign is closely tied to the monthly jobs reports between now and November 6.

"I don't think one statistic popping up on a Friday during this campaign is going to be monumental," said Ryan, the day before yet another rotten jobs report came out. "People in their gut know that we're on the wrong track in this country. They know that the president is going hard left. This is not a Bill Clinton Democrat, and I think people know that. So I just don't think some statistic that comes out on any given day is going to be the primary motivator of this campaign. I think the die is cast, the trajectory is set, and the choice of the two futures is clear. We just have to make it even more clear, and we have to go to the country and ask them for permission to fix this mess." ♦

Despair and Change

There's no excuse for the Obama record.

BY FRED BARNES

President Obama has had four years to fix the economy, and it's not his fault he's failed so far. He's tried very hard, and he's made some headway. But the task is so great that no one, not even FDR or Bill Clinton, could have done any better than he has. Thus, on effort and good intentions alone, Obama has earned four more years.

That's a pathetically weak argument for reelection. But aside from attacking Mitt Romney, it's the best Obama, Clinton, and Vice President Joe Biden could come up with at last week's Democratic convention to defend a president bent on imposing policies that have produced consistently poor results.

Yet there's a bigger problem with this tale—or narrative, in the political vernacular—of a determined president unfairly criticized. It's simply a message that doesn't fit the moment. Millions of voters—especially disillusioned backers of Obama in 2008—fear that neither Obama nor Romney nor anyone else can revive the economy and halt America's decline. And their pessimism is deepening.

Just before the two conventions, a Fox News poll asked this question: "Do you think the United States is on

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the rise as a civilization or is it on the decline?" The response was decline 57 percent, rise 31 percent. To me, this reflects despair—well, near-despair, anyway—not just fleeting unhappiness with today's stagnant economy and high joblessness.

Other polls buttress this. In August, an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey found that 63 percent of adults are "not confident that life for our children's generation will be better than it has been for us." This view is almost unanimous among unhappy 2008 Obama voters questioned in recent focus groups.

On top of all that, the federal government's ability to solve problems has worsened, according to a Resurgent Republic poll last month of 1,000 likely voters. Only 16 percent said it has increased since Obama took office in January 2009, while 54 percent said it's gotten worse.

Given this situation, the excuses for Obama are, as a political matter, inadequate. Take Clinton. "No president, not me, not any of my predecessors, no one could have fully repaired all the damage that he found in just four years," he said.

No president? I doubt Clinton believes this. With 227,000 new jobs, last February was one of Obama's best months. But in February 1996, when Clinton was in the White House, 434,000 jobs were created. Franklin Roosevelt did better too. By 1936, the economy was growing at a 13 percent clip, while Obama presided over 1.9 percent growth in the first half of 2012. In June 1984, the Reagan economy created 363,000 jobs. The Obama economy last June? Only 80,000.

Nor was Obama encouraging in his bland convention speech. "You elected me to tell you the truth," he said. "And the truth is it will take more than a few years for us to solve the challenges that have built up over decades."

He invoked FDR and "the kind of bold, persistent experimentation that [he] pursued during the only crisis worse than this one." But Obama isn't following the FDR formula. Rather than a course correction, he's relying on government programs as the sole stimulus and job creator, precisely what failed to stir a strong recovery in his first term. Offering incentives to private sector growth and job creation—now that would be an experiment for Obama.

Except on getting reelected

"Our problems can be solved," Obama said. True, but does anyone but Keynesian economists and partisan Democrats believe he's likely to be the problem solver? Swing voters, the pivotal bloc in the election, don't.

Biden wasn't reassuring either in a speech both awful in content and poor in delivery. "America is not in decline," he said. Why not? "Because it's never a good bet to bet against the American people." But it's not the people that distressed Americans are betting against. It's our leaders, Obama in particular.

Give Republicans credit for understanding the situation, while not responding to it satisfactorily. Vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan has stressed that fixing the economy and averting (or reversing) national decline is doable. Five times in his acceptance speech, he declared, "We can do this."

The idea that the economy can be revived is the finishing kick in his stump speeches. He hammers it. "We can do this," he said in Greenville, North Carolina, last week. "The point I want to make to you is it is in our control. We are Americans. We control our own destiny. We put the right policies in place, we can do this. This is something we can get done. . . . Let's get this done because we can do this."

Hard to miss the message there. But it's not sufficient. It leaves a big question unanswered: How? This is a job for Romney, but he hasn't provided an answer yet. At the GOP convention, he first had to introduce himself to the country, since most Americans had never heard a Romney speech. "He couldn't do everything at once," an adviser told me.

Romney did lay out a five-step "plan" for creating 12 million jobs. The steps were more ends than means: exploit oil and gas resources, expand job training and school choice, sign trade agreements, reduce the deficit and lower taxes, streamline regulations, and reduce health care costs. And that was as specific as Romney got.

"Voters wonder whether anyone can turn the economy around, partly because they believe D.C. is so hopelessly broken," the Romney adviser says. "Democrats are saying we have to be patient, but voters have run out of patience. They are frustrated with the pandering and the rhetoric and instead want results."

Romney knows this, I'm told. He knows he has to explain *how* he will achieve his jobs agenda. He intends to do so. For what it's worth, my advice is, the sooner the better. ♦

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Who Built the Recession?

Two guilty parties.

BY JEFFREY BELL & RICH DANKER

Bill Clinton, who rode a recession into office and left the scene just before another one began, knows something about the blame game. Addressing the Democratic convention on Wednesday night, he made a full-throated effort to defend the Obama presidency by putting it in the context of past Republican failure.

"They want to go back to the same old policies that got us into trouble in the first place," he warned, listing tax cuts, financial deregulation, defense spending, and domestic budget cuts as examples. Clinton's argument was an inch deep, but it recalled the fact that the economic catastrophe that primed Obama's 2008 victory and has dogged his incumbency remains a liability to Republicans four years later.

Blame them.

If Clinton and his party believe that tax cuts can cause a financial crisis, that's a new line of attack. If they believe that financial deregulation did it, they have never made a comprehensive case for exactly how. If it was too much spending on defense rather than entitlements, then they should review the boom of the 1980s. The Democrats have never really made a coherent argument of how the GOP caused such misery—they only pointed the finger. Meanwhile, Republicans act as if life began in January 2009.

There remains one explanation that has escaped both sides' scrutiny because they share culpability for it. Beginning in 2001, easy money from the Federal Reserve flooded the markets with cheap credit, creating asset bubbles and finally tipping the American financial system on its side. This was a period of legitimate economic success (52 consecutive months of job growth under President George W. Bush) mixed with fake wealth attached to real estate and financial assets. No Republican is eager to wade into that story, while no Democrat wants to admit that their current strategy is reminiscent of it: Lean on the Fed to juice the economy.

Reliance on a loose-money Fed did not end well for the presidents who attempted it (Nixon, Carter, both Bushes), while Reagan and Clinton, by contrast, saw the fruits of a strong dollar. But even those relatively successful monetary policy records showed signs of dysfunction beneath the surface. Reagan was fortunate the rest of the world was eager to finance the deficit spending he failed to curb. For Clinton, the tech bubble collapse snowballed into a recession, but only on his way out the door.

Clinton can point the finger as well as anybody, but outside of the political arena he has shown he has some understanding of this issue. In an appearance at the Peterson Foundation in 2010, he responded to a question from moderator Bob Schieffer about the SEC's battle with Goldman Sachs by looking at the bigger picture of how finance came to dominate the economy. Clinton explained: "Ever since we went off the gold standard, which was necessary for economic management purposes, if you look at it we had a global financial economy before we had a global trade economy and certainly before we had any global environmental and labor safeguards. And ever since then economic inequality has increased."

He's right. Real household median income grew a measly 17 percent between 1971, the year Nixon ended convertibility of the dollar to gold, and 2009. The financial sector's share of the economy doubled in the same period while the manufacturing component was cut nearly in half. There has been a major financial crisis on average every four years. A debt-based monetary system has produced a debt-driven economy, which rewards those with the financial acumen and assets to play the market while eroding the earnings and savings of working Americans.

Clinton feels our pain but clings to the old-line idea of "economic management." He holds to the belief that the government knows better than the market what the economy needs, especially when it comes to money. In a choice between the gold standard and central bank power associated with paper money, he sides with Ben Bernanke and his Federal Open Market Committee.

Republicans did too, at least until the presidential campaign got under way. By the end of the primaries, though, most of the candidates, including Romney, had vowed to name a new Fed chairman. The party platform adopted in Tampa on August 29 calls for a commission to study a gold standard. If the Romney-Ryan ticket shows some willingness to rethink fiat currency and dependency on the Fed, the GOP will be able to point Clinton's bony finger back at the Democrats and make them defend the monetary system that is a major reason we got into trouble in the first place. ♦

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What Comes After Assad?

Al Qaeda is not a threat in Syria.

BY BARTLE B. BULL

Mi-24 helicopter gunships: Most of Assad's arsenal was made in Russia.

The moral and geostrategic arguments for a Western intervention in Syria speak for themselves. There is only good in helping a courageous majority free itself of a barbaric puppet of Iran and Russia who indiscriminately bombs his own civilians from land, air, and sea. Ethically, no outcome could be worse than more of this war. Strategically, nothing could be worse for civilized interests than Assad coming out of it the winner.

But what happens in the aftermath of an intervention? There seems to be growing concern that al Qaeda has infiltrated the opposition and would come out of the conflict the big winner. On my most recent trip to Syria, last month, I found that this scenario is highly unlikely.

To see what a Sunni-dominated Syria might look like, I traveled to Idlib Province, close to the Turkish border, in what might be called the country's Sunni heartland: the well-populated northwest, whose overflow has swelled Syria's two largest cities, Aleppo and Damascus, into metropolises of many millions. Al Qaeda's strategy in these parts of the country is to send organizers to the very poorest villages. The foreigners arrive with money, mobilize some locals, and gradually reveal the nature of their aims. The story always ends with the villagers rejecting the interlopers—just as the Sunnis of Iraq's Anbar Province eventually got rid of Al Qaeda in Iraq during the years 2004-07.

One understands the dynamic after digging behind the headlines. For example, there were press reports of a checkpoint flying an al Qaeda flag in the Idlib town of Taftanaz. What was absent from most media coverage is the fact that a week or two later the flag was gone and local commanders vowed never to let al Qaeda return.

Any cross-section of the Sunni community—from local families to rebel units, from the more relaxed Muslims who observe the Ramadan fast but break it all day long with cigarettes and coffee to members of the Muslim Brotherhood—shows, in words and behavior, that what they want from their revolution is a tolerant and forward-looking future.

"We have lived with the Christians for over a thousand years," the commander of a notably religious rebel unit tells me. "Of course we can live with them tomorrow." It's useful to register such statements with a degree of skepticism since Assad's strategy to fan the flames of sectarianism is having some effect. And yet the sentiment accords with what we already know from Syrian history, old and recent. As in Saddam's Iraq, in Syria it is the so-called secular ideology of Baathism that—like the atheist regimes led by Stalin, Hitler, and Mao—has done the most damage to the country's social fabric.

As for other Sunni religious movements, experience in Syria indicates that, as with Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is potentially a deterrent against extremist Salafi currents. In any case, a post-Assad political system would see the Brotherhood itself competing for space within the Sunni community with businessmen and tribal representatives as well as liberals and secularists. One goal of U.S. policy then should be to identify and work with those in the Sunni community who are likely American allies. The Obama administration's current policy, using a small fraction of the CIA's softer capabilities and budgeting less than $100 million in nonlethal aid, merely perpetuates the stalemate.

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The revolution, dominated by the Sunni Arab majority that represents around 60 percent of Syria's population, is more than likely to prevail in the end and will not put down its weapons until it does. And yet Assad's support from Russia and Iran means that, even as he has already ceased to govern, he will not soon be defeated by the lightly armed rebels.

Assad's military advantages against the rebels rest on a relatively slender, and tactically vulnerable, base. The Damascus regime's mostly Russian-supplied arsenal includes, according to Jeffrey White, defense fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, about 36-48 Hind combat helicopters, maybe 100 Mi-8 and Mi-17 up-armed utility helicopters, and perhaps 300 fixed-wing aircraft of types suitable for ground attack. About half, at most, of these aircraft are likely to be usable. On the ground, Assad has perhaps 1,600 T-72 tanks, less combat losses since the beginning of the revolt, and another 3,000-odd lesser tanks. Assad's armor is worn down by a year and a half of hard fighting, and vulnerable now to simple RPGs.

The revolution by the Sunni Arab majority, which represents around 60 percent of Syria's population, is more than likely to prevail in the end. And yet Assad's support from Russia and Iran means that he will not soon be defeated by the lightly armed rebels.

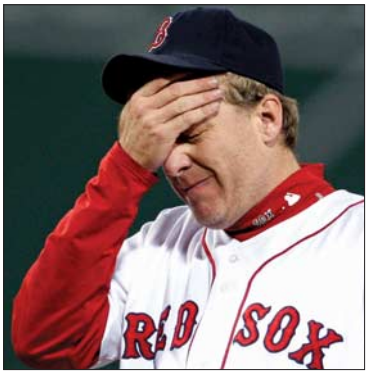
White also explains that Syrian air defenses, once described by U.S. officials as "sophisticated," are "not a serious obstacle for a Western air force" seeking to impose a no-fly zone. Similarly, the Obama administration and its surrogates should no longer imagine that the prospect of an al Qaeda victory in Syria is an obstacle to American support. ♦

A Schilling Pitch that Went Awry

Rhode Island experiments with Solyndranomics.

BY ETHAN EPSTEIN

The course of starting a successful business never did run smooth—particularly for bored, retired athletes. Johnny Unitas blew his football fortune on bowling alleys and a circuit board company. Björn Borg came close to selling his Wimbledon trophies to make ends meet after his fashion label failed miserably. Baseball great Lenny Dykstra lost it all on a chain of car washes, a high-end magazine, and a venture called The Players Club, a brokerage company for other athletes.



Taxpayer funds! What was I thinking?

But say what you will about these would-be businessmen, none of them ever blew $75 million in taxpayer money. No, that particular ignominy required the entrepreneurial skill of future Hall of Fame pitcher Curt Schilling and the investment acumen of Rhode Island's politicians.

The tale of the smallest state's very own Solyndra begins back in 2006. Nearing retirement after 18 extraordinarily successful years in the major leagues, Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling founded Green Monster Games, a video game company based in Maynard, Massachusetts, about 30 miles from Boston. The idea was to build a "multiplayer online game," the kind that people from anywhere can play so long as they have an Internet connection. The game (which had nothing to do with baseball) was going to cost $40 to $50 million and take up to five years to develop. Schilling invested $5 million up front and sought other investors for the rest.

Evidently, Schilling's business pitch was a lot less impressive than, say, his slider. One venture capitalist after another passed on funding the company. And so Schilling continued shoveling an increasing portion of his own $90 million fortune into the business—until early 2010, when Rhode Island governor Don Carcieri came courting.

Carcieri, a Republican, offered Schilling and his company, by then named 38 Studios, a $75 million loan guarantee to move from Maynard to Providence. (Schilling had reportedly sought a similar deal from Massachusetts, which Governor Deval Patrick declined.) Schilling agreed, and in April 2011, 38 Studios moved to the Ocean State.

Rhode Island's government had only one objective in mind when it lured 38 Studios: jobs. (In April 2011, the state's unemployment rate stood at 11.3 percent.) Indeed, the loan guarantee was set up with hiring numbers in mind: Only by meeting the state's arbitrary targets would 38 Studios gain access to the cash. As *Boston* magazine reported (in a splendid piece about Schilling and

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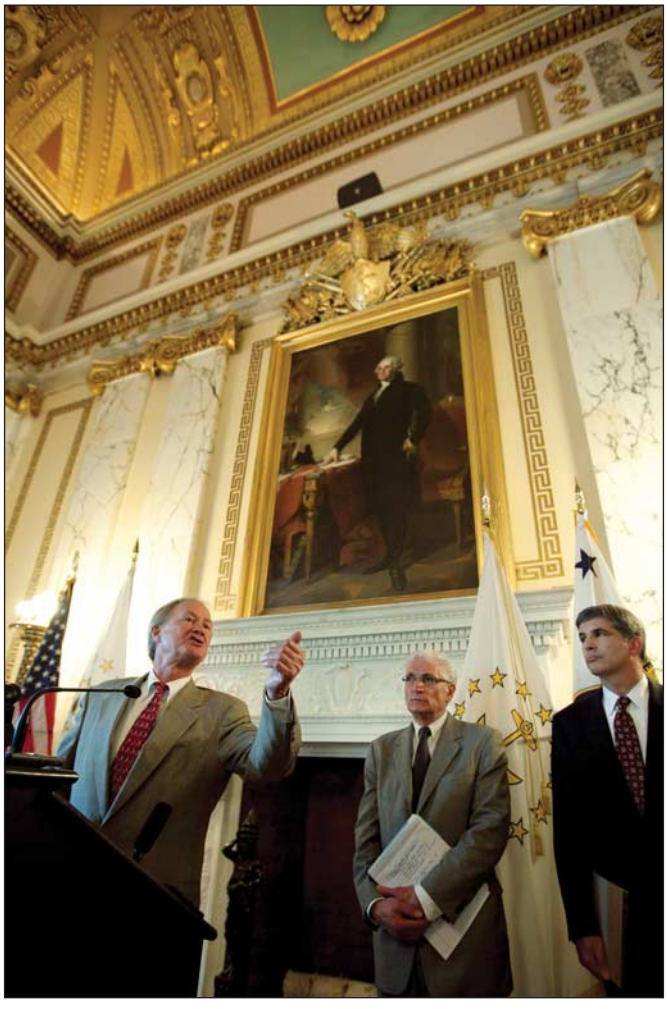
the debacle), "the company would unlock $17.2 million for creating 80 new jobs in the state by spring 2011, another $4.2 million for adding 45 more by fall, and $3.1 million on top of that for 125 additional jobs by winter." The bizarre idea that jobs are the *objective* of business rather than its happy byproduct seems to have animated the scheme.

The shakiness of this arrangement was obvious to some at the outset. As far back as 2010, Providence-based journalist Ted Nesi had reported, "Sixty percent of the loan money is getting paid out based on milestones that have nothing to do with whether [the computer game] is on track—it's all based on 38 Studios's address and local headcount."

So the size of 38 Studios's workforce became increasingly untethered to its success as a business. This arrangement yielded predictable results. Nicholas Kole, who worked as a character designer for the company for three years, says it seemed to him wildly overstaffed. "After the move to Rhode Island, we [took] on a LOT of new employees (and, it seemed, not always in the departments that needed the help)," he writes in an email. And then there were the perks: With the state backing up its loans, 38 Studios offered its employees zero-deduction health insurance, lots of free meals, and a huge travel budget.

By early 2012, the company had more than 350 people on staff—and the multiplayer game still hadn't hit the marketplace. (The company did release a single-player game in February, which sold fairly well.) It was also burning through some $4 million a month, and wasn't expected to release the game until June 2013. With little revenue coming in, 38 Studios began missing payments, stiffing vendors like Atlas Van Lines and its health insurance provider, Blue Cross Blue Shield.



Gov. Lincoln Chafee (left): Don't make him your investment adviser.

AP / STEVEN SENNE

On May 1, the firm defaulted on a loan payment to the state of Rhode Island. On May 15, it missed payroll. Shortly thereafter, Rhode Island governor Lincoln Chafee (formerly a Republican, now a Democratic-leaning independent) held a press conference at which he declined to extend additional tax credits to keep the business afloat. That sealed 38 Studios's fate; shortly, all employees were laid off, and the company filed for bankruptcy.

Including interest on the bonds that Rhode Island sold to guarantee the loans, the state's taxpayers are now on the hook for an estimated $112 million. Rhode Island is attempting to claw back some of that money—late last month, it announced the formation of a "litigation subcommittee" to determine whether any third-party liability exists.

Schilling, for his part, has lashed out at Chafee for holding that news conference, saying it scared away potential private investors. He labeled the governor a "dunce of epic proportions" and a "buffoon." (Chafee, with characteristic flaccidity, replied that Schilling's words were "regretful.") Schilling is seemingly unwilling to admit that, as a baseball player, he was ill-qualified to run a multimillion-dollar technology business. Nonetheless, the state's hiring requirements helped to doom the enterprise. Indeed, as some have pointed out, it was 38 Studios's *success* in meeting the employment targets set out by the state that sowed the seeds of its demise. Kole says, "All I know is that, by the time things fell apart, we were far from lean."

It's all too easy to see why Rhode Island—a rust-belt economy sandwiched between white-collar and far wealthier Connecticut and Massachusetts—would be eager to land a high-tech company. Throw in the state's inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Bay State, and it becomes abundantly plain why Rhode Island was so eager to capture the startup of a former Red Sox superstar, even if he had no executive experience.

What is less clear is why the voters of Rhode Island—or, for that matter, the nation—would elect politicians so ignorant of economics, and so promiscuous with other people's money. ♦

Who Killed the Liberal Arts?

Raphael's 'School of Athens'

And why we should care

By Joseph Epstein

When asked what he thought about the cultural wars, Irving Kristol is said to have replied, "They're over," adding, "We lost." If Kristol was correct, one of the decisive battles in that war may have been over the liberal arts in education, which we also lost.

In a loose definition, the "liberal arts" denote college study anchored in preponderantly Western literature, philosophy, and history, with science, mathematics, and foreign languages playing a substantial, though less central, role; in more recent times, the social science subjects—psychology, sociology, political science—have also sometimes been included. The liberal arts have always been distinguished from more specialized, usually vocational training. For the ancient Greeks, the liberal arts were the subjects thought necessary for a free man to study. If he is to remain free, in this view, he must acquire knowledge of the best thought of the past, which will cultivate in him the intellectual depth and critical spirit required to live in an informed and reasonable way in the present.

College
What It Was, Is, and Should Be
by Andrew Delbanco
Princeton, 240 pp., $24.95

For many years, the liberal arts were my second religion. I worshipped their content, I believed in their significance, I fought for them against the philistines of our age as Samson fought against the Philistines of his—though in my case, I kept my hair and brought down no pillars. As currently practiced, however, it is becoming more and more difficult to defend the liberal arts. Their content has been drastically changed, their significance is in doubt, and defending them in the condition in which they linger on scarcely seems worth the struggle.

The loss of prestige of the liberal arts is part of the general crisis of higher education in the United States. The crisis begins in economics. Larger numbers of Americans start college, but roughly a third never finish—more women finish, interestingly, than do men. With the economic slump of recent years, benefactions to colleges are down, as are federal and state grants, thus forcing tuition costs up, in public as well as in private institutions. Inflation is greater in the realm of higher education than in any other public sphere. Complaints about the high cost of education at private colleges—fees of $50,000 and $55,000 a year are commonly mentioned—are heard everywhere. A great number of students leave college with enormous student-loan debt, which is higher than either national credit card or automobile credit debt. Because of the expense of traditional liberal arts

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colleges, greater numbers of the young go to one or another form of commuter college, usually for vocational training.

Although it is common knowledge that a person with a college degree will earn a great deal more than a person without one—roughly a million dollars more over a lifetime is the frequently cited figure—today, students with college degrees are finding it tough to get decent jobs. People are beginning to wonder if college, at its currently extravagant price, is worth it. Is higher education, like tech stocks and real estate, the next big bubble to burst?

A great deal of evidence for the crisis in American higher education is set out in *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Its author, Andrew Delbanco, the biographer of Herman Melville, is a staunch defender of liberal arts, as he himself studied them as an undergraduate at Harvard and as he teaches them currently at Columbia. The continuing diminution of the liberal arts worries him. Some 18 million people in the United States are now enrolled in one or another kind of undergraduate institution of higher learning—but fewer than 100,000 are enrolled in liberal arts colleges.

At the same time, for that small number of elite liberal arts colleges—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Duke, the University of Chicago, and a few others—applications continue to rise, despite higher and higher tuition fees. The ardor to get into these schools—for economic, social, and snobbish reasons—has brought about an examination culture, at least among the children of the well-to-do, who from preschool on are relentlessly trained to take the examinations that will get them into the better grade schools, high schools, colleges, and, finally, professional schools. Professor Delbanco is opposed to the economic unfairness behind these arrangements, believing, rightly, that as a result, "the obstacles [to getting into the elite colleges] that bright low-income students face today are more insidious than the frank exclusionary practices that once prevailed."

Whether students today, despite all their special tutoring and testing, are any better than those of earlier generations is far from clear. Trained almost from the cradle to smash the SATs and any other examination that stands in their way, the privileged among them may take examinations better, but it is doubtful if their learning and intellectual understanding are any greater. Usually propelled by the desires of their parents, they form a meritocracy that, in Delbanco's view, as in that of the English sociologist Michael Young whom he quotes, comprises a dystopia of sorts, peopled by young men and women driven by high, but empty, ambition. "Are these really the people we want running the world?" Delbanco asks. Unfortunately, they already are. I am not the only one, surely, to have noticed that some of the worst people in this country—names on request—are graduates of the Harvard and Yale law schools.

Attending one of a limited number of elite colleges continues to yield wide opportunities for graduates, but fewer and fewer people any longer believe that someone who has finished college is necessarily all that much smarter than someone who hasn't. With standards lowered, hours of study shortened, reports appearing about how many college graduates can no longer be depended upon to know how to write or to grasp rudimentary intellectual concepts, having gone to college seems to have less and less bearing on a person's intelligence.

Studies cited by Delbanco in his footnotes claim an increase among college students in cheating, drinking, and depression. In their book *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roska argue that the gain in critical thinking and complex reasoning among the majority of students during college years is very low, if not minimal. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* drawn from their book, Arum and Roska write:

> Parents—although somewhat disgruntled about increasing costs—want colleges to provide a safe environment where their children can mature, gain independence, and attain a credential that will help them be successful as adults. Students in general seek to enjoy the benefits of a full collegiate experience that is focused as much on social life as on academic pursuits, while earning high marks in their courses with relatively little investment of effort. Professors are eager to find time to concentrate on their scholarship and professional interests. Administrators have been asked to focus largely on external institutional rankings and the financial bottom line. Government funding agencies are primarily interested in the development of new scientific knowledge. . . . No actors in the system are primarily interested in undergraduates' academic growth, although many are interested in student retention and persistence.

What savvy employers are likely to conclude is that those who graduate from college are probably more conformist, and therefore likely to be more dependable, than those who do not. Paul Goodman, one of the now-forgotten gurus of the 1960s, used to argue that what finishing college really meant is that one was willing to do anything to succeed in a capitalist society. In getting a college degree, Goodman held, one was in effect saying, I want in on the game, deal me a hand, I want desperately to play. Education, meanwhile, didn't have a lot to do with it.

Not everywhere in higher education have standards slipped. One assumes that in engineering and within the sciences they have been maintained, and in some ways, owing to computer technology, perhaps improved. Relatively new fields of learning, computer science chief among them, have not been around long enough to have lost their way. Medical and legal education are probably not greatly different than they have traditionally been. Chiefly in the liberal arts subjects do standards seem most radically to have slipped.

Early in the 19th century, Sydney Smith, one of the

founders of the *Edinburgh Review*, remarked that if we had made the same progress in the culinary arts as we have made in education, we should still be eating soup with our hands. Apart from eliminating corporal punishment and widening the educational franchise, we can't be sure if, over the centuries, we have made much progress in education. At the moment there is great enthusiasm about "advances" in education owing to the Internet. Two teachers at Stanford, for example, put their course on Artificial Intelligence online and drew an audience of 160,000 students from all around the world. But science, which deals in one right answer, is more easily taught without a physical presence in the room, and probably works better online than humanities courses, whose questions usually have many answers, few of them permanently right. The *Washington Monthly*, in its May-June issue, has a special section called "The Next Wave of School Reform," a wave that, in the words of the editor, aims to "improve students' ability to think critically and independently, solve complex problems, apply knowledge to novel situations, work in teams and communicate effectively." The problem with these waves of school reform, of course, is that a new one is always needed because the last one turns out to have tossed up more detritus on the shore than was expected.

The way we were: a lecture at St. John's College, 1940

The fact is that we still don't know how to assess teaching—trial by student test scores, except in rudimentary subjects, isn't very helpful—and we remain ignorant about the true nature of the transaction between teacher and student that goes by the name of learning. In undergraduate education, we may even have retreated a step or two through the phenomenon known as grade inflation and through the politicization of curricula.

The division between vocational and liberal arts education, which began during the 19th century with the advent of the land-grant state universities in the United States, is today tilting further and further in favor of the vocational. Even within the liberal arts, more and more students are, in Delbanco's words, "fleeing from 'useless' subjects to 'marketable' subjects such as economics," in the hope that this will lend them the practical credentials and cachets that might impress prospective employers.

Delbanco reminds us of Max Weber's distinction between "soul-saving" and "skill-acquiring" education. The liberal arts, in their task to develop a certain roundedness in those who study them and their function, in Delbanco's phrase, "as a hedge against utilitarian values," are (or at least were meant to be) soul-saving. Whether, in the majority of students who undertook to study the liberal arts, they truly were or not may be open to question, but what isn't open to question is that today, the liberal arts have lost interest in their primary mission. That mission, as Delbanco has it, is that of "attaining and sustaining curiosity and humility," while "engaging in some serious self-examination." A liberal education, as he notes, quoting John Henry Cardinal Newman, "implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of our character."

Delbanco warns that it won't do to posit some prelapsarian golden age when higher education approached perfection. Surely he is correct. A good deal of the old liberal arts education was dreary. The profession of teaching, like that of clergyman and psychiatrist, calls for a higher sense of vocation and talent than poor humanity often seems capable of attaining. Yet there was a time when a liberal arts education held a much higher position in the world's regard than it does today. One of the chief reasons for its slippage, which Delbanco fails directly to confront, is that so many of its teachers themselves no longer believe in it —about which more presently.

I mentioned earlier that the liberal arts were for a good while my second religion. Here let me add that I had never heard of them until my own undergraduate education had begun.

When I was about to graduate from high school as an amiable screw-off, ranked barely above the lower quarter of my class, my father, who had not gone to college, told me that if I wished to go he would pay my way, but he encouraged me to consider whether my going wouldn't be a waste of time. He personally thought I might make a hell of a good salesman, which was a compliment, for he was himself a hell of a good salesman, and a successful one. I eschewed

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his advice, not because it wasn't sound, but chiefly because I felt that, at 18, I wasn't ready to go out in the world to work.

In those days, the University of Illinois was, at least for residents of the state, an open-enrollment school. If you lived in Illinois, the school had to take you, no matter how low in your high school class you graduated. Lots of kids flunked out, and my own greatest fear on the train headed from Chicago down to Champaign-Urbana, in white bucks and reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, was that I would be among them.

Most of my friends, Jewish boys from the rising lower-middle class, went to the University of Illinois to major in business. "Business major" nicely rang the earnestness gong. Yet the courses required of a business major struck me as heart-stoppingly boring: accounting, economics, marketing, advertising, corporation finance, also known as "corp fin," which sounded to me like nothing so much as a chancy seafood dish. I was especially nervous about accounting, for I had wretched handwriting and a dis- orderly mind, which I viewed as two strikes against me straightaway. Wasn't there something else I might study instead of business? A fellow in the fraternity that was rushing me suggested liberal arts. This was the first time I had heard the phrase "liberal arts." What it initially stood for, in my mind, was no accounting.

Quickness of response—on which 95 percent of education is based—is beside the point, and is required only of politicians, emergency-room physicians, lawyers in courtrooms, and salesmen.

In my first year at the University of Illinois, I had slightly above a B average. I attained this through sheer memorization: of biological phyla, of French irregular verbs and vocabulary, of 17th-century poems. I also discovered, in a course called Rhetoric 101, that I had a minor skill at prose composition, a skill all the more remarkable for my excluding all use of any punctuation trickier than commas or periods.

After this modest success, I decided that I was ready for a more exotic institution, the University of Chicago, to which I applied during my second semester at Illinois. What I didn't know then, but have since discovered, was that my demographic cohort, those people born toward the middle and end of the Depression, were lucky when it came to college admission, for our small numbers made colleges want us quite as much as we wanted them. In short, I was accepted at the University of Chicago, though I would never have been accepted there today, and that is where I spent the next, and final, three years of my formal education.

The University of Chicago had a reputation for great teachers, but I managed, somehow, to avoid them. I never sat in a class conducted by Leo Strauss, Joseph Schwab, Norman Maclean, David Greene, or Edward Shils. (Of course, great teachers, like great lovers, can sometimes be overrated. Later in life, I met a few men and women reputed to be great teachers and found them pompous and doltish, their minds spoiled by talking too long to children.) I attended a lecture by David Reisman, who was then *Time* magazine-cover famous, and was impressed by what then seemed to me his intellectual suavity. I sat in on a couple of classes taught by Richard Weaver, the author of *Ideas Have Consequences*, but left uninspired. I was most impressed by teachers from Mittel-Europa, Hitler's gift to America, whose culture seemed thicker than that of the native-born teachers I encountered, and could not yet perceive the commonplace mind that sometimes lurked behind an English accent.

I took a course from Morton Dauwen Zabel, who was the friend of Harriet Monroe, Marianne Moore, and Edmund Wilson. Although not a great teacher, Zabel was an impressive presence who gave off whiffs of what the literary life in the great world was like. I took a summer course from the poet and critic Elder Olson, who kept what seemed a full-time precariously long ash on the end of his cigarette, and who, after reading from *The Waste Land*, ended by saying, "How beautiful this is. Too bad I can't believe a word of it."

The students at the University of Chicago were something else. In his book, Delbanco, defending the small classroom, refers to something he calls "lateral learning," which refers to what a college student learns in class from his fellow students. He cites Cardinal Newman and John Dewey on this point, and quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne:

> It contributes greatly to a man's moral and intellectual health, to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate.

A great many of my fellow students in the College at the University of Chicago seemed to come from New York City, several others from academic families. They appeared to have been reading the *Nation* and the *New Republic* from the age of 11. Their families argued about Trotsky at the dinner table. A few among them had the uncalled-for candor of psychoanalysands. I recall a girl sitting next to me at a roundtable in Swift Hall volunteering her own menstrual experiences in connection with a discussion of those of the Trobriand Islanders.

Some among these University of Chicago students had an impressive acquaintance with books. One morning in Elder Olson's class in modern poetry, Olson began quoting Baudelaire (*mon semblable,—mon frère!*) and a student next to me, named Martha Silverman, joined him, in French, and together, in unison, the two of them chanted the poem to its conclusion. This was one of those moments when I thought it perhaps a good time to look into career opportunities at Jiffy Lube.

"I invariably took the first rank in all discussions and exercises, whether public or private, as not only my teachers testified, but also the printed congratulations and carmina of my classmates." So wrote Leibniz about his own classroom performance. Reverse everything Leibniz wrote and you have a fairly accurate picture of my classroom performance at the University of Chicago. None among my teachers there ever suggested that I had intellectual promise. Nor should they have done, for I didn't show any, not even to myself. I made no "A"s. I wrote no brilliant papers. I didn't do especially well on exams. I was not quick in response in the classroom.

Only years later did I realize that quickness of response —on which 95 percent of education is based—is beside the point, and is required only of politicians, emergency-room physicians, lawyers in courtrooms, and salesmen. Serious intellectual effort requires slow, usually painstaking thought, often with wrong roads taken along the way to the right destination, if one is lucky enough to arrive there. One of the hallmarks of the modern educational system, which is essentially an examination system, is that so much of it is based on quick response solely. Give 6 reasons for the decline of Athens, 8 for the emergence of the Renaissance, 12 for the importance of the French Revolution. You have 20 minutes in which to do so.

At the University of Chicago I read many books, none of them trivial, for the school in those years did not allow the work of second- or third-rate writers into its curriculum. Kurt Vonnegut, Toni Morrison, Jack Kerouac, Adrienne Rich, or their equivalents of that day, did not come close to making the cut. No textbooks were used. You didn't read "Karl Marx postulated . . ."; you read Karl-bloody-Marx. The working assumption was that one's time in college is limited, and mustn't be spent on anything other than the first-rate, or on learning acquired (as with textbooks) at a second remove.

Nor did Chicago offer any "soft" majors or "lite" courses. I remember, in my final year, looking for such a course to fill out a crowded schedule, and choosing one called History of Greek Philosophy. How difficult, I thought, could this be? Learn a few concepts of the pre-Socratics (Thales believed this, Heraclitus that), acquire a few dates, and that would be that. On the first day of class, the teacher, a trim little man named Warner Arms Wick, announced that there was no substantial history of Greek philosophy, so we shall instead be spending the quarter reading Aristotle and Plato exclusively.

How much of my reading did I retain? How much does any 19- or 20-year-old boy, whose hormones have set him a very different agenda, retain of serious intellectual matter? How much more is less than fully available to him owing to simple want of experience? What I do remember is the feeling of intellectual excitement while reading Plato and Thucydides and an almost palpable physical pleasure turning the pages of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as he made one dazzling intellectual connection after another. I can also recall being plunged into a brief but genuine depression reading Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

The idea behind the curriculum at the College of the University of Chicago was the Arnoldian one, abbreviated to undergraduate years, of introducing students to the best that was thought and said in the Western world. Mastery wasn't in the picture. At least, I never felt that I had mastered any subject, or even book, in any of my courses there. What the school did give me was the confidence that I could read serious books, and with it the assurance that I needed to return to them, in some cases over and over, to claim anything like a genuine understanding of them.

I was never more than a peripheral character, rather more like a tourist than a student, at the University of Chicago. Yet when I left the school in 1959, I was a strikingly different person than the one who entered in 1956. What had happened? My years there allowed me to consider other possibilities than the one destiny would appear to have set in grooves for me. I felt less locked into the social categories—Jewish, middle-class, Midwestern—in which I had grown up, and yet, more appreciative of their significance in my own development. I had had a glimpse—if not much more—of the higher things, and longed for a more concentrated look.

Had I not gone to the University of Chicago, I have often wondered, what might my life be like? I suspect I would be wealthier. But reading the books I did, and have continued to throughout my life, has made it all but impossible to concentrate on moneymaking in the way that is required to acquire significant wealth. Without the experience of the University of Chicago, perhaps I would have been less critical of the world's institutions and the people who run them; I might even have been among those who do run them. I might, who knows, have been happier, if only because less introspective—nobody said the examined life is a lot of laughs—without the changes wrought in me by my years at the University of Chicago. Yet I would not trade in those three strange years for anything.

I turned out to be a better teacher than student. In fact I took to saying, toward the close of my 30-year stint in the English department at Northwestern University, that teaching provides a better education than does being a student. If he wishes to elude boredom among his students and embarrassment for himself, a teacher will do all he can to cultivate the art of lucid and interesting presentation and the habits of thoroughness. Thereby, with a bit of luck, education may begin to kick in.

Yet even after completing three decades of teaching, I am less than sure that what I did in the classroom was effective or, when it might have been effective, why. Of the thousands of inane student evaluations I received—"This guy knows his stuff" . . . "Nice bowties" . . . "Great jokes"—the only one that stays in my mind read: "I did well in this course; I would have been ashamed not to have done." How I wish I knew what it was that I did to induce this useful shame in that student, so that I might have done it again and again!

Student evaluations, set in place to give the impression to students that they have an important say in their own education, are one of the useless intrusions into university teaching by the political tumult of the 1960s. Teaching remains a mysterious, magical art. Anyone who claims he knows how it works is a liar. No one tells you how to do it. You walk into a classroom and try to remember what worked for the teachers who impressed you, or, later in the game, what seemed to work best for you in the past. Otherwise, it is pure improv, no matter how extensive one's notes.

Teaching remains a mysterious, magical art. Anyone who claims he knows how it works is a liar. You walk into a classroom and try to remember what worked for the teachers who impressed you.

As a testimony to the difficulty of evaluating the quality of teaching, Professor Delbanco includes a devastating footnote about student evaluations. One study found that students tend to give good evaluations "to instructors who are easy graders or who are good looking," and to be hardest on women and foreign teachers; another, made at Ohio State University, found "no correlation between professor evaluations and the learning that is actually taking place." As Delbanco notes, the main result of student evaluations is to make it easier for students to avoid tough teachers or, through harsh reviews, punish these teachers for holding to a high standard.

I was not myself regarded as a tough teacher, but I prefer to think that I never fell below the line of the serious in what I taught or in what I asked of my students. What I tried to convey about the writers on whom I gave courses was, alongside the aesthetic pleasures they provided, their use as guides, however incomplete, to understanding life. Reading Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Willa Cather, and other writers I taught was important business—possibly, in the end, though I never said it straight out, more important than getting into Harvard Law School or Stanford Business School. When I taught courses on prose style, I stressed that correctness has its own elegance, and that, in the use of language, unlike in horseshoes, close isn't good enough; precision was the minimal requirement, and it was everything.

How many students found helpful what I was trying to convey I haven't the least notion. If anything I said during the many hours we were together mattered to them, I cannot know. Not a scholar myself, I never tried to make scholars of my students. A small number of them went on to do intellectual work, to become editors, critics, poets, novelists; a few became college teachers. Did my example help push them in their decision not to go for the money? Some of the brightest among them did go for the money, and have lived honorable lives in pursuit of it, and that's fine, too. A world filled with people like me would be intolerable.

When I taught, I was always conscious of what I thought of as the guy in the next room: my fellow teachers. During my teaching days (1973-2003), I could be fairly certain that the guy in the next room was teaching something distinctly, even starkly, different from what I was teaching. This was the age of deconstruction, academic feminism, historicism, Marxism, early queer theory, and other, in Wallace Stevens's phrase, one-idea lunacies. A bright young female graduate student one day came to ask me if I thought David Copperfield a sexual criminal. "Why would I think that?" I asked. "Professor X thinks it," she said. "He claims that because of the death in childbirth of David Copperfield's wife, he, Copperfield, through making her pregnant, committed a crime." All I could think to reply was, "I guess criticism never sleeps."

While not wishing to join the dirge-like chorus of those who write about the fate of higher education in our day, Andrew Delbanco does not shy from setting out much that has gone wrong with it. He highlights the importance everywhere accorded to research over teaching among faculty. He notes the preeminence of science over the humanities, due to the fact that science deals with the provable and can also lead to technological advancement, and hence pays off. (He mentions the sadly mistaken slavishness of the humanities in attempting to imitate science, and cites the advent of something called the "literature lab" as an example.) He brings up the corruption implicit

in university presidents sitting on corporate boards, the fraudulence of big-time college athletics, some of whose football and basketball coaches earn more than entire academic departments, and much more.

Delbanco, a secular Jew and a man of the Vietnam generation, is nonetheless ready to allow the pertinence of the earlier Protestant view of higher education in the liberal arts:

> The era of spiritual authority belonging to college [when it was under religious auspices] is long gone. And yet I have never encountered a better formulation—"show me how to think and how to choose"—of what a college should strive to be: an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others.

College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be gives a clear picture of all the forces, both within and outside the university, working against the liberal arts. Yet Delbanco lets off the hook the people who were in the best position to have helped save them—the teachers, those "guys in the next room." Much could be said about teaching the liberal arts before the Vietnam generation came to prominence (which is to say, tenure) in the colleges: that it could be arid, dull, pedantic, astonishingly out of it. But it never quite achieved the tendentious clownishness that went into effect when "the guys in the next room" took over.

Not that the ground hadn't been nicely prepared for them. Universities had long before opened themselves up to teaching books and entire subjects that had no real place in higher education. Take journalism schools. Everyone who has ever worked on a newspaper knows that what one learns in four years in journalism school can be acquired in less than two months working on a newspaper. But as journalism schools spread, it slowly became necessary to go through one in order to get a job on a large metropolitan daily. Going to "journ" school became a form of pledging the fraternity. Everyone else in the business had pledged; who are you, pal, to think you can get in without also pledging? And so journalism schools became mainstays of many universities.

Then there is the business school, especially in its MBA version. Business schools are not about education at all, but about so-called networking and establishing, for future employers, a credential demonstrating that one will do anything to work for them—even give up two years of income and pay high tuition fees for an MBA to do so. As with an American Express card, so with an MBA, one daren't leave home without one, at least if one is applying for work at certain corporations. Some among these corporations, when it comes to recruiting for jobs, only interview MBAs, and many restrict their candidate pools to MBAs from only four or five select business schools. Pledging the fraternity again.

Soon, the guys in the next room, in their hunger for relevance and their penchant for self-indulgence, began teaching books for reasons external to their intrinsic beauty or importance, and attempted to explain history before discovering what actually happened. They politicized psychology and sociology, and allowed African-American studies an even higher standing than Greek and Roman classics. They decided that the multicultural was of greater import than Western culture. They put popular culture on the same intellectual footing as high culture (Conrad or graphic novels, three hours credit either way). And, finally, they determined that race, gender, and social class were at the heart of all humanities and most social science subjects. With that finishing touch, the game was up for the liberal arts.

The contention in favor of a liberal arts education was that contemplation of great books and grand subjects would take students out of their parochial backgrounds and elevate them into the realm of higher seriousness. Disputes might arise from professor to professor, or from school to school, about what constituted the best that was thought and said—more Hobbes than Locke, more Yeats than Frost—but a general consensus existed about what qualified to be taught to the young in the brief span of their education. That consensus has split apart, and what gets taught today is more and more that which interests professors.

Columbia still provides two years of traditional liberal arts for its undergraduates. The University of Chicago continues to struggle over assembling a core curriculum based on the old Robert Hutchins College plan. St. John's College, both in Annapolis and in Santa Fe, has, from its founding, been devoted to the cult of the liberal arts, even to the point of having its students study medieval science. The hunger among students for the intellectual satisfaction that a liberal arts education provides is not entirely dead. (At Northwestern, a course in Russian novels taught by Gary Saul Morson attracts 600 students, second only to the recently canceled notorious course in sex education offered by the school.) But the remaining liberal arts programs begin to have the distinct feel of rearguard actions.

The death of liberal arts education would constitute a serious subtraction. Without it, we shall no longer have a segment of the population that has a proper standard with which to judge true intellectual achievement. Without it, no one can have a genuine notion of what constitutes an educated man or woman, or why one work of art is superior to another, or what in life is serious and what is trivial. The loss of liberal arts education can only result in replacing authoritative judgment with rivaling expert opinions, the vaunting of the second- and third-rate in politics and art, the supremacy of the faddish and the fashionable in all of life. Without that glimpse of the best that liberal arts education conveys, a nation might wake up living in the worst, and never notice. ♦

Robert Frost in England, 1957

The Poet Outright

One key to understanding Robert Frost. BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

It would be a good parlor game to draw up a list illustrating the variety of great men New England has produced—starting with the archetypal New England poet Robert Frost, continuing through, say, Benjamin Franklin, the gunsmith Samuel Colt, the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the Watergate conspirator and prison missionary Charles Colson, and winding up with George W. Bush—and then challenge participants to name the person on that list who is not, in fact, a native New Englander. The answer is Robert Frost himself, who was born and spent his childhood in San Francisco. Only the death of his journalist father in 1885, when Frost was 11, brought the family back to Massachusetts.

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The Art of Robert Frost
by Tim Kendall
Yale, 408 pp., $35

Frost became a New Englander of a recognizable kind, or of many kinds: He attended public high school in Lawrence, farmed in New Hampshire, read a lot of Emerson, and absorbed his culture more from London (where, at almost 40, he published his first volumes of verse) than from New York. But the New England of his poems is not a world of kicking leaves, eating lobster, and looking at mountains. It is the morbid, gothic, and ghastly world of those who, in a less delicate age, were called Swamp Yankees: the millworker who has his feet shattered by a piece of industrial machinery, the runaway wife watching the passersby at nightfall with paranoia, the married couple suffering a collective nervous breakdown over a dead child.

We should distinguish between Frost's most typical poems and his most celebrated ones. The typical poem is a blank-verse dialogue between people to whom something unspeakable has happened, with a vaguely repellent air lowering over them. But all of the most celebrated poems—"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "After Apple-Picking," "Mending Wall," "Birches"—have some atypical element that renders them welcoming. Frost's poems are no more what they seem than Frost himself.

He reveled in this ambiguity. He praised poetry as "the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another." Tim Kendall, an English literature professor at the University of Exeter, uses the word "ulteriority" to

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describe this aspect of Frost's worldview. In *The Art of Robert Frost*, he illustrates it through a kind of low-tech version of an online university course. Kendall reprints several dozen poems in full, and follows each of them up with a lecture, which bundles in all kinds of explanatory "links."

First, Kendall ties Frost's poems to his opinions, which are generally odd-sounding to contemporary ears because they are not the product of any kind of herdthink. These references do not resolve Frost's double meanings, but they establish that some of those meanings are more "meant" than others. The political views hinted at in "Two Tramps in Mud Time," for instance, are made clearer by the impatient wish, confided to one of Frost's notebooks, that we could "for Christ's sake forget the poor some of the time."

Second, Kendall examines Frost's method of composition. The closing lines of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" might be the best-known stanza of American poetry:

> *The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*
> *But I have promises to keep,*
> *And miles to go before I sleep,*
> *And miles to go before I sleep.*

It is interesting to know that Frost chose it because he thought his original ending:

> *The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*
> *But I have promises to keep*
> *That bid me give the reins a shake.*

was a dud. One can see why.

Third, and most helpfully, Kendall engages with a century's worth of close readings of Frost's poetry. From Amy Lowell to Randall Jarrell to Seamus Heaney, the most celebrated poets and critics have sung Frost's praises and picked his nits. This has made him a profitable poet through whom to study the motives and meaning of American poetry in general.

A lot of these examinations of Frost were carried out in the heat of one scholarly fad or another, hardened into conventional wisdom, and have never been reexamined. Such reexamination is the main service Kendall supplies.

What kind of poet is Frost? An Englishman such as Kendall might be better equipped to answer that question than an American. If the genuinely American poetic tradition begins with Walt Whitman, then Frost was not really an American poet at all. Kendall contrasts the two poets' attitudes towards traditional English versification: "Whitman presented his metrical experiments as part of a campaign to cut the shackles of that encumbrance. For Frost, originality stems not from rejection of the past but from deploying its resources in unforeseen ways."

This distinction is exactly right. Frost was not against modernizing, but he was unimpressed by the way Whitman had gone about it. He would wind the clock of the poetic tradition back to where it was on the eve of Whitman's revolution. His own understanding of the English poetic tradition was shaped mostly by the English Romantics, and Kendall is excellent in drawing out their specific influences: John Keats on "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Samuel Taylor Coleridge on "An Old Man's Winter Night," and William Wordsworth absolutely everywhere.

Wordsworth described his project as "fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation." Frost aimed to take this experiment a step further, and Kendall makes much of his "sub-Wordsworthian diction." Frost's protagonists are even more "vibrantly unschooled" than his predecessor's, and giving voice to them is eminently worthwhile. These are indeed an interesting class of people. They are precisely the people that industrialization (in Wordsworth's and Frost's age) and globalization (in ours) destroy, and they are never the most eloquent pleaders of their own cause.

In pleading it for them, one is always doomed to a degree of insincerity. Frost aims at this sub-Wordsworthian diction by twisting extremely simple words and phrases into new contexts, as if he were misusing them. But it is the kind of misuse that only a sophisticate would attempt. When the narrator in "Mending Wall" says, *Spring is the mischief in me*, it is because Frost likes the effect, not because any farmer would talk that way. Describing a visitor to a country nursery as *a stranger to our yard, who looked the city* (in "Christmas Trees") saves a preposition but doesn't exactly . . . um . . . "look" the country. Shifting an adverbial phrase to a nominal phrase in *All out of doors looked darkly in at him* ("An Old Man's Winter Night") is pleasingly strange. But it's not as Wordsworthian as Frost might have thought.

Like the Romantics, Frost was interested in describing man's position not just in society but in nature. No modern poet was better at doing both at the same time. In his underrated poem "Reluctance," he writes:

> *The leaves are all dead on the ground,*
> *Save those that the oak is keeping*
> *To ravel them one by one*
> *And let them go scraping and creeping*
> *Out over the crusted snow,*
> *When others are sleeping.*

The most beautiful, descriptive word in this tour de force is not "keeping" or "ravel" but "others"—for the way it conveys that the writer is *not* sleeping.

Kendall has a very 21st-century reading of the clash between man and nature. He roots for nature. Consider Frost's beautiful description of an abandoned farmhouse in "Ghost House":

> *O'er ruined fences the grape-vines shield*
> *The woods come back to the mowing field;*
> *The orchard tree has grown one copse*
> *Of new wood and old where the woodpecker chops;*
> *The footpath down to the well is healed.*

Any 20th-century reader would have viewed the spectacle of a house going "back to bush" with the same sense of civilizational tragedy that V. S. Naipaul conveys in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Kendall, though, sees the landscape as "cleansed of the human stain." It is likely that most Frost readers until very recently have read "healed" in the paragraph above as a visual metaphor, not (as Kendall reads it) as a moral opinion. Where Frost is a naturalist, Kendall is an environmentalist.

We should not regret the bringing of new ideological preoccupations

to Frost. Older critics, in the grip of their own ideologies, have certainly talked their share of nonsense about him. Two of these ideologies deserve particular attention.

First, Freudian psychology. From World War I, when Frost's first books appeared, until sometime in the mid-1980s, a good deal of literary criticism consisted of uncovering references to phallic symbols. This was a kind of "ulteriority" that even the most dim-witted critic could practice, and once the university system expanded in the 1950s, there was a profusion of such critics. Like DDT, the poem with a lot of fronds and prongs and fountains and geysers was a convenient but ultimately damaging midcentury labor-saving innovation. Even today, university reading lists are garlanded with worthless poems—William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say," for instance, or Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"—aimed at work-shy academics.

Frost was not above carting to town what the market requested, including such relatively strong poems as "After Apple-Picking" (*My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still*) and "Putting the Seed In," which ends, *The sturdy seedling with arched body comes / Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs*. Kendall has an excellent, balanced way of arguing for the virtues of these poems, saying the latter is "not so much about sex as craftily aware of it, and to praise it on more explicit terms is to miss its strengths, just as to censor it would be to risk being condemned as dirty-minded." Deprived of the sponsorship of Freud, though, "Meeting and Passing," which circles around the image of *Your parasol / Pointed the decimal off with one deep thrust*, is beginning to look like a terribly overrated poem.

A second ideology that has been overworked in readings of Frost is nationalism. In poems like "The Oven Bird" and "Hyla Brook" (which Kendall reproduces), and "Does Nobody At All Ever Feel This Way in the Least?" (which he does not), Frost spends a great deal of energy in distinguishing between what is "New World" and what is "Old World," right down to species of birds and frogs. Critics are not wrong to see this as a genuine preoccupation of Frost's. It's just that it needn't preoccupy us so much, now that the differences between the two cultures are evaporating and Old World culture is being contemned even in the Old World.

If Frost has been faulted for one thing consistently over the decades, it is humorlessness. Kendall tries to defend him against the charge, but he has a weak case. There is self-consciousness,

Robert Frost, ca. 1915

irony, and playfulness in Frost, but it is usually vain and mean, and not the same thing as humor. Randall Jarrell's accurate assessment that "Birches," another Frost favorite, was an overrated poem probably comes from the way Frost uses it to demean the whole game of writing a poem—

> *But I was going to say when Truth broke in . . .*
> *(Now am I free to be poetical?)*

It's the kind of poem people who are contemptuous of, or threatened by, poetry tend to like.

The best sign that the critics are right about Frost's humorlessness is his Emersonian paean to going one's own way, "The Road Not Taken." Frost didn't intend it to be an Emersonian paean. He meant to spoof the indecision of his great friend Edward Thomas. As Kendall puts it, this misunderstanding regarding what may be Frost's most popular poem occasioned a crisis. "Its popularity," he writes, "becomes an affront, attracting admiration for the very characteristics which the poet had tried to mock."

An atypical outburst of real humor comes in what is perhaps Frost's greatest poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time." Kendall rightly gives it a very political reading. Even if Frost never makes the point specifically, the poem is an outright attack on that foundation of all progressivism—the division of labor. But one purely descriptive stanza has a glittering gaiety that would not be out of place in an Ira Gershwin lyric:

> *The sun was warm but the wind was chill.*
> *You know how it is with an April day*
> *When the sun is out and the wind is still,*
> *You're one month on in the middle of May.*
> *But if you so much as dare to speak,*
> *A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,*
> *A wind comes off a frozen peak,*
> *And you're two months back in the middle of March.*

The most convincing reading of any poem in this book is that of "Out, Out—," which will not be described here since the poem is short and much of its power comes from the shock of its unfolding. Go read it now. Done? Good. It's really something, isn't it? Anyhow, certain critics, notably Seamus Heaney and Jay Parini, have seen a tacit sympathy on Frost's part for the unfortunate characters in it. Kendall does not. He sees a sadistic manipulation of the reader. And he is right. "Where in the text can such sympathies be found?" he asks. "And on the basis of what supporting evidence might poet or poem be absolved from a Neronic pleasure in the suffering of others, or at least from indifference to it?"

On a few occasions, Kendall uses words such as "interrogate," "performative," and "encode," but his prose is for the most part unmarred by the cant of 1990s theory. On many occasions, he breaks free of hidebound interpretations of Frost. Where he falls down is in being a bit too much of a musicologist.

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It is true that prosody (that is, rhyme and meter) can be a large part of what gives a poem the "ulteriority" that Kendall so prizes. Sound and sense can work together, or at cross-purposes. But Kendall often commits the fallacy that a poet's musical effects are intentional-before-the-fact to the extent that they are describable-after-the-fact. This is a fallacy that poetry criticism shares with sports color commentary, where a bloop single is frequently described as a more skillful piece of hitting than a screaming line drive caught on the warning track. In his discussion of "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," Kendall notes the way that "the poem's tetrameter varies between the heavy stresses of the opening line (*The hoúse had góne to bríng agaín*) and the anapests of the third (*now the chímney was áll of the hoúse that stoód*) to establish poles of sonorous regularity."

Whether these are poles of sonorous regularity, or sounds of regular polarity, or regulations of polar sonority, the effect is not repeated, and one has to assume that the lines just fell that way—luckily perhaps, although that third line does sound crowded and a little hurried.

A preoccupation with prosody is rare in modern critics. Kendall's attention to it is almost wholly admirable. But it leads him to importune the poems for meaning in inappropriate places. Frost's magnificent "Desert Places" has been read for many years in the shadow of the interpretation that Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren gave in their university textbook, *Understanding Poetry*. The poem describes a journey in a snowstorm, and concludes:

> *They cannot scare me with their empty spaces*
> *Between stars—on stars where no human race is.*
> *I have it in me so much nearer home*
> *To scare myself with my own desert places.*

Brooks and Warren read the poem as a summons to religious faith. Maybe this is not an airtight argument, but it has a certain obvious logic. What is scary about empty spaces? By definition there cannot be anything in them—they're empty. What is scary is the fact that they're empty. Empty of what? If these spaces are out in the cosmos somewhere, then what they're empty of is God. Kendall thinks this is mistaken:

> To claim to hear "Desert Places" as an expression of the need for faith is to impose a sentimental reading unsupported by, and alien if not anathema to, this insidious music. Better to read it as an expression of the impossibility of faith—faith in God and, more desperately, faith in the self. The third line of each stanza remains unrhymed and unaccommodated, a dead line formally signaling a failure to find harmony or consolatory design.

Even if you think Warren and Brooks read Frost with too much religious sentimentality, the absence of a rhyme is pretty weak evidence on which to build a metaphysical counterargument. There are limits to what Kendall calls "ulteriority." There may well be a "sound" argument that runs alongside the "sense" argument. But this does not mean you can refute the latter with the former. Otherwise, there is no arguing with the lout who thinks the girl who just said "Beat it, you creep!" has a crush on him because the words came so trippingly off her tongue.

Maybe *all the fun's in how you say a thing*, as Frost wrote in "Mending Wall." But all the content is in what is actually said. ♦

B&A

Gal Reporter

A lifetime of adventure, romance, and unlimited budgets. BY JAY WEISER

Brenda Starr, Reporter
The Collected Daily and Sunday Newspaper Strips, Volume I
by Dale Messick
Hermes, 288 pp., $60

I first saw Brenda Starr at midnight, lured to a derelict pier by a promised interview. Suddenly the moon, skewing shadows on twisted steel beams, silhouetted yachtsman Broker Proffitt against the glinting bay beyond. (Brenda preferred her villains upscale.) As he drew a gun, Brenda was seized with regret: "If I had known my life would be this short, I would have picked a better-paying career."

The pioneering heroine of the *Brenda Starr, Reporter* comic strip recently ended her 70-year quest for scoops, romance, and adventure. This volume reprints selected storylines from the strip's early years, enhancing the color far beyond the muddy standards of 1940s Sunday supplements. A role model for mid-20th-century girls about to surge into the workforce, Brenda soldiered on in the late-century world of changing gender roles. In her last quarter-century, bruised by failed relationships and ensnared by office politics and budget cuts at a deteriorating newspaper, she became the heroine of a graphic novel that happened to run in the comics pages—a masterpiece unrecognized because it, like Brenda herself, was trapped in a dead-tree medium.

With the *Huffington Post*'s Arianna Huffington (a dead ringer for the astoundingly big-haired villain Vanity Puffington) aggregating print journalists into oblivion, Brenda's day was done, even though she had served two stints as editor in chief of her own newspaper, *The Flash*. Strip creator

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Dale Messick, one of the first women cartoonists, had conceived Brenda as a proto-feminist heroine. This was less advanced than it seems in our supposedly more enlightened day: Late-19th-century journalists Nellie Bly and Ida Wells had actual adventures as hair-raising as Brenda's, and Anne O'Hare McCormick and Martha Gellhorn were famed foreign correspondents at the time of the strip's 1940 debut.

In the first strips, Brenda looks strikingly like Rosalind Russell's Hildy Johnson in *His Girl Friday* (also 1940)—another aggressive reporter out to prove she is as good as any man. While Messick later claimed that "authenticity is something I always try to avoid," the early Brenda worked in a realistic newsroom, volleying repartee with the boys before racing out for scoops.

The strip's popularity peaked in the postwar decades, centering on Brenda's endlessly thwarted romance with the dashing, one-eyed Basil St. John. A hereditary disease condemned Brenda's mystery man to madness that only a serum made from rare black orchids could forestall, so the pair roamed the world in pursuit. (In glimpses over the years, the serum recipe resembled a trendy 21st-century cocktail, but without the alcohol or anchovies.) Basil's 1945 arrival is no mystery; the original Brenda was too feisty for women pressed back into domestic roles after World War II.

By 1985, when *Chicago Tribune* columnist Mary Schmich took over, she found the strip locked in a 1950s romantic sensibility where Brenda "was always crying about her love life," even though characters such as sitcom journalist Mary Richards bestrode popular culture. Under Schmich (who had originally planned to become a novelist) and the veteran comic book artists Ramona Fradon (through 1995) and June Brigman (to the end), *Brenda Starr* sharpened into a satire, mocking thrillers, media, and postfeminist angst in wild storylines running up to eight months long. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) may have popularized the graphic novel form, but Brenda got there first.

Even during the romance decades, Brenda had remained a working journalist—and, in a gender reversal, regularly rescued Basil. Returning journalism to the fore, Schmich unknowingly restored Messick's original character, with some twists. Brenda kept the starbursts around her eyes, her red hair and tasteful string of pearls, but dressed more simply, as befitted a postfeminist professional. Simpler clothes also reproduced better as the size of comic strips shrank. (The retired Messick, whose high-fashion illustrations had entranced girls for 40 years, groused, "She looks more like she works at a bank.") No longer a girl reporter struggling to keep her job in a man's world, Brenda became a legendary journalist of a certain age struggling to keep her job in an imploding newspaper industry.

Dale Messick and her creation, 1998

Jeered at by a recurring Greek chorus of readers at the newsstand outside *The Flash*'s offices—they would disgustedly dump her Page One exposés in the garbage, or stare raptly at the vacant-eyed local TV anchorman on a monitor—she didn't always succeed. When, in a circulation-building Hail Mary, publisher B. Babbitt Bottomline turned the newsroom over to the *American Reporter* reality show, Brenda emoted on quality journalism. But viewers of the show fired her in favor of scheming gossip columnist Gabby Van Slander.

The media satire extended to cable: Brenda became the liberal voice of a screamfest hosted by conservative Slash Burns (a Bill O'Reilly lookalike), but it turned out that he loved the abuse; it hooked viewers. Forced off his show after the murder of his mistress/junior staffer, hyperambitious hottie Très Smart, Burns does the Washington version of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, working the analogous shtick as a liberal cable host who had seen the error of his ways. (Poor Très violated a core *Brenda Starr* mistress principle: Buy a large life insurance policy even before you go out to buy milk.) Plots could be prescient: A fake janitor stole *The Flash*'s unpublished scoops for a competitor years before Rebekah Brooks's similar trick for *News of the World* came to light.

Brenda's villains were Nietzschean Superman-wannabes ripped straight from the headlines, like preachy environmentalist/guitarist/artesian water adulterator Spring Chicwater (with a striking resemblance to rock star Sting) and celebrity chef/ex-con/Paul Prudhomme clone Rock Roquefort. Most memorably, Schmich created what she calls "a string of shrewd older women." Mrs. Burns (Slash's mother) was so retro that she never even got a first name. Channeling Maggie from *Bringing Up Father*, she wielded her rolling pin to smash three skulls into oblivion before plying Brenda with home-baked poisoned cookies. (Mrs. Burns ultimately lost the mother of all mother-in-law/daughter-in-law battles, dueling Slash's wife with shovels over Brenda's open grave as she sought to bury Brenda alive.)

Most of the women were high-powered professionals. Game-fixing

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Viennese sports psychologist Dr. Anna List ("Etics is like BMW—nice but not necessary") comforted tearful athletes with a box of tissues next to her Freudian couch—and hypnotized Brenda to kill on command at the word "Pulitzer." Emotionally desperate Dr. Dolores Pain spirited Basil from her EMT unit to a remote mountain retreat, where she danced around his IV gurney singing "I Feel Pretty." Book editor Snootella, with a stable of best-selling fake authors and an exquisite pageboy hairdo that shimmered and danced as if auditioning to join Anna Wintour, killed to keep giving readers the false truths they craved.

Most shaded was Lady Trumpster, who, like her doppelgänger Katherine Graham, earned her newspaper empire the old-fashioned way: through her husband's sudden death. Lady Trumpster's professional success came at a family cost: Lear-like, she constantly lamented the limitations of her twin henchmen sons. In a London speedboat chase set against a fast-receding Tower Bridge (one of Brigman's best sequences), one son failed to drown Brenda despite dumping her, drugged, into the Thames, while the other, zooming behind, betrayed his mother by fishing the star reporter out of the deep.

Brenda was constantly in peril: clapped with earphones blasting Springsteen's hits at killer decibel levels; bound with chicken-basting thread as Rock ignited a grease fire ("I'll bet Ellen Goodman doesn't get tied up this much," she whined); awaiting defenestration in a fake murder-suicide. Messick had bequeathed Schmich a character who was a bit of a ditz. But where that other working-woman comics ditz, Cathy, could only say "Ack!" at each reverse, Brenda—a combination of Nick and Nora Charles without the money, Philip Marlowe without the gloom, Don Quixote without the illusions, and Columbo with an inner life—unditzed herself to expose the corruption behind the luxurious façades.

Brenda Starr finally married Basil St. John in 1976 (President Ford congratulated the couple), and then divorced him, but the mystery man kept coming back. (Readers demanded it, Schmich reports.) Endlessly ruminating over the relationship, Brenda couldn't move on, even while comatose in the hospital, mumbling about decades of failures to the excruciation of her visiting colleagues.

Typically for the postfeminist world, Brenda's solace was a constructed family: When not rescuing Brenda, gay hairdresser-turned-entertainment-reporter Uncle Spiff would engage her in long philosophical walks. Spy-turned-Oprahfied-talk-show-host Wanda Fonda was a close friend—and, awkwardly, the mother of Basil's son Sage. When Basil vanished yet again, leaving Wanda on her own, Brenda, like any devoted turn-of-the-century prestepmother, was present for the birth of the child, and later chaperoned the eye-patched, mixed-race boy on a journey to find his father in the mythical Central Asian republic of Kazookistan.

Down to about 30 papers by the end, Brenda's satire was too unconventional for the editorial pages and too complex for the gag-a-day comics pages. Occasional movie and TV incarnations over the last few decades ignored the character's steel and wit in favor of the glamorous ditz. Although Brenda, burned by Basil, became the ultimate anti-cougar—in a recurring joke, each storyline ended with the handsome male lead throwing himself at her, only to be rejected—maybe television's Age of the Cougar will find a place for this postfeminist icon. ♦

B&A

Highway from Hell

Humanitarian relief from a totalitarian regime.

BY JOSEPH LOCONTE

In the mid-1990s, a severe famine brought millions of North Koreans to the brink of starvation. Floods precipitated the crisis, but the failed economic policies of Kim Il Sung—the paranoid dictator intent on maintaining a vast military machine and acquiring nuclear weapons—were the real culprit. The result, as the *Economist* described it in 1997, was North Korea's "descent into destitution." The country's state-run health care system essentially collapsed, clean water became scarce, strict food rations were enforced. The U.S. State Department estimated that during 1995-97 between one and two million North Koreans perished because of the famine.

Thus, for the first time since the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948, many North Koreans made plans to escape the regime—a crime punishable by imprisonment, torture, or worse. By the late 1990s, tens of thousands fled to China, South Korea, or other destinations. Few could expect to evade the nation's police and security forces, however, without help from the outside. Many were forcibly sent back. Yet the response of the "international community" to their plight was a mix of indifference, paralysis, and bad public policy.

The best hope for North Korean refugees seeking sanctuary came from *outside* the international community: an informal, multinational network of safe houses and transit routes run by private citizens, working mostly through Christian churches and humanitarian groups.

Joseph Loconte, associate professor of history at The King's College in New York, is the author of The Searchers: A Quest for Faith in the Valley of Doubt.

Escape from North Korea
The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad
by Melanie Kirkpatrick
Encounter, 376 pp., $25.99

Here, journalist Melanie Kirkpatrick chronicles the efforts of these modern-day emancipators. Though largely overlooked by policymakers and pundits, they have established a clandestine rescue operation not unlike the underground railroad that brought American slaves to freedom prior to the Civil War. "Sixty years of political oppression have not dulled North Koreans' appetite for freedom," Kirkpatrick writes. "The Christian and humanitarian workers devoted to this cause see their mission as the liberation of North Korea one person at a time."

Press conference of North Korean refugees on Capitol Hill, 2006

Escape from North Korea reads like a primer for the uninitiated, offering a concise overview of the human-rights situation in North Korea, drawing heavily on interviews with asylum seekers and human-rights advocates. In a well-researched and often poignant work, Kirkpatrick describes what must rank as among the most dangerous human-rights campaigns in the 21st century.

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, a demilitarized zone stretching 2.5 miles wide and 155 miles long has divided North and South Korea. Stocked with land mines and barbed wire, and patrolled by heavily armed soldiers, the DMZ is virtually impenetrable; it effectively prevents the people of North Korea from fleeing south. Instead, many head north and cross the Tumen and Yalu Rivers to China, with the hope of eventually making their way to South Korea or other friendly locales.

It is a fearsome undertaking. As Kirkpatrick explains, no North Korean survives long in China without assistance, and no North Korean gets out of China without help. As Pyongyang's staunchest ally, Beijing forcibly repatriates asylum seekers—a violation of international law. Once returned, they face indefinite prison terms, the confiscation of their property, or execution. On the eve of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, for example, North Korea executed 15 people (most of them women) for trying to cross the border into China.

Nevertheless, with help from the underground railroad, North Koreans continue to flee. Once in China, they look for routes out of the country: by train, express bus, car, boat, or on foot. Their next step is to find sanctuary in places such as Vietnam, Burma, Laos, or Thailand. If they reach Bangkok safely, they go to the South Korean embassy. After months of interviews to make sure they aren't spies, they are allowed passports to Seoul. All told, it is a 6,000-mile trek to gain asylum in South Korea. If North Koreans were allowed to leave Pyongyang and go directly to Seoul, they would travel 120 miles.

North Korea's underground railroad can be traced to the work of Tim Peters, an evangelical Christian pastor from Michigan whose missionary experience in the region exposed him to the suffering of North Korean refugees. In 1996, he founded Helping Hands Korea to assist North Koreans hiding in China. Ten years later, a *Time* cover story called him "the public face" of the rescue movement. Based in Seoul, Peters focuses on those who would suffer the most if caught and repatriated: pregnant women who would be forced to have abortions; children suspected of being fathered by Chinese men, who would be killed to maintain the state's vision of racial purity; people with medical problems who would not survive imprisonment; and, given the militant atheism of the regime, anyone suspected of having become Christian.

Helping a North Korean is a crime in China, punishable by fines, jail time, or deportation. But this fact has not deterred Peters and a growing number of activists from setting up shop. Kirkpatrick tells the story of Long Island businessman Steven Kim, for example, who worked in China and witnessed the fate of North Korean women sold as sex slaves to Chinese men. Before he was arrested, Kim helped about 100 women escape to freedom. After spending four years in a Chinese prison, he launched the nonprofit 318 Partners, named after Article 318 of the Chinese criminal code that convicted him.

These and other humanitarian groups rely on a network of Christians working secretly in China and elsewhere in Asia. Thanks in part to Protestant missionaries from South Korea and the United States, there are now an estimated 70 million Christians in China—about the same number of people who belong to the Communist party. Kirkpatrick describes how Chinese Christian communities provide safe houses for refugees, help them find temporary jobs on the black market, purchase train tickets, guide them to border crossings, and give advice on how to avoid arrest.

"The first survival tip a North Korean learns when he reaches China

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is: Find a Christian," writes Kirkpatrick. "Christians run almost all of the aid organizations. So, too, much of the informal assistance that refugees receive comes from Christians, especially local Chinese. Christians are the only people who seem to care."

All of this comes as a shock to North Korean refugees, who have been force-fed a diet of atheist, anti-Christian propaganda all of their lives. Freedom of religion hasn't existed in North Korea since the Korean War ended in 1953, and most North Koreans have never seen a house of worship, a Bible, or any religious literature. The cult of personality surrounding the nation's dictators, beginning with Kim Il Sung, functions as the state religion. Yet the example of Christians offering help—at great risk to themselves and out of love for God and neighbor—serves as "a powerful recruiting tool" among the refugees.

The great tragedy is that only a tiny fraction of North Korea's 24 million people have been able to escape its vast gulag of violence, oppression, and mind control. A United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights estimates that over 200,000 people (a third of whom are children) are locked away in prison camps where they are subject to beatings, rape, torture, experimentation, and arbitrary execution.

No one knows for certain, but it's estimated that perhaps a million North Koreans have been killed by the regime. A 2007 report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide in London, drawing on extensive eyewitness accounts, found *prima facie* evidence of crimes against humanity: "The widespread and systematic nature of the attacks means that a large number of perpetrators have incurred criminal responsibility for international crimes committed in North Korea." Even the usually feckless U.N. Human Rights Council managed to pass a resolution earlier this year, without opposition, condemning Pyongyang's human-rights abuses.

Perhaps the most sobering and encouraging lesson of *Escape from North Korea* is that the failure of political leadership to confront a human-rights disaster need not be the end of the story. When the 1990s famine forced many North Koreans to seek asylum, the international community sent billions of dollars in food aid to Pyongyang. But most of it was diverted to the military and Communist party elite, propping up the ruling family. The South Korean government, committed to a "Sunshine Policy" of engagement, worked hard not to antagonize its militarized neighbor. Japan, anxious about North Korea's nuclear ambitions, pursued a policy of rapprochement. China actively collaborated with North Korean agents to shuttle refugees back to Pyongyang. Bill Clinton, distracted by his sex scandal, made no effort to assist North Koreans seeking sanctuary.

Civil society actors stepped into the breach. The remarkable efforts of these Christian activists—mostly American, South Korean, and Chinese—not only embarrass the international diplomatic community, they invalidate liberalism's cynical narrative about religious belief. Many political and cultural elites view conservative Christianity as the enemy of tolerance, justice, and human rights. Yet Kirkpatrick's refreshingly frank account is a story of Christian zeal in the cause of human freedom: a gospel message of love, hope, sacrifice, and rescue.

The result is a daring missionary effort that is reclaiming the lives of between 2,000 and 3,000 North Koreans every year. Their emancipation may hold the key to their country's future. "Help one man or woman escape, and that person will get word back home about the freedom that awaits on the outside of their prison state," writes Kirkpatrick. "The seeds of the collapse of the Kim family regime are being planted by those who flee." ♦

B&A

Hide and Go Seek

A curiously opaque view of transparency.

BY SONNY BUNCH

Throughout *Privacy*, Garret Keizer's extended essay on the topic in an increasingly public world, the author confuses and conflates voluntary sharing with forced governmental action. "Does anything say so much about the times we live in as the fact that the word *sharing* has almost everything to do with personal information and almost nothing to do with personal wealth?" he wonders.

Privacy
by Garret Keizer
Picador, 208 pp., $15

Of course, the two have nothing to do with each other. Choosing to share intimate details of your life with what amount to strangers—on Facebook or Twitter or message boards; with Amazon and Google and other online collators of data—bears no relation to redistributing wealth via taxation. One is done voluntarily; the other at the point of a gun.

Elsewhere, Keizer complains, "By law I am not permitted to know which of the foods at the supermarket have been genetically engineered." Another, more accurate, way of writing that sentence would be the following: "The law does not require corporations to prominently display which of the foods at the supermarket have been genetically engineered."

It is telling that Keizer finds forced redistribution pleasing and voluntary sharing appalling—that he finds the lack of a regulation on a corporation to be some massive violation of his own personal, private life.

Telling, but perhaps not surprising.

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As Keizer admits in his book, "my political beliefs . . . could be described as approximately socialistic, vacillating between social democracy and something in a deeper shade of red." He later laments, "It is a sign of the times when a centrist like Obama is accused of fomenting class war!"

Like a good Marxist, Keizer argues that privacy is best understood through the prism of economics: It is something that the wealthy have access to and the poor strive for. As he puts it, "Were it not a good thing, the wealthier among us would not enjoy more of it than the less wealthy do."

Is this even true? In the age of TMZ, Page Six, PerezHilton.com, and the president of the United States' campaign listing wealthy enemies for the masses to rise up and attack, do the wealthy actually enjoy any more privacy than the rest of us? It is true they can purchase gates to live behind; but their Twitter feeds and Facebook notices are far more scrutinized than the rest of ours. Entertainers are hounded by paparazzi when they leave their homes; businessmen are hounded by journalists who demand to know why they're spending their money to influence political races. Short of Salingerian reclusiveness, the wealthy live far more public lives.

Keizer's myopia damages his arguments. In denouncing the press for publishing scandalous photos of private people in public situations—in one particular case, the nude photo of a woman who had escaped an attacker and was running to safety—Keizer fails to grapple with the real quandary at the heart of the matter: privacy versus freedom of the press.

Keizer is happy to read all sorts of meanings into the Constitution regarding privacy and the penumbras from whence it came. But when time comes to examining an actual right spelled out in the Constitution—such as the First Amendment's admonition that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press"—Keizer waffles. He refuses to wrestle with the tension between the freedom of the press and the freedom to remain out of the press, instead feeling comfortable to insist simply that the latter right must exist and that we're all insane for failing to realize it.

Keizer returns to the cautionary tale of Tyler Clementi several times. A freshman at Rutgers, Clementi leapt to his death from the George Washington Bridge after learning that his roommate had spied on him having intimate relations with another man. The roommate was recently sentenced to serve jail time for his invasion of privacy.

The presumption running throughout Keizer's invocations of Clementi is that he was "outed": that no one could have known he was gay, that his roommate was in the dark, and that his parents could be scandalized by the revelation. But as Ian Parker convincingly demonstrated in the *New Yorker*, Clementi was not only "out" to his parents, but knew, by way of social media, that his roommate knew he was gay. He spent time chatting with strangers about his sexuality. He wondered online about what would happen if his roommate walked in on him, and declared, "I would just be like 'screw it.'" *Pace* Keizer, Clementi wasn't a victim of the age of public living so much as a creature of it.

Keizer seems less worried about government than corporate intrusion into our personal lives—1.3 million requests by the government for cell phone records of citizens is less a concern than Google targeting ads to keywords found in our Gmail accounts. Indeed, he links distrust of government to the overall decline in privacy: "What is far more significant is the way in which e-mail represents a simultaneous rejection of *both* privacy *and* public institutions, no big surprise to anyone conscious of their interdependence."

Those who lived under the Stasi might have something to say about the "interdependence" of privacy and massive public institutions, but no matter. Suffice it to say that there are far worse things in the world than the proliferation of microtargeted advertisements. ♦

B&A

Oh! Molly!

The theater pays tribute to a famous act.

BY CHARLOTTE ALLEN

Faux-folksy columnist Molly Ivins (1944-2007) and Ann Richards (1933-2006), the single-term Democratic governor who lost her 1994 bid for reelection to George W. Bush, rank as progressives' favorite dead Texans. It was perhaps inevitable, given the political leanings of most theater audiences, that each should be the subject of a touring one-woman impersonation show, running nearly simultaneously. In Washington, where I live, no sooner had *Ann: An Affectionate Portrait of Ann Richards*, starring Hollywood veteran Holland Taylor, closed and moved on than *Red Hot Patriot: The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins*, starring the better-known Hollywood veteran Kathleen Turner, arrived in town to complete the homage-athon.

Red Hot Patriot
The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins
by Margaret Engel and Allison Engel
Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.

Both plays have drawn sellout audiences. I was able to grab the very last matinee seat in a packed house at Arena Stage to watch Turner, attired in jeans and cowboy boots, channel Ivins in the 75-minute autobiographical monologue that is *Red Hot Patriot*.

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The play confirmed what I had long suspected about Ivins: The down-home twanging Texas two-stepping in her syndicated columns amounted to so many cowpies. She wasn't even born in Texas, but in California. She grew up in River Oaks, the fancy, moss-draped Houston neighborhood where George H.W. Bush now lives. (The Ivinses, like the Bushes in pre-political days, were oil people.) She went to Smith, with a junior year in Paris, and then (although *Patriot* leaves this out) Columbia Journalism School. In short, Molly Ivins was a limousine liberal.

The hard-drinking, hard-smoking part of her print persona was real enough (the play hints at a juice problem), but the good ol' gal/populist she played both inside and outside the newsroom was a carefully constructed artifice. She might have named her dog Shit and walked around barefoot in the office during her six-year stint at the *New York Times*, but it wasn't because that's how they did things back in River Oaks.

Those with fond memories of the sultry Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat* may be surprised at the thickness that has grown like tree rings around her middle over the past 30-odd years. In this she resembles Ivins, a dazzlingly pretty young woman with a big Cupid's bow smile (shown in photos of her projected onto the stage backdrop) who in midlife came to resemble a Texas longhorn, except without the horns. Still, Turner remains a superb actress, and under the direction of David Esbjornson, she works like the pro that she is to invest her stage-Ivins with charm and even pathos, capturing an inner loneliness mostly hidden by a carapace of wisecracking and political grandstanding. I was almost tempted—but not quite—to reward Turner's A-grade effort by joining in the standing ovation that she received when her 75 minutes were up.

The problem is the material. The playwrights are twin-sister newspaper reporters Margaret (formerly of the *Washington Post*) and Allison (formerly of the *San Jose Mercury News*) Engel, who worship Ivins's memory—unfortunately, because they worshipfully turn her into a stock-issue leftist-feminist battling against "inequality, poverty, sexism, and racism" (their dreary words in an interview) instead of a living, breathing human being. They used as their main source material Ivins's own columns, stitching key quotations together to build a rickety plot whose few twists you can spot from a mile away: Ivins hated her overbearing, Republican-voting father, who drove her to ideological rebellion; but then, lo, she realized as she worked his obituary into a column, that she was exactly like him! What a surprise!

MARK GARVIN

Kathleen Turner as Molly Ivins

Ivins could be very funny when she wanted to be, especially when her target was the Texas state legislature (one solon said, "I am filled with humidity"—really!), although it must be said that all state legislatures, not just Texas's, are barrels of slow-swimming fish for humorists. She claimed to have been fired by the *New York Times* after she, as Rocky Mountain bureau chief, had described a community chicken slaughter in rural New Mexico as a "gang-pluck." (I find this story hard to believe; don't *New York Times* reporters use double-entendres to poke fun at their perceived inferiors all the time?)

But Ivins was often simply tedious and bombastic. How many times can you refer to George W. Bush in print as "Shrub" and still get a laugh? One time? Zero times? Maybe it was the Engel sisters' ham-handed choice of Ivins quotations, or maybe it was an object lesson in the pitfalls of trying to make a play out of political polemic, but I got tired of the pile-ons of such didacticisms as: "I thought that jokes kept the outrage alive—but maybe they keep it at arm's length," and: "The Founding Fathers left out poor people and black people and gay people and female people."

This latter line—maybe it was supposed to be the "patriot" part of "red-hot patriot"—drew a round of applause from the Arena Stage audience. (This was an audience that also booed every time a photo of Bush appeared on the screen behind Turner.) But by then I was just plain bored. I was thinking, *Let's see, she's trashed Dubya. She's trashed H. Dubya. She's paid her regards to Ann Richards ("Oh, Lord, I loved her!"). This thing has got to end soon.*

End it did, because Ivins succumbed to breast cancer at 62, after a gruesome eight-year battle. But the Engel sisters couldn't help turning even her sad and untimely death into an occasion for a Tom Joad I'll-be-everywhere exercise in rhetoric, delivered by Turner: "My legacy will be helping people be a pain in the ass to those in power."

Even Molly Ivins deserved to be more than an ideological cardboard cutout. She was a complicated figure who liked to hang around men, drinking them under the table if need be. She might have detested her Republican father because that's what Southwestern girls who went to Seven Sisters colleges did. But she yearned for the high-testosterone masculinity that he represented. Of the two boyfriends she had in her youth (she never married), one died in a motorcycle accident and the other was killed in combat in Vietnam. She liked to report on (and be photographed with) the Hells Angels, and heaven knows what she thought of the metrosexuals who staffed the newsrooms where she worked.

So Molly Ivins became something of a masculine figure herself: brusque, obnoxious, aggressively outrageous, with a fishwife mouth—all traits that masked her essential aloneness. ♦

"[Obama] has mentioned more than once in recent weeks that he cooks 'a really mean chili.'"
—New York Times, September 2, 2012

Cooking with Barry

Barry's Two-Term Chili

Hey, America. I don't know if you know this about me, but I make a really mean chili. Guy Fieri ate some, and he gave me a fist bump, and was like, "Yo, El Presidente, that is THE BOMB!" Guy Fieri said that. *GUY FIERI.*

So, the thing about chili is that the ingredients need time to cook together. I mean, seriously, how is all that flavor gonna come together so quickly? You see, you've got to understand here, chili is very complicated. There are a number of ingredients involved: meat, tomatoes, beans, onions, uh, garlic, like a million spices. You can't expect somebody to just, you know, figure out how to put it all together at once and know how much of what needs to go in there. Especially if the person who used the kitchen before you made a big mess and left things all over the place, and you've got to figure out where the utensils are and go get all the ingredients from the store yourself. And maybe you make a batch of chili, and a lot of people don't like it at first, but then, you make some more batches, and your chili starts to get better—slowly, but it's getting better. It is. Really. And maybe some people are like, "This chili isn't that great, my friend Bill made better chili," but maybe they don't understand you've never even cooked anything before, so it's pretty impressive chili since you don't really know what you're doing and everybody who used to say how great you were is mad at you for some reason, and then people at the grocery store keep saying you can't have more meat to put in your chili, but you need more meat, because that's what gets the chili going again. I mean, come on! There's a learning curve! For chili, I mean. Still talking about chili here.

And let's say you know this guy—let's call him, I don't know, Mitch. And Mitch keeps telling everybody your chili sucks, and he can make better chili because he's been making chili forever, and you've already had 40 minutes to make your chili so it should be good by now. But what Mitch doesn't realize is that sometimes it takes more than 40 minutes to make chili. Sometimes you need a second 40-minute term to get the job done, and so you have to remind everyone that Mitch had his chili recipe handed to him by