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THE FALL OF ROME

Italy's political class clings to power

BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

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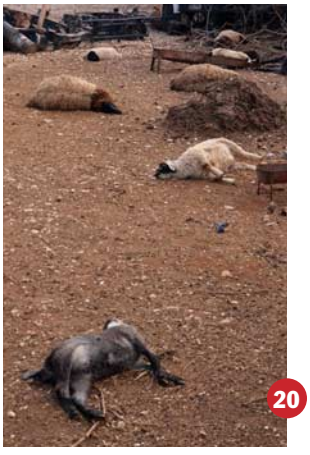

COVER BY DAVID CLARK

Back to the 1980s

Readers of the *Washington Post* might have thought a time warp had collided with the zeitgeist last week when they turned to their Style section. For there, staring at them from the front page, and stretching well beyond, was a seven-page, 14-part package entitled "The Prophets of Oak Ridge," written by a Style reporter named Dan Zak, featuring 28 illustrations, three graphs, and five original works of art, suitable for framing.

Not since art critic Philip Kennicott's profusely illustrated (including bird's-eye map with guide) tribute to the Occupy Washington encampment (2011) has the *Post* gone to such extravagant lengths to waste space, annoy subscribers, ignore actual news, offend local sensibilities, and generally remind us why media institutions such as the *Washington Post* are in dire straits. For "The Prophets of Oak Ridge" is an extended—indeed, more than extended—tribute to three "peace activists" who recently trespassed on the nuclear weapons/research facility in Tennessee, vandalized property, and now face federal criminal charges.

Reporter Zak is probably too young to remember, but in tone and substance, "The Prophets of Oak Ridge" is a near-perfect replica of the sort of piece routinely published in American newspapers during Ronald Reagan's first term, when the nuclear freeze movement had galvanized the Upper West Side of Manhattan and even network made-for-TV movies were depicting nuclear apocalypse (*The Day After*, anyone?). The only thing missing, from The Scrapbook's perspective, is a quotation from Dr. Helen Caldicott, author of *Nuclear Madness*, *Missile Envy*, and other classics of the era.

All the comic elements are in place. Reporter Zak's heroes—a belligerent drifter, aging ex-nun, and grizzled house painter—are depicted in all their endearing humanity, and in lavish detail. They're gentle people, of course, and all too human, but possessed of a vision of world peace and global harmony more powerful than any hydrogen bomb. Needless to say, the residents of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, are American oafs, Appalachian division, who don't understand the world quite as well as the reporter and the peace activists, but are dependent on the local employer to pay for their fattening food and pickup trucks.

The peace activists (and reporter Zak, for that matter) don't exactly disdain the locals, but feel a—well, a pity for them arising out of their deep faith, justifiable anger, and, of course, basic decency. The peace activists speak in a New Age/Old Testament jargon (hence the title) while everyone else—bumptious Republicans, rustic Southerners, military robots—sounds like a cartoon character.

Far be it from The Scrapbook to understand why the *Washington Post* would wish to revive a trend in journalism that mercifully died around 1987. And we would hardly expect a Style reporter to examine the dread subject of life and death in the nuclear age from anything like a historical perspective.

Two things, however, are painfully obvious. As a practical matter, The Scrapbook won't stay up late waiting for the *Post* to devote comparable space and resources depicting religious activists of another sort—say, evangelical Christians on the wrong side of the *Post*'s editorial page, or pro-lifers who live within the *Post*'s circulation area. And if the *Washington Post* is concerned about nuclear arsenals that threaten the well-being of their readers, they should send Dan Zak and an illustrator not to Oak Ridge but to Tehran, or even Pyongyang. ♦

Call It the Richardson Prevention Act

North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un may have been incensed last week at having been knocked out of the headlines by a gay NBA player, or perhaps he was just having a bad day. His solution? Send an American citizen to the gulag. Kenneth Bae, a Washington state native who owns a tour company that specializes in travel to North Korea, was arrested last November in North Korea and charged with unspecified "crimes against the state." (His "crime" appears to have been photographing malnourished children.) Last week, North Korea's inaptly named justice system found Bae guilty and sentenced him to 15 years of hard labor.

This story may sound familiar. According to the State Department, "U.S. citizens crossing into North Korea . . . have been subject to arbitrary arrest and long-term detention. Since January 2009, four U.S. citizens have been arrested for entering North Korea illegally, and two U.S. citizens who entered on valid DPRK visas were arrested inside North Korea on other charges."

The North Korean regime uses these kidnappings, er, arrests, as a means of extracting concessions and prestige-enhancing visits from American bigwigs. A few years ago, for example, Bill Clinton traveled to North Korea to secure the release of two American television reporters.

History now looks set to repeat itself. Former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, who visits Stalinist North Korea so often that he probably has a vacation home there, released a statement immediately after Bae's conviction, saying, "Now that the sentencing and the North Korean legal process has been completed it is important that negotiations begin to secure Kenneth Bae's

release on humanitarian grounds or a general amnesty." (Translation: Richardson is itching to hop on the next flight to Pyongyang.)

It occurs to The Scrapbook that these events could be avoided if a ban on travel to North Korea were imposed. (Only some 4,000 Western tourists visit North Korea each year, almost all on stage-managed propaganda tours.) Not only does tourism provide much-needed revenue to an evil regime teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and collapse, but, as the Bae incident shows, it also gives the North Korean government plum opportunities to hold Americans hostage for ransom.

A travel ban would mitigate this danger. Bill Richardson need not worry, though; The Scrapbook would be happy to exempt him from the ban. Kim Jong-un can have him. ♦

Preemptively Biting the Hand …

Over the past few weeks, there have been rumblings of a potential buyer for the Tribune newspaper company, which owns the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Orlando Sentinel*, *Sun Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale, and a few other notable papers. Given the desperate financial straits of the Tribune Company, this should be good news for journalists who believe in the importance of print media, or are at the very least worried about their jobs.

Unless, as is the case here, the potential buyers happen to be the Koch brothers, David and Charles, billionaire philanthropists who have spent the last few years being unfairly maligned by the mainstream press, thanks to their patronage of libertarian and right-of-center causes. The *Huffington Post* reports that *Los Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez asked at a recent awards ceremony held at the *Times* for a show of hands "if you would quit if the paper was bought by the Koch brothers." Half the *Times* staffers reportedly raised their hands. While this is supposed to be a chilling anecdote, The Scrapbook wonders—wouldn't knowing they could easily clear out all of the staff reflexively opposed to them be an incentive for the Kochs to buy the paper?

Of course, when Hollywood mogul David Geffen was rumored as a potential purchaser of the *Times* a while back, there was absolutely no objection heard from the newsroom there, despite Geffen's left-wing politics and track record of throwing millions at liberal causes. And lest you think this hypocrisy is confined to the *Times* newsroom, the Newspaper Guild & Communications Workers of America also issued a statement:

> We understand why the Kochs breed this distrust. They are active political proponents of harsh right-wing positions. We're also not certain that Tribune will listen to anything but money when the final decision is made. . . . We call on Tribune to make a pledge that they'll only sell to a buyer that will protect the objectivity of the news product by making a public commitment to doing so.

Harsh right-wing positions? The libertarian Koch brothers aren't nearly as right-wing as they're made out to be. But the left has whipped up a frenzy against them in recent years, no doubt hoping to discourage deep-pocketed donors to causes not helpful to their hero in the White House. So Los Angeles city council members, eager to join the anti-Koch posse,

called on the city to withdraw its pension fund investments in the Tribune Company if the papers were sold to the Kochs. "Frankly, what I hear about the Koch brothers, if it's true, it's the end of journalism," said city council member Bill Rosendahl.

The Scrapbook is further intrigued that it's apparently not a problem for the staff of the *Los Angeles Times* that the city government it's supposed to report on is not only invested in the paper but willing to use its purse strings to prevent the paper from doing something it doesn't like.

We conclude that councilman Rosendahl is half right—the end of journalism is nigh, but not because of the Koch brothers. Journalism is dying because reporters and editors put themselves at the service of liberal politicians like Rosendahl a long time ago.

If the Koch brothers were to buy the *Los Angeles Times* and get half the staff to quit and the city government to divest its pension funds from the paper in the process, we're prepared to amend our judgment—that would show that the enterprise still has a healthy future. ♦

Sobering Advice

A *Slate* column reprinted in the *Washington Post* wisely points out that some of the best-known writer-drinkers stayed sober while working. We heartily agree. But shouldn't this apply to caption-writers as well? ♦

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BPA WORLDWIDE

Call Me Ethan

Why is it so irritating to be called by the wrong name? I'm not just talking about being misidentified by people who know you—that's obnoxious because it feels like a personal slight. What I'm wondering is, why do I wince when the guy at the coffee shop calls out my order by the name "Ian" instead of "Ethan," as happened again just last week? I think it's because my name feels inherent, even absolute. Simply put: *I am Ethan*, and to be called anything else is profoundly disturbing.

But it turns out that's not a universal sentiment. A recent Reuters story from Beijing quoted someone named "Brooklyn Zhang." Now, if you think that Ms. Zhang was born with the name "Brooklyn," then I have a bridge to sell you in a certain borough. As I've learned on several visits to China, "Brooklyn" almost certainly bestowed the name upon herself, either when learning English in school or on entering the workforce.

Strange as it may seem, almost all urban, affluent Chinese people now have an English first name—this in addition to their given Chinese name, that is, their real name. They simply stick the English name in front of their Chinese last name. Their business cards (and boy do the Chinese love business cards) are printed on both sides. One side features the Chinese name written in characters, while the other sports the English name in the Latin alphabet. The English names aren't just used to impress foreigners. Remarkably, Chinese people often go by them even with other Chinese.

Not all Chinese people have quite gotten the hang of this English name thing. Sometimes the results are charming. So while I've met my fair share of Chinese named "Carl" and "Rebecca," I've also encountered more than one "Money," "Happy," and again "Brooklyn." And I've met more "Echos" than I can count (though one spelled it "Acco") and even a "Banana" or two. A couple of years ago, on a trip to Taiwan, I stayed at a hotel where the front desk attendant wore a nametag reading "Brain." I never did figure out whether that was intentional, or someone had misspelled Brian.

MICHAEL SLOAN

Other times, it's the combinations that are amusing. In Shanghai, a man once introduced himself to me as Peter Pan. (Pan is a common Chinese surname.) It was apparent that Mr. Pan was ignorant of the literary resonance of his new name. My Chinese teacher in high school had perhaps the best combination Chinese/Western name of all time, though in reverse order: Her name was Cheng-Mei Rothschild. A native Beijinger, Mrs. Rothschild had immigrated to the States and married an American Jew.

It's pretty obvious that all this is a product of rapid modernization and world travel. China's new middle class wants to appear international, savvy, wealthy, and forward-looking. English—and America—still represent all of those qualities. What's more surprising is that the custom is semi-venerable. I read in the *New York Times* a few years back that "in 19th-century China, choosing an English name was the privilege of only a handful of elite," but now, "as China widens its reach abroad and as the number of foreigners living in mainland China swells, picking an English name has become a rite of passage for most young, urban Chinese."

I still don't know how they can do it, these self-namers. According to family lore, I became an Ethan even before birth, when my pregnant mother overheard someone being called by that name on the T in Boston. But she might just as well have overheard someone speaking to a Jason or Benjamin or Brian, and then I wouldn't be me. That's why occasionally being called "Ian" or "Nathan" or "Evan"—the fate of anyone named Ethan—gives me a nails-on-chalkboard sensation, to the point where I now loathe each of those monikers. (Note to all Nathans, Ians, and Evans: Those are fine names, they're just too close to me for comfort, uncanny-valley-style.) In the same way, being called *Epsteeeen* (as happened during a recent radio interview) when I'm actually an *Epstiiiine*, can send shivers up my spine.

I suppose the young, striving Chinese who name themselves enjoy a form of self-invention that those of us bearing the names our parents gave us will never experience. But I'm okay with that. Because I know that deep down, I will always and forever be Ethan Epstein. Though come to think of it, I could live to see a day when China is the world's sole superpower and in order to appear forward-looking I'll start going by 香蕉 Epstein.

Ethan Epstein

the weekly Standard

Waiting for 2014

At his press conference last week, President Obama renewed his request for Republicans to negotiate a grand bargain with the White House on spending, taxes, and deficit reduction. Yet he knows Republican leaders in the House and Senate have already rejected the very idea of getting together with him for another round of talks. So what's he up to?

The answer is gamesmanship. It's what Obama, a clever politician, is especially good at. He's learned from his first term that merely calling for negotiations works to his advantage. And on the off-chance Republicans agree to talks, so much the better. That would put him in an even more favorable position, and Republicans in an unfavorable one, whether the talks accomplish anything or not. For him, it's a win either way.

This gambit does nothing to further a second-term agenda or enhance his presidency. In fact, Obama doesn't have an agenda. He has an inbox. He takes up the issues that come his way—gun control, immigration reform, whatever.

His agenda awaits the 2014 midterm elections. If Democrats win the House and hold the Senate, Obama's agenda will emerge: higher taxes, cap and trade, universal pre-K, a $9 minimum wage, and who knows what else.

For now, his chosen task is to soften up Republicans and make them as vulnerable as possible, while sparing himself any political embarrassment. Lessons from his first four years as president are his guide. One is that the lofty idea of a grand bargain can be exploited to the detriment of Republicans.

Another is that he doesn't have to agonize over his economic policy. The election exit poll last November informed him of this. Yes, the economic growth rate is half that of a normal recovery, and high unemployment persists. But on the poll question of who would handle the economy best, he was roughly even with Mitt Romney. So the message was, "weak economy—no problem."

The same is true for his policy of raising taxes on the rich. He's free, politically speaking, to target "millionaires and billionaires," though by that he means couples earning over $250,000. Republicans, quite correctly, accuse Obama of trying to intensify the redistribution of wealth from the affluent to those less well off. But Gallup is on Obama's side. A poll in April found that 59 percent of Americans think wealth "should be more evenly distributed." Only 33 percent feel distribution currently is "fair."

Thus Obama was on safe ground at his press conference when he questioned Republicans' motive in refusing to replace the sequester they had initially opposed. "When it was determined that doing something about it might mean that we close some tax loopholes for the wealthy and the well-connected," he said, Republicans decided they'd rather "take the sequester."

From last year's campaign, Obama learned that accusing Republicans of waging a "war on women" is a tactic that works. It's an absurd charge, but it proved to be attractive to a large voting bloc, single women. So the president appealed to them again last week in a speech to Planned Parenthood.

He asked the organization to "spread the word . . . particularly among young women" that under Obamacare "most insurance plans are now covering the cost of contraceptive care." He added: "We need all the college students who come through your doors to call up their friends and post on Facebook talking about the protections and benefits that are kicking in."

Obama identified the enemy. It's "those who want to turn back the clock to policies more suited to the 1950s than the 21st century." He was referring to opponents of abortion—that is, Republicans. But he never mentioned the "A" word. That's verboten when referring to outfits like Planned Parenthood, though they actually perform hundreds of thousands of abortions every year.

There's still another lesson Obama has put into practice: He can do things that other presidents could never get away with. His speeches and press conferences aren't flyspecked for false or dubious statements (though the *Washington Post*'s Glenn Kessler did give him two Pinocchios for claiming at the press conference that "85 to 90 percent of Americans with health insurance" are already subject to Obamacare without repercussions).

It's now routine for the president to announce he'll try to achieve by executive order what Congress has refused to enact. He's altered immigration and welfare laws this way. President George W. Bush would have been pilloried for this by the press and most of the political community. But Obama has faced little pushback, except briefly from congressional Republicans.

Instead, he's often gigged by the media for small stuff like devoting too much time to golf and taking too many

taxpayer-paid vacations. Obama seems unfazed. And there's no reason to be upset, since he gets a pass on bigger things.

Giving up on a serious agenda over the next 18 months is little sacrifice for the president. He has practically no influence with Congress, and that includes Democrats. He'll simply deal with what shows up in his inbox. If Congress passes immigration reform legislation, he'll claim credit.

In the meantime, Obama can nick away at Republicans, tarring their reputation. A national Gallup poll in early April revealed that the biggest criticism of Republicans is that they're "too inflexible" or "unwilling to compromise."

That's where Obama's pursuit of a grand bargain comes in. When Republicans balk at talks, they're inflexible and won't compromise with the president. But if they negotiate, they'll face a choice: either agree to a bad deal that divides Republicans or be accused of spurning a compromise.

Putting Republicans in this box is gamesmanship at its cleverest. But leadership it's not. That's for past and future presidents.

—Fred Barnes

Against Infanticide

The massacre of 20 children in Newtown, Connecticut, last December rightly sparked a national conversation about policies that might be enacted to prevent such atrocities in the future. But where is the national conversation in response to the massacre of innocents carried out in Philadelphia by Kermit Gosnell?

Gosnell stands before a jury accused of murdering newborn babies over the course of a long, gruesome career as a doctor specializing in late-term abortion. These were infants old enough to "scream" and "jump," according to court testimony, when Gosnell or one of his employees stabbed scissors into their necks.

Gosnell is not alone. Last week the pro-life group Live Action released undercover videos in which a woman six months pregnant is seen approaching several late-term abortionists to ask what would happen if her baby were born alive during an abortion. Dr. Cesare Santangelo, who operates five blocks west of the White House, told her, "We would not help it."

Americans remain divided over abortion early in pregnancy, but the Gosnell trial reminds us that overwhelming majorities find it repugnant to kill babies that look and act like babies, whether inside or outside the womb. Yet thousands if not tens of thousands of babies capable of surviving outside the womb are aborted every year in America.

The partial-birth abortion ban passed by Congress in 2003 did not stop all abortions of viable babies. It simply banned one procedure, described by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the late Democratic senator from New York, as "too close to infanticide." Barack Obama himself endorsed the idea of a late-term abortion ban when campaigning in 2008. "I think it's entirely appropriate for states to restrict or even prohibit late-term abortions as long as there is a strict, well-defined exception for the health of the mother," he told a Christian magazine, adding, "Now, I don't think that 'mental distress' qualifies as the health of the mother. I think it has to be a serious physical issue that arises in pregnancy, where there are real, significant problems to the mother carrying that child to term."

And yet America has a far more liberal abortion regime than the one Obama claimed he would support in 2008. Even though some infants born as early as 20 weeks survive, most state restrictions kick in only at 24 weeks. And most "health" exceptions for late-term abortions cover much more than serious danger to physical health. In conformity with *Roe* v. *Wade*'s companion case, *Doe* v. *Bolton*, a health exception must cover "psychological" and "emotional" health, a loophole so big as to render the restrictions meaningless. Justice Anthony Kennedy, the Supreme Court's swing vote on abortion, has never explicitly endorsed the expansive health exception in *Doe*, but he has ruled repeatedly that abortion can be restricted after viability. We can't know whether Kennedy and the Court would uphold a late-term abortion ban. But that should not deter Congress from passing such a nationwide ban, so as to rein in an abortion regime that is tantamount to infanticide on demand.

Some pro-choice Americans will object if there is no exception allowing late-term abortions in the case of disabled babies, such as those with Down syndrome and spina bifida. Some pro-lifers will object as well, in that a late-term abortion ban would still leave the country's abortion laws more liberal than those of many European countries and would seem to accept the Supreme Court's viability standard. But any line drawn later than conception is somewhat arbitrary. The right to life is not bestowed when a fetus becomes old enough to live outside the womb. Neither is it bestowed when a baby is half-delivered, which is the line drawn by the partial-birth abortion ban, yet we drew that line without conceding the principle that a child in the womb has a right to live. We drew it, furthermore, for the entire country, without concern the law was trampling on states' rights.

So drawing a line at, say, 18 weeks after conception would likely pass muster with the Supreme Court and with the vast majority of Americans. It would be also be a line that could move up as medical science advances.

There are many lesser measures that could also be pursued to stop the Kermit Gosnells who are still in business. Congress could require that a second independent physician

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THOMAS FLUHARTY

attend all late-term abortions to provide medical care in the event the baby is born alive. Obama opposed such a measure as an Illinois state senator because, he said at the time, "if these children are being born alive, I, at least, have confidence that a doctor who is in that room is going to make sure that they're looked after." Gosnell has made a mockery of Obama's words.

To enact any legislation, of course, will require men and women of courage in Congress. It will require Democrats who are brave enough to ignore the campaign Planned Parenthood will mount with its bloody war chest. And it will require Republicans who can steel themselves to ignore the foolish and cowardly party strategists who tell them any discussion of abortion will hurt them politically, once liberals recast it as a "war on women." We think the political risks of such an effort are minimal, as the vast majority of American men and women oppose post-viability abortions. But whatever the politics, it is also the case that this is an honorable fight, a fight for what Ronald Reagan called "the right without which no other rights have any meaning."

—John McCormack

Losing the Game

There was one moment in President Obama's world-weary press conference last Tuesday when he seemed genuinely interested and engaged. At the very end, when Obama had already begun to depart the podium, a reporter shouted a question about the previously obscure but now famously gay NBA center, Jason Collins. Obama returned to the podium and was animated as he expressed his pride in Collins: "I told him I couldn't be prouder of him. . . . And I think America should be proud. . . . So I'm very proud of him."

That's nice.

In the meantime, between his hoop-shooting and golf-playing expeditions and his expositions on the social significance of sports, the president does have a day job. At the press conference he implicitly acknowledged that his job performance on Syria hasn't been all that great. "What's happening in Syria," he said, "is a blemish on the international community generally." But Barack Obama claims to be nothing if not a leader of "the international community." So a blemish on the international community is a blemish on the presidency of Barack Obama.

Indeed, when it comes to Syria, even Barack Obama couldn't claim that there's much to be proud of: After two years of posturing and vacillating, of big talk and no action, of portentous but unenforced warnings, 75,000 people have died, Bashar al-Assad has remained in power and used chemical weapons, turmoil has spread to neighboring countries and the region has become increasingly unstable and dangerous, and America's credibility lies in tatters.

But Obama may still act. Despite the wavering red line he seems to have laid down, Obama still maintains his earlier position that the (appropriately verified and confirmed, chain-of-custody and all) use of chemical weapons "would be a game-changer," a phrase he repeated three times at his press conference, and elaborated on once: "That is a game-changer because what that portends is potentially even more devastating attacks on civilians, and it raises the strong possibility that those chemical weapons can fall into the wrong hands and get disseminated in ways that would threaten U.S. security or the security of our allies."

So what is to be done? The options are far worse than they were two years ago. But Barack Obama must know that in the rough world of Middle East politics, as in the rough world of NBA basketball with which he seems more familiar, a game-changer unresponded-to results in a changed game. It results in defeat.

We're already far down the path to a defeat for American interests and principles in Syria, having failed to respond promptly and strongly. Still, a strong if late response would be better than none. A half-hearted late response—such as arming some of the rebels—might not be. It could well be too little, too late. So the American response to the game-changer has to be itself game-changing, i.e., serious. It's hard to see what a serious response would be short of direct American engagement—perhaps a combination of enforcement of a no-fly zone and aerial attacks. And no serious president would rule out a few boots on the ground (it's pretty hard to secure chemical weapons by air).

Bashar al-Assad doesn't seem to be as much of a sports fan as Barack Obama. So far as we know, he hasn't opined on the Jason Collins matter. But he—and everyone else in the region—does seem to understand the game of power politics.

Western leaders once understood this game too. Here's Winston Churchill, over a half century ago:

> The Middle East is one of the hardest-hearted areas in the world. It has always been fought over, and peace has only reigned when a major power has established firm influence and shown that it will maintain its will. Your friends must be supported with every vigour and if necessary they must be avenged. Force, or perhaps force and bribery, are the only things that will be respected. It is very sad, but we had all better recognize it. At present our friendship is not valued, and our enmity is not feared.

We're unfortunately approaching a state where "our friendship is not valued, and our enmity is not feared." That would be disastrous for us, and for the world. An American president has no more important job than to check, and then reverse, the momentum toward such an outcome.

The ball is in Barack Obama's court. And it's not just a game.

—William Kristol

The Benghazi Talking Points

And how they were changed to obscure the truth.

BY STEPHEN F. HAYES

Even as the White House strove last week to move beyond questions about the Benghazi attacks of Tuesday, September 11, 2012, fresh evidence emerged that senior Obama administration officials knowingly misled the country about what had happened in the days following the assaults. THE WEEKLY STANDARD has obtained a timeline briefed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence detailing the heavy substantive revisions made to the CIA's talking points, just six weeks before the 2012 presidential election, and additional information about why the changes were made and by whom.

As intelligence officials pieced together the puzzle of events unfolding in Libya, they concluded even before the assaults had ended that al Qaeda-linked terrorists were involved. Senior administration officials, however, sought to obscure the emerging picture and downplay the significance of attacks that killed a U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.

The frantic process that produced the changes to the talking points took place over a 24-hour period just one day before Susan Rice, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, made her now-famous appearances on the Sunday television talk shows. The discussions involved senior officials from the State Department, the National Security Council, the CIA, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the White House.

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

The exchange of emails is laid out in a 43-page report from the chairmen of five committees in the House of Representatives. Although the investigation was conducted by Republicans, leading some reporters and commentators to dismiss it, the report quotes directly from emails between top administration and intelligence officials, and it includes footnotes indicating the times the messages were sent. In some cases, the report did not provide the names of the senders, but THE WEEKLY STANDARD has confirmed the identities of the authors of two critical emails—one indicating the main reason for the changes and the other announcing that the talking points would receive their final substantive rewrite at a meeting of top administration officials on Saturday, September 15.

The U.S. consulate in Benghazi, September 11, 2012

The White House provided the emails to members of the House and Senate intelligence committees for a limited time and with the stipulation that the documents were available for review only and would not be turned over to the committees. The White House and committee leadership agreed to that arrangement as part of a deal that would keep Republican senators from blocking the confirmation of John Brennan, the president's choice to run the CIA.

If the House report provides an accurate and complete depiction of the emails, it is clear that senior administration officials engaged in a wholesale rewriting of intelligence assessments about Benghazi in order to mislead the public. THE WEEKLY STANDARD sought comment from officials at the White House, the State Department, and the CIA, but received none by press time.

Within hours of the initial attack on the U.S. facility, the State Department Operations Center sent out two alerts. The first, at 4:05 P.M. (all times are Eastern Standard Time), indicated that the compound was under attack; the second, at 6:08 P.M., indicated that Ansar al Sharia, an al Qaeda-linked terrorist group operating in Libya, had claimed credit for the attack. According to the House report, these alerts were circulated widely inside the government, including at the highest levels. The fighting in Benghazi continued for another several hours, so top Obama administration officials were told even as the fighting was taking place that U.S. diplomats and intelligence operatives were likely being attacked by al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists. A cable sent the following day, September 12, by the CIA station chief in Libya, reported that eyewitnesses confirmed the participation of Islamic militants and made clear that U.S. facilities in Benghazi had come under terrorist attack. It was this fact, along with several others, that top Obama officials would work so hard to obscure.

After a briefing on Capitol Hill by CIA director David Petraeus, Democrat Dutch Ruppersburger, the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, asked the intelligence community for unclassified guidance on what members of Congress could

ESAM OMRAN AL-FETOR / REUTERS / LANDOV

Version 1: Friday, September 14, 2012, 11:15 a.m.

- We believe based on currently available information that the attacks in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. Consulate and subsequently its annex.
- The crowd almost certainly was a mix of individuals from across many sectors of Libyan society. That being said, we do know that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qa'ida participated in the attack.
- Initial press reporting linked the attack to Ansar al-Sharia. The group has since released a statement that its leadership did not order the attacks, but did not deny that some of its members were involved. Ansar al Sharia's Facebook page aims to spread Sharia in Libya and emphasizes the need for jihad to counter what it views as false interpretations of Islam, according to an open source study.
- The wide availability of weapons and experienced fighters in Libya almost certainly contributed to the lethality of the attacks.
- Since April, there have been at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy. We cannot rule out the individuals has [sic] previously surveilled the U.S. facilities, also contributing to the efficacy of the attacks.
- We are working w/Libyan authorities and intelligence partners in an effort to help bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of US citizens.

Version 2: Saturday, September 15, 2012, 9:45 a.m.

- The currently available information suggests that the demonstrations in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. Consulate and subsequently its annex. This assessment may change as additional information is collected and analyzed and currently available information continues to be evaluated. ~~On 10 September the Agency notified Embassy Cairo of social media reports calling for a demonstration and encouraging jihadists to break into the Embassy.~~
- The investigation is ongoing ~~as to who is responsible for the violence, although the crowd almost certainly was a mix of individuals. That being said, there are indications that Islamic extremists participated in the violent demonstrations.~~
- ~~The wide availability of weapons and experienced fighters in Libya almost certainly contributed to the lethality of the attacks.~~
- ~~The Agency has produced numerous pieces on the threat of extremists linked to al Qa'ida in Benghazi and eastern Libya. Since April, there have been at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy. We cannot rule out the individuals has [sic] previously surveilled the U.S. facilities, also contributing to the efficacy of the attacks.~~
- The US government is working w/Libyan authorities ~~and intelligence partners in an effort~~ to help bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of U.S. citizens.

Version 3 (the final version): Saturday, September 15, 2012, 11:26 a.m.

- The currently available information suggests that the demonstrations in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. diplomatic post and subsequently its annex. There are indications that extremists participated in the violent demonstrations.
- This assessment may change as additional information is collected and analyzed and currently available information continues to be evaluated.
- The investigation is ongoing, and the U.S. government is working with Libyan authorities to help bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of U.S. citizens.

say in their public comments on the attacks. The CIA's Office of Terrorism Analysis prepared the first draft of a response to the congressman, which was distributed internally for comment at 11:15 A.M. on Friday, September 14 (Version 1 at right). This initial CIA draft included the assertion that the U.S. government "know[s] that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda participated in the attack." That draft also noted that press reports "linked the attack to Ansar al Sharia. The group has since released a statement that its leadership did not order the attacks, but did not deny that some of its members were involved." Ansar al Sharia, the CIA draft continued, aims to spread sharia law in Libya and "emphasizes the need for jihad." The agency draft also raised the prospect that the facilities had been the subject of jihadist surveillance and offered a reminder that in the previous six months there had been "at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy."

After the internal distribution, CIA officials amended that draft to include more information about the jihadist threat in both Egypt and Libya. "On 10 September we warned of social media reports calling for a demonstration in front of the [Cairo] Embassy and that jihadists were threatening to break into the Embassy," the agency had added by late afternoon. And: "The Agency has produced numerous pieces on the threat of extremists linked to al Qaeda in Benghazi and Libya." But elsewhere, CIA officials pulled back. The reference to "Islamic extremists" no longer specified "Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda," and the initial reference to "attacks" in Benghazi was changed to "demonstrations."

The talking points were first distributed to officials in the interagency vetting process at 6:52 P.M. on Friday. Less than an hour later, at 7:39 P.M., an individual identified in the House report only as a "senior State Department official" responded to raise "serious concerns" about the draft. That official, whom THE WEEKLY STANDARD has confirmed was State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland, worried that members of Congress would use the talking points to criticize the State Department for "not paying attention to Agency warnings."

In an attempt to address those concerns, CIA officials cut all references to Ansar al Sharia and made minor tweaks. But in a follow-up email at 9:24 P.M., Nuland wrote that the problem remained and that her superiors—she did not say which ones—were unhappy. The changes, she wrote, did not "resolve all my issues or those of my building leadership," and State Department leadership was contacting National Security Council officials directly. Moments later, according to the House report, "White House officials responded by stating that the State Department's concerns would have to be taken into account." One official—Ben Rhodes, THE WEEKLY STANDARD is told, a top adviser to President Obama on national security and foreign policy—further advised the group that the issues would be resolved in a meeting of top administration officials the following morning at the White House.

There is little information about what happened at that meeting of the Deputies Committee. But according to two officials with knowledge of the process, Mike Morrell, deputy director of the CIA, made broad changes to the draft afterwards. Morrell cut all or parts of four paragraphs of the six-paragraph talking points—148 of its 248 words (see Version 2 above). Gone were the reference to "Islamic extremists," the reminders of agency warnings about al Qaeda in Libya, the reference to "jihadists" in Cairo, the mention of possible surveillance of the facility in Benghazi, and the report of five previous attacks on foreign interests.

What remained—and would be included in the final version of the talking points—was mostly boilerplate about ongoing investigations and working with the Libyan government, together with bland language suggesting that the "violent demonstrations"—no longer "attacks"—were spontaneous responses to protests in Egypt and may have included generic "extremists" (see Version 3 above).

If the story of what happened in Benghazi was dramatically stripped down from the first draft of the CIA's talking points to the version that emerged after the Deputies Committee meeting, the narrative would soon be built up again. In ensuing days, administration officials emphasized a "demonstration" in front of the U.S. facility in Benghazi and claimed that the demonstrators were provoked by a YouTube video. The CIA had softened "attack" to "demonstration." But as soon became clear, there had been no demonstration in Benghazi.

More troubling was the YouTube video. Rice would spend much time on the Sunday talk shows pointing to this video as the trigger of the chaos in Benghazi. "What sparked the violence was a very hateful video on the Internet. It was a reaction to a video that had nothing to do with the United States." There is no mention of any "video" in any of the many drafts of the talking points.

Still, top Obama officials would point to the video to explain Benghazi. President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even denounced the video in a sort of diplomatic public service announcement in Pakistan. In a speech at the United Nations on September 25, the president mentioned the video several times in connection with Benghazi.

On September 17, the day after Rice appeared on the Sunday shows, Nuland defended Rice's performance during the daily briefing at the State Department. "What I will say, though, is that Ambassador Rice, in her comments on every network over the weekend, was very clear, very precise, about what our initial assessment of what happened is. And this was not just her assessment, it was also an assessment you've heard in comments coming from the intelligence community, in comments coming from the White House."

It was a preview of the administration's defense of its claims on Benghazi. After pushing the intelligence community to revise its talking points

to fit the administration's preferred narrative, administration officials would point fingers at the intelligence community when parts of that narrative were shown to be misleading or simply untrue.

And at times, members of the intelligence community appeared eager to help. On September 28, a statement from ODNI seemed designed to quiet the growing furor over the administration's explanations of Benghazi. "In the immediate aftermath, there was information that led us to assess that the attack began spontaneously following protests earlier that day at our embassy in Cairo. We provided that initial assessment to Executive Branch officials and members of Congress, who used that information to discuss the attack publicly and provide updates as they became available."

The statement continued: "As we learned more about the attack, we revised our initial assessment to reflect new information indicating that it was a deliberate and organized attack carried out by extremists. It remains unclear if any group or person exercised overall command and control of the attack, and if extremist group leaders directed their members to participate. However, we do assess that some of those involved were linked to groups affiliated with, or sympathetic to al Qaeda."

The statement strongly implies that the information about al Qaeda-linked terrorists was new, a revision of the initial assessment. But it wasn't. Indeed, the original assessment stated, without qualification, "we do know that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda participated in the attack."

The statement from the ODNI came not from James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, but from his spokesman, Shawn Turner. When the statement was released, current and former intelligence officials told The Weekly Standard that they found the statement itself odd and the fact that it didn't come from Clapper stranger still. Clapper was traveling when he was first shown a draft of the statement to go out under his name. It is not an accident that it didn't.

The revelations about exactly how the talking points were written, revised, and then embellished come amid renewed scrutiny of the administration's handling of Benghazi. Fox News spoke to a Special Ops soldier last week who raised new questions about what happened during the attack, and the State Department's inspector general acknowledged that the office would be investigating the production of the Administrative Review Board report on the attacks because of concerns that investigators did not speak to a broad spectrum of individuals with knowledge of the attack and its aftermath. On May 8, the House Oversight and Government Reform committee will hold another hearing on the matter. And Republicans in Congress have asked the administration to release all of the emails, something that would further clarify how the changes came about. ♦

The 'Transparency' Agenda

It's a murky business.

BY MICHAEL WARREN

Last September, Ronald Robins Jr., a senior vice president at Abercrombie & Fitch, received a letter urging the company "to join with over a hundred major companies and make political spending disclosure and accountability a corporate practice." The Ohio-based clothing retailer isn't particularly political. It doesn't have a political action committee, nor is it a member of the more politically involved trade groups like the Chamber of Commerce. Any politics they have lean slightly left. In 2012, the company spent a bit more than $5,000 in donations, to Barack Obama, Ohio Democratic senator Sherrod Brown, Ohio Republican congressman Pat Tiberi, and others. The previous year, Abercrombie spent a measly $120,000 on lobbying, less than 0.1 percent of its operating budget that year. What's more, all that information is public under current disclosure laws.

Nevertheless, the letter informed Robins that companies like his "face increasing pressure" to support political groups and candidates that "threaten corporate reputation, bottom line and shareholder value." This "secret political spending," the letter continued, "threatens not only the health of our democracy but also the reputation and integrity of companies." Half the companies on the S&P 100 stock market index, the letter said, have "recognized the dangers" and have "demonstrated leadership by disclosing the details of and implementing board oversight of their spending." The signers added that they "hope" Abercrombie will follow the lead of these exemplary companies.

None too subtle, the message was: Disclose, or we can make things very difficult for you.

Hundreds of executives at corporations like Abercrombie received letters like this one last year. They were signed by various people, many with titles like "director of shareholder advocacy" at left-leaning investment funds. But like the letter to Robins, all were signed first by the same man, Bruce F. Freed.

Nice company you got there. It would be a shame . . .

Freed may be the most important figure in American business you've never heard of. He isn't a businessman or CEO, an innovator or entrepreneur or even investor. In fact, he has little business experience beyond a few years owning his own Washington, D.C.-based public affairs consulting firm.

A former journalist and Democratic congressional staffer, Freed (who declined to reveal his age) is the founder and president of the Center for Political Accountability, a nonprofit, "nonpartisan organization . . . formed to address the secrecy that cloaks much of the political activity engaged in by companies and the risks this poses to shareholder value." Since it began in 2003, CPA has received $1.2 million in seed money from the Open Society Foundations, funded by left-wing billionaire George Soros. In collaboration with other Soros-backed groups like MoveOn.org, Common Cause, and Media Matters for America, as well as the large unions, CPA is leading a coordinated effort to get some of the country's biggest and most profitable publicly traded corporations to disclose all spending related even tangentially to politics. Freed has the attention of these companies' executives—and he's trying to convince (some might say force) them to get out of politics entirely. Take it from Freed himself.

"CPA and our partners are putting pressure on companies to adopt political disclosure, to curb the independence of trade associations, and to change the behavior of companies and trade associations in their political spending," he told a group of anti-corporate spending activists in 2011. "I think what's critical to remember is that the CPA strategy is not vulnerable to political obstruction or legal challenge. What we're finding is that corporate governance offers a route that allows the issue to be addressed almost unimpeded."

Freed and company are currently pressing their case during corporate America's "proxy season." Every spring, companies are required by the Securities and Exchange Commission to inform their shareholders of the issues pending at the annual shareholder meeting. Generally, these are mundane matters of corporate governance, and few shareholders bother to show up, allowing the corporate board to direct their "proxy" votes. Shareholders who do show up have the

Michael Warren is a reporter at The Weekly Standard.

opportunity to offer their own proposals, and in recent decades, proxy season has been a time for activist shareholders—labor union pension funds, "socially responsible" investment funds, and corporate gadflies—to raise whatever issues they wish.

Activist shareholders used to agitate for companies to rein in executive compensation or divest from apartheid-era South Africa. Their proposals rarely won the support of even a plurality of shareholders, but internal support was seldom the goal. Stirring up controversy—and headlines—could generate public pressure. To avoid PR headaches, companies sometimes acceded to the activists' demands, even when majorities of shareholders were not won over.

This is where Freed saw his chance. In recent years, CPA and its allies have used the proxy process aggressively to hassle corporate boards to adopt more sweeping disclosure of their political spending. According to As You Sow, an umbrella group for activist shareholders, at least 125 proposals related to political spending are expected in the 2013 proxy season, a figure that has more than doubled in three years. Most of those filing these proposals are either pension funds, like the New York State Common Retirement Fund and the California State Teachers' Retirement System, or "socially responsible" investor groups.

One of these is Trillium Asset Management, which last year extracted a major concession from Boston-based financial firm State Street. After a Trillium-backed disclosure proposal received 44 percent shareholder support, State Street reversed course. "State Street made a number of significant improvements to its disclosures and policies, including prohibiting its trade organizations from using its membership dues for political contributions and activities . . . and agreeing to disclose its political contributions to 527s and tax-exempt organizations," the Trillium press release trumpeted.

To an outsider, it might seem that shareholder interest in political disclosure is increasing. Freed and company foster this belief, arguing in their letter to Abercrombie, for instance, that proxy advisory firms ISS and Glass Lewis "recommend voting for proxy proposals" expanding political disclosure. (The AFL-CIO is one of ISS's largest clients, and Glass Lewis is owned by a teachers' union fund in Ontario, Canada.) And Freed claims that "the average vote for these resolutions has topped 30 percent in the past three proxy seasons." But these activists are stacking the deck. The conservative Manhattan Institute discovered that Freed's 30 percent figure discounts abstentions, which most corporate rules consider "no" votes on shareholder proposals. The actual shareholder vote for disclosure proposals, Manhattan says, was just 17 percent across Fortune 200 companies in 2012, a seven-year low. In an interview, Freed said the Manhattan Institute's methodology is "deeply flawed" and that the SEC's own formula discounts abstention votes.

Ultimately, Freed argues that not disclosing political spending creates unnecessary 'risk' for a corporation. In business, avoiding unnecessary risk is a no-brainer.

But internal pressure from proxy proposals is just one part of Freed's strategy; another is "peer pressure." The letter to Abercrombie cites Aflac, Exelon, Merck, Microsoft, and Wells Fargo as companies with "sound political disclosure." CPA has developed its own (rather inquisitorial) index of major companies' disclosure policies in conjunction with the Zicklin Center for Business Ethics Research at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton school of business (where Freed serves on the advisory board). The index scores the top 200 companies of the S&P 500 across 25 indicators, for a maximum of 72 points. The 2012 index ranks pharmaceutical giant Merck first, with a score of 70. The most improved company from 2011 was Costco, with an impressive 61. Meanwhile, 18 companies scored zero points, including Berkshire Hathaway, T. Rowe Price, and Priceline.com.

Freed's letter to Abercrombie cites the CPA-Zicklin index as demonstrating that "political disclosure and accountability [is] becoming a mainstream corporate practice." The fact is, no corporation with a brand to uphold wants to find itself out of the mainstream—or cited by any corporate watchdog. It's worth noting that four companies—IBM, Colgate-Palmolive, Goldman Sachs, and Praxair—were left off the CPA-Zicklin index because they were wise enough to engage in no political spending. Freed says they were left off at the request of other companies so as not to "skew" the index.

All of this is only the start. Two weeks ago, officials at the SEC announced they were considering a new rule to require all publicly traded companies to disclose their political spending. Consideration for the rule came after an overwhelming petition drive from Soros-funded groups like Common Cause, Public Citizen, and Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. In the *New York Times* story on the announcement, Freed's second-in-command and CPA's counsel, Karl Sandstrom, gets the last word.

"I think the SEC staff is very sympathetic to the petition itself, and a lot of the comments have referenced Justice Kennedy's opinion in *Citizens United*," said Sandstrom. "But they have so much on their plate, they have to decide what's going to come first."

Freed insists that CPA's goal isn't to discourage companies from spending money on politics. As he explained to activists in that 2011 talk, he aims to "solidify" disclosure "as a corporate governance standard and . . . really lock in place best practices." This "will place increased pressure on laggards to adopt political disclosure."

Freed's appropriation of corporate jargon—best practices, corporate reputation, bottom line, shareholder value—is deft. Ultimately, Freed

argues that not disclosing political spending creates unnecessary "risk" for a corporation. In business, avoiding unnecessary risk is a no-brainer.

Yet the risk Freed warns of is actually manufactured by the very groups sounding the alarm. Consider the "corporate transparency" strategy outlined in a leaked 2012 memo from the Soros-funded Media Matters to its allies on the organized left. Media Matters said its goal was to "make the case that political spending is not within the fiduciary interest of publicly traded corporations and therefore should be limited." How to do this? When a business backs a conservative candidate, the memo said, Media Matters will "portray it as a complete endorsement of everything that a politician has said or done."

That's what happened to Target, the Minneapolis-based mega-retailer, when it contributed $150,000 to the political group MN Forward in 2010. MN Forward says it supports "pro-business" candidates and gave money to Republican gubernatorial candidate Tom Emmer. Emmer also backed a state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. When Target disclosed its contribution to MN Forward, all hell broke loose. MoveOn.org, another Soros-backed entity, organized gay-rights protests at Target stores across the country and, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported, delivered to the retailer a petition promising a boycott signed by 24,000 people.

Soon after, Target CEO Gregg Steinhafel wrote a letter to employees ensuring that the company would "begin a strategic review and analysis of our decision-making process for financial contributions in the public policy arena" and initiate a "dialogue" on workplace diversity and LGBT issues. Target executives had learned their lesson. In 2008, Target spent $575,000, a company record, in disclosed political donations, according to OpenSecrets.org. That number dropped to $490,000 in 2010 and just over $400,000 in 2012, with a significantly larger share going to PACs and thus not directly supporting individual candidates.

Chalk up a victory for Freed. ♦

Cheaters in School

And they aren't students.

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

Award-winning Atlanta school superintendent Beverly Hall, outside Fulton County Jail

The front page of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* one day in late March was almost completely taken up by news of indictments of 35 public employees. They were not legislators or crooked cops but principals and teachers in the Atlanta school system. They had been doing what one expects to hear students have been doing—namely, cheating on exams. But going by the tone of the grand jury report, one could have been forgiven for thinking they were sanitation department employees cutting deals and working kickbacks with the mob.

The Atlanta educators had, for years, been revising answers on their students' statewide, federally mandated competency tests. This was done to improve the students' scores, and unsurprisingly it worked.

Geoffrey Norman, a writer in Vermont, is a frequent contributor to The Weekly Standard.

The Atlanta school system was celebrated. Its chief, Beverly Hall, was named National Superintendent of the Year in 2009 by the American Association of School Administrators, which declared her to be "an outstanding superintendent whose leadership has turned Atlanta into a model of urban school reform. . . . She has demonstrated a commitment to setting high standards for students and school personnel, working collaboratively with the school board, and meeting the needs of the local community."

Hall was also honored at the White House by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who later said, while the rumors of widespread fraud and corruption were already in the air, "Whatever the outcome of the state investigation, [Hall's] accomplishments should not go unrecognized."

Hall was also endorsed by the Gates Foundation, which found the Atlanta

BEN GRAY / MCT / LANDOV

public school system "the leading edge" in "effective teaching."

The grand jury thought otherwise. According to the indictment, Hall had indeed worked collaboratively: "In her capacity as the superintendent, [she] conspired and endeavored to violate the Georgia RICO Act through a pattern of racketeering activity . . . "

If convicted, Hall could do 45 years, which seems harsh and probably is. But she is accused of profiting from a criminal enterprise to the tune of some half-million dollars, of ruining the careers of principals who refused to go along with the enterprise and rewarding those who did. And, of course, there are the thousands of children and their parents who were defrauded and no doubt feel truly cheated by what Hall was doing when she wasn't soaking up the praises of the educrats and foundation chiefs.

Suspicions about the test scores being rung up by Atlanta students first emerged in 2008 and were reported by the *Journal-Constitution*. The test scores were, quite simply, too good to be true. The improvement was too dramatic. Inner-city schools were, almost overnight, outperforming those in the suburbs, but it was indelicate to point this out. There were, predictably, racial undercurrents.

Still, the *Journal-Constitution* persisted. The evidence was compelling enough that a Republican governor, Sonny Perdue—a white man from rural Georgia—pushed an investigation. The conspirators were defiant. As the *AJC* reported, one superintendent met "in 2010 with a dozen principals where schools were most suspect. She disparaged the state investigation and then told the principals to write and read aloud memos telling the state investigators to 'go to hell.'"

Eventually, one teacher wore a wire, just like on the television shows, and gradually the evidence was accumulated and the indictments handed down. Now there will be trials.

It is, of course, a depressing story. Not least because of the brutal insensitivity and unconcern about "the kids." That is to say, the victims. Hall and her co-conspirators sold them down the river while soaking up the money and the glory.

But that is, sadly, ordinary human frailty, and that has been with us a long time. The conspirators were tempted and they gave in to it. But they had their enablers at the foundations and in the Department of Education. Why were the latter not suspicious when the *Journal-Constitution* began reporting the story in 2008? These, after all, are supposed to be the people who really understand education. They are the experts.

And yet they were apparently more clueless than some parents of Atlanta schoolchildren who went to officials and demanded to know why, if their children were testing so well, they were reading so poorly.

Suspicions about the test scores being rung up by Atlanta students first emerged in 2008 and were reported by the *Journal-Constitution*. The scores were, quite simply, too good to be true. The improvement was too dramatic.

"Don't worry about it," was Beverly Hall's answer. And the big dogs at the Gates Foundation and the Department of Education backed her up. A mother of one of the defrauded children was quoted in the *AJC* as saying, "Beverly Hall needed to take the fall for this. She made a deal with the devil, and the devil called her out."

The Department of Education has a budget of over $77 billion a year, and it also needs to be called out. This, of course, will not happen. What is happening is an effort by education theorists and teachers' union bosses to transfer the blame from Hall and her co-conspirators onto . . . the tests.

The scandal, according to this line, proves that there is too much emphasis placed on standardized tests. One voice making this argument is that of William Ayers, writing in the *Washington Post*, where he is coyly described as:

> a radical activist during the 1960s and '70s, [who] had the national spotlight thrown on him during the 2008 presidential campaign when right-wing commentators tried, incorrectly, to say he had a close relationship with then candidate Barack Obama. In any case, Ayers is a well-known Chicago educator who worked with mayor Richard Daley on school reform and who taught and did research for years at the university. He has written numerous articles and books on elementary education.

In his short piece for the *Post*, Ayers (who in fact took part in the Weather Underground's bombing campaign and was later a fugitive from justice) writes that Hall's work "embodied the shared educational policies of the Bush and Obama administrations." He then goes on to blame the No Child Left Behind initiative of the Bush administration (no mention of the big part Ted Kennedy played in that one) and Obama's Race to the Top program for putting heavy emphasis on testing and "reducing education to a single narrow metric that claims to recognize an educated person through a test score."

The stress on testing is an incentive to cheating, Ayers writes, and maybe so. But life is full of temptations that people are reasonably expected to resist. The Atlanta conspirators did have choices. Some of their colleagues chose not to cheat and not to tell investigators to "go to hell." Some even chose to cooperate with the investigation.

Many, if not most, of the students who went to the corrupt schools—and their parents who sent them there—had no choice.

If testing has been tried and found wanting, one thinks, then how about trying something different?

Like school choice. If the Department of Education and the Gates Foundation and the rest of the education apparatus can't sniff out a fraud and a con of this magnitude, let the parents and the students give it a try. They can't do any worse. ♦

Disappearing Red Lines

Obama's mess of a Syria policy.

BY LEE SMITH

Animal carcasses near Aleppo, March 2013, after a chemical attack, residents said.

In his April 30 White House press conference, President Obama explained that there's evidence chemical weapons have been used in Syria, but "we don't know how they were used, when they were used, and who used them. We don't have a chain of custody."

What he meant is that maybe it wasn't Bashar al-Assad's regime that gassed its enemies. Maybe rebels lifted some chemical arms from Assad's massive stockpile. As if to substantiate Obama's conjecture, Syria's ambassador to the U.N. Bashar al-Jaafari at roughly the same time as Obama's press conference accused the rebels of a chemical weapons attack near the Turkish border.

It's not the first time the Syrian government has accused its domestic enemies of using Damascus's own unconventional arsenal against civilians. In March, Assad spokesmen contended that rebels had launched a chemical weapons attack against Khan al-Assal, a town in Aleppo Province, that killed 25 people.

Still, the timing of the regime's latest claims should embarrass the White House. It gives the appearance that Obama and a ruling clique that has racked up a death toll approaching 100,000 are working two different ends of the same psychological operations campaign. Obama says he's confused about Syria's chemical weapons, and Assad lends a hand by sowing doubt about the author of the chemical attacks in Syria. In one regard, Obama and Assad really do share the same goal, albeit for different reasons—they both want to ensure that the United States sits on the sidelines of the Syrian civil war.

Syria analyst Tony Badran sees in all this a "cynical two-step," in which Assad and Obama pick up on each other's cues and send reinforcing messages. Writing in *NOW Lebanon*, Badran, a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, shows how since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, the Syrian regime has furnished plentiful justifications for the United States not advancing its regional interests by helping to topple Iran's chief Arab ally. Among other reasons, Badran writes, there is fear that the fall of the Damascus regime would endanger Israel, that it would threaten Syria's minority communities, that it would empower Sunni radicals allied with al Qaeda, and that those same Sunni radicals might wind up seizing the regime's large stockpile of chemical weapons.

At his press conference, Obama claimed that White House policy from the beginning of the uprising was to pressure Assad to step down. The truth is that Obama waited for five months before making any such statement and has sent mixed signals since then about whether he really wants Assad to go. The very red line Obama drew last August was just such a mixed signal. The White House warned Assad against using chemical weapons, but also insisted that he must keep them under his control. The problem of course is that Assad cannot control his chemical weapons arsenal unless he is firmly in control of his country. Assad could also see that the administration's warnings were couched in heavily qualified language, which signaled to him that in comparison with a domestic uprising determined to kill him, the White House was a much less serious adversary that he could risk ignoring.

For instance, after a State Department cable showed that Assad might have used chemical weapons in December, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered what the administration doubtless considered a strong warning. "I am not going to telegraph in any specifics," said Clinton, "what we would do in the event of credible evidence that the Assad regime has resorted to using chemical weapons against their own people." The concept of "credible evidence,"

IMAGES: GEORGE OURFALIAN / REUTERS / LANDOV

Lee Smith is a senior editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

it is now obvious, gives the White House wiggle room to do nothing. If Obama's red line showed Assad that Americans were ambivalent about his fate, Clinton's reaction told him they were bluffing.

The administration doubted that Assad would ever be "crazy" enough to use chemical weapons; after all, Obama had warned him of the consequences. Here the White House misunderstood power politics as it is played by someone fighting for his rule, his community, and his life. The Assad regime has lost control of much of Syria; in the event it has to abandon Damascus, plan B is to make a run for the Alawite homeland in Syria's coastal mountains. The continued existence of the Alawite minority would then depend on its ability to defend that enclave from the Sunni Arab majority the rebels are drawn from. By using chemical weapons in at least a limited fashion, Assad could show that he would open the gates of hell should the rebels chase him all the way to his coastal redoubt. That would be not "crazy" from his perspective, but rational.

It is tempting to say that Assad has outmaneuvered Obama, but it may just be that the White House is incompetent. With the U.S. intelligence community last week joining their French, British, and Israeli counterparts in the conviction that Assad has employed chemical weapons, likely more than once, Obama has three choices. He can enforce his red line, swallow his words, or obfuscate the fact that he is swallowing his words. He has opted for the third.

What does it mean when Obama says that not only the United States but also the international community must be confident that the Assad regime used chemical weapons? Obama is, in effect, referring the issue to Russia, Syria's ally on the U.N. Security Council. And Obama knows that Vladimir Putin is no more apt to dump Assad now than he was two years ago. He is taking his case to the international community on the sound assumption that Moscow will prevent action.

As for reports sourced to unnamed administration officials claiming that the White House plans to send arms to the rebels, these accounts have to be read within a larger narrative. Over the past year, similarly unnamed sources have repeatedly leaked to the press that the administration was either contemplating arms shipments to the rebels or already facilitating them. Yet Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey two weeks ago said the U.S. intelligence community still doesn't really know who the rebels are. "If we could clearly identify the right people, I would support" arming them, said Dempsey. The unnamed sources are likely part of yet one more media blitz meant to throw critics of Obama's Syria policy off balance.

A man wounded in the same attack

For the other aspect of the White House's approach to Syria has been to emphasize the difficulty of conducting any military action against Assad. Obama officials have once again renewed their warnings regarding Syria's air defense system, which they say has been beefed up, making it a more formidable deterrent than ever against any no-fly zone that the administration might contemplate imposing. And yet despite Syria's Russian-made, and maybe Russian-manned, air defenses, Israel struck targets across the Syrian border in February, and may have conducted another raid in late April.

Obama supporters reason that the president is taking his cues on Syria from the American people, who have no appetite for more military conflict in the Middle East. However, polls do not show a public that has become isolationist. Rather, they simply reflect the eternal good sense, common wisdom, and decency of the American people, who do not ever hunger for foreign entanglements. The administration's vague talk of "military intervention" is meant to raise the stakes so high that any form of assistance to topple Assad is preemptively taken off the table.

No officials or lawmakers have ever called for U.S. forces on the ground in Syria—it is the White House that says in order to find and destroy Assad's chemical weapons it would take more than 70,000 U.S. troops, a number intended to stop critics of the administration's Syria policy dead in their tracks. What policymakers like Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham have called for is a no-fly zone and arming the rebels. Obama's former CIA director David Petraeus drew up plans for getting weapons to the Free Syrian Army, which Leon Panetta and Hillary Clinton supported, as did Dempsey, before he changed his mind.

As Frederic Hof, the State Department's former point man on Syria, wrote of Dempsey's and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's testimony last month before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the central purpose "was to pour cold water on the idea of military intervention in Syria."

Hof, who out of government has become one of the sharpest critics of the administration's Syria policy, concludes that responsibility for confused policy rests with the White House. "A Pentagon reflecting confusion is a Pentagon in need of clear guidance from the commander in chief, U.S. President Barack Obama."

"I've got to make sure I've got the facts," Obama said last Wednesday. Over the last two years, the president's Syria policy suggests that even when he has the facts, he doesn't know what to do with them. ♦

The Fall of Rome

Bankrupt and bloodied, Italy's political elite clings to power

By Christopher Caldwell

Rome

Italians have been told not to worry too much about Luigi Preiti, the 46-year-old businessman who opened fire at the April 28 swearing-in of new prime minister Enrico Letta, wounding two policemen. Preiti, press accounts assure the public, was in a *condizione molto delicata*, having recently lost his job and split from his wife. The problem is that the whole of Italy is in a *condizione molto delicata*. Unemployment is in double digits. Citizens are fighting over the spoils of an economy nearly 7 percent smaller than it was five years ago.

Worst of all, the government cannot find a way to balance its books that the public will tolerate. That is why February's elections produced a deadlock between three irreconcilable forces. The left-wing Democratic party (PD), which had successfully prevented reformists from ending the stranglehold of the party's Communist-era leadership, got the most votes for the lower house. The 76-year-old media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the populist conservatives, spent months attacking German bankers and Italian taxmen, and stunned the country by nearly winning the Senate. A quarter of the country voted for the Five-Star Movement (M5S) of comedian Beppe Grillo, which seems to want to do away with the country's political system altogether. Mario Monti, who led the "technocratic" government installed in 2011 to please Italy's EU creditors, was left in the dust. It is not surprising that it took two months of calumny, threats, and purges before the Berlusconi-ites, the Democrats, and the rump of Monti's forces could unite to fend off the Grillo movement and form a government, however shaky.

Comedian Beppe Grillo: His movement is no joke.

Americans uncertain what to expect from Letta's new government may find it useful to think of him as a younger, more Italian version of former Utah governor Jon Huntsman. Letta comes from the center-right. His political family is the old, anti-Communist Christian Democrats, the youth wing of which he once led. His literal family includes Gianni Letta, an uncle, who is an intimate of Berlusconi, the longtime prime minister. But there came a moment about 10 years ago when Silvio Berlusconi turned into a politician no well-bred young Italian could be seen in public with. Enrico cast his lot with the center-left.

That is how he and I came to share a pizza one lunchtime in Rome in 2003. Letta was trying to explain how the future lay with his Margherita party, which rejected both Berlusconi and the Communist heritage of the left. I had the (immodest) impression that I understood Letta's situation better than he himself did. His centrism was temporary. The left had already captured him. Berlusconi's charisma and money were essential to the right, but the left could get rid of the Communist stigma by merely changing its name, which it had already done a number of times. When the various Communist, post-Communist, socialist, and antiglobalist groups reconstituted themselves as the Democratic party in 2007, Letta was among its founding members.

But Letta knew what he was doing. Here is the difference between a "moderate Republican" in the United States and a centrist on the Italian left: No one needs a moderate Republican. But for two decades Italy's leftists have had a desperate need for moderates, as a means of staving off reform on the inside while implying to everyone on the outside that such reform was actually taking place. That pivotal position has now made Letta prime minister, with a lot of help from the financial crisis of the last half-decade.

STEFANO LANCIA / EPA / LANDOV

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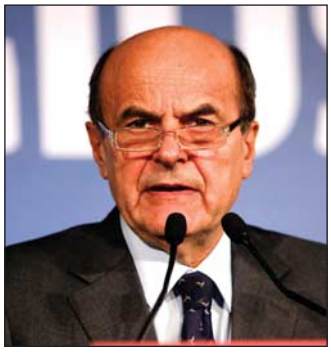
In 2009, two longhaired baby boomers—a shaggy, grumpy comedian named Beppe Grillo and his somewhat spiffier adviser, the futuristic PR man Gianroberto Casaleggio—started a party called the Five-Star Movement (which they deny is a party at all). They had noticed that the followers of Grillo's blog were responding to his pox-on-both-their-houses riffs with a frenzied enthusiasm. The frustrated *grillini* (which means "little crickets" in Italian) were similar to the people who flocked to MoveOn and Meetup in the middle of the Bush years, except that they lacked a single hate object. Grillo's people have an almost religious faith in the Internet, and in the ability of "direct democracy" to solve Italy's corruption problems. Over the Net, they began to organize "V-Days," messageless, rather primal gatherings where mostly young participants would rally behind the slogan *Vaffanculo*, the Italian version of the universal insult telling people where to stick it.



Pier Luigi Bersani

Silvio Berlusconi

It is tough to say what Grillo and his followers stand for. They don't really have an economic plan. Grillo himself believes in French ideas of *décroissance*, or "ungrowing," associated with the economist Serge Latouche (and attractively expressed in decades past by such thinkers as Jacques Ellul and Ivan Illich). One of the new Five-Star deputies in Rome explained to me that the party would like to scrap a proposed high-speed train in order to hire people to make buildings more energy efficient, and in general to have more people work at home. "Progress does not mean doing the same thing," he said. "It's doing things with fewer resources." This may sound bizarre, but in a country where low birthrates mean Italy will lose a quarter of its population in a generation or so, to believe in shrinkage is to be on the side of history. The Five-Star deputies are among the only Italians to have faced this question somewhat squarely.

Grillo's people have fought against NATO bases in Sicily and trash incinerators in Parma. They want tax cuts and say the Italian tax authorities are a tyranny. They have called for a referendum on whether Italy should stay in the common European currency. Like the left, they want to claw back the wealth that rich people won before the financial crisis (*il bottino*, Grillo calls it, "the booty"). Like the right, they are not crazy about the idea that everyone born to a member of Italy's rapidly growing immigrant population deserves Italian citizenship. And there are echoes of Mussolini's rhetoric in some of Grillo's rhetoric, including his warning to the political class—"Surrender! You are surrounded by the Italian people!" A millenarian video made by Casaleggio descries the machinations of "masonic, religious, and financial groups" in contemporary politics, and Grillo's website was lit up last week with discussion of Letta's having addressed the international businessmen's roundtable known as the Bilderberg Group.

Most of all, the Five-Star Movement hates corruption. It distrusts Berlusconi and his People of Liberty party (PdL). It dislikes Berlusconi for the familiar reasons injected into the international press by Berlusconi's opponents in the Italian literary elite: his influence-peddling, his control of Italian television, his dalliances with teenage girls, and, less avowedly, his wealth. Unlike the Italian literary elite, though, the M5S brings skepticism to Italy's Democratic party as well. The PD is the home of trade union patronage, and Grillo warns that unions are "just like the parties: old organizations that history, not me, will shut down." The PD builds its prestige and lines its pockets and then erupts into dudgeon should anyone suggest that it cares about anything other than the interests of the poor. Grillo calls it the "PdL without the L."

In the short term, the M5S has two major gripes about political corruption: First, the metastasis of parliamentary seats—Italy has 315 senators, not counting its appointed "senators-for-life," and these seats are all starting points for little empires of patronage. The second gripe—and do note the contrast to American ideas of fighting corruption—is the public funding of campaigns, which provides the money that lubricates those patronage empires. Ending public finance of political parties is the one M5S reform plank so popular that Letta on his first day as prime minister announced he would pursue it.

The M5S, however wackily, aims to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. It chose its list of deputies and senators in an Internet election. In the first days of parliament its members objected to sitting in a bloc as part of the usual left-to-right fan; they preferred to sit in the back rows, as the montagnards of the French Revolution did, and for the same symbolic reasons—they want to remain away from, but above, power. The M5S deputies call each other

TOP, TONY GENTILE / REUTERS / LANDOV; BOTTOM, CIRO FUSCO / EPA / LANDOV

"citizen" rather than "honorable." There have been dozens of convicted criminals in Italy's parliament in recent years, and high on the list of its rules is the exclusion of members with criminal records. That excludes Grillo himself, who was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in 1981 for a driving accident in which three passengers were killed.

The M5S opposes what it calls the *casta*, the Italian political "caste." All party members are emphatic that the Italian press is part of this caste. "They want to speak to you just to make a movie of you," one of the M5S deputies told me, "to put you in a bad light." He did not think the press owned by Berlusconi was any more scurrilous than the press owned by his opponents. Grillo gave no television or newspaper interviews to the mainstream media during the campaign, and his followers have imitated his example. (This distrust does not extend to the foreign press.) With some exceptions, Italy's big papers have reciprocated the indifference. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, a newspaper obsessed with sending Berlusconi and his wife to jail, has taken up Grillo's cause.

The ideology of throwing the bums out has a name in Italy. It is called *qualunquismo* ("whoever"-ism). February's election came within a hair's breadth of bringing *qualunquismo* to power for the first time since the Second World War. People liked the Grillo message. A quarter of the country voted for it, including 40 percent of factory workers, according to a study at the University of Urbino. The result had been, until the naming of Letta last week, two months of deadlock. Much that happened in those two months has strengthened the M5S case that the state is corrupt. Little about Letta's appointment will change this feeling.

The February elections ended with 26 percent for M5S, 25 percent for the left-wing PD, and 22 percent for Berlusconi's PdL. Mario Monti's technocratic government, which had been appointed at the urging of the European Union to facilitate Italy's cooperation with international monetary demands, had "balanced" Italy's books by leaving $92 billion in government contracts unpaid—many of them to small businessmen. When Monti's Civic Choice party won only 8 percent of the vote, it surprised nobody but the *casta*. But this three-way split did not yield the results that one might expect in an ordinary electoral system. A decade ago, Berlusconi passed a reform guaranteeing a parliamentary majority to the largest party, no matter how small its percentage of the vote. Meant to rig the system in favor of his own struggling party, it backfired. It has wound up benefiting the PD. Because it ran in a coalition with a few smaller parties, the PD could claim an extra 3 percent of the vote—its 29.54 percent gave it 340 seats. Berlusconi, through the same means, bumped up to 29.18 percent, for 124 seats. Although, in narrow terms, Grillo had the largest party, his 25.55 won him only 108 seats.

So the left had a majority in one of the two houses, but this was a majority with very little legitimacy. What legitimacy it had was further diminished by the way it had run its campaign. A year ago, the PD was rallying behind Matteo Renzi, the 37-year-old mayor of Florence who proposed to reform the party and purge its old-left cadres in the way that Bill Clinton and Tony Blair had done in their respective countries. And the party's perennial foe, Berlusconi, looked to be in permanent decline. Berlusconi was weakened by various tabloid stories about teenagers, escort services, hair implants, and dissolute parties characterized by what he called "Bunga Bunga." All polls showed it was an impossible election for the PD to lose. So strong did the PD's position appear that its leadership began to ask: Why reform at all? The party changed its nominating rules and arranged that the wheezy old apparatchik Pier Luigi Bersani be given the top spot. It was an act so brazen that it brought Berlusconi back from the dead.

It also left the PD in a tricky position when the time came to build a coalition. With few workable political programs of its own, it had spent the past several years riding a moral high horse about Silvio Berlusconi, and chasing him through the Italian justice system. Was Bersani now supposed to promise Berlusconi (behind the scenes) some kind of immunity from prosecution in order to cling to power? Or was he supposed to approach Grillo, in hopes that an anticorruption party would form a governing alliance with the party it was accusing of corruption? Bersani chose to ask Grillo. Grillo's response was to ask if Bersani was joking.

Elites on the left did not find Bersani's approach to Grillo as ridiculous as everyone else did. They assumed Grillo was, at the end of the day, someone just like themselves. To the extent he had any intelligent protest to make, they figured, he would come to realize that they had the answer to every discontent. Writing in the philosophical review *MicroMega*, which plays the same role in Italian political-intellectual life as, say, the *New York Review of Books*, Giovanni Perazzoli seemed astonished that Grillo would not want to help liberate Italy from Berlusconi. "For Grillo, the PD and the PdL are really the same," he wrote. "They're the same because they're both parties." But that is to underestimate Grillo's discrimination. They are the same in his view not because they are both parties but because they are both *corrupt* parties. If anything, the PD is the more dangerous to Grillo, because it is the party of skilled political operators. For a party of genuinely provincial and trodden-upon *qualunqui*

like the M5S, the PD's invitation to "share" power was an invitation to get taken to the cleaners.

The result was the deadlock that lasted until two weeks ago. It seemed worse because of a quirk in the Italian constitution, and the role played under it by the president, the 87-year-old ex-Communist Giorgio Napolitano. The presidency is mostly a ceremonial post, but there are a couple of important exceptions. First, it is the president who invites a party to form a government, rather as the queen does in Britain. And second, the president has a potential role in adjudicating future legal complaints against politicians, including (but not limited to) Berlusconi. Berlusconi's people dared not commit themselves to government until they knew what kind of president they were going to be serving under, and Napolitano was barred by the constitution from calling for new elections so late in his term. Ultimately, Napolitano agreed to run for reelection, which will allow him to serve as head of state until just before his 95th birthday. In agreeing to take up the presidency for a final (one assumes) seven-year term, Napolitano scolded Italy for its "regression" and its "ungovernability," and urged the parties to act responsibly. But his election and Letta's government do not solve Italy's problems. They will even make the *grillini* say, "Aha! See?" The two main parties have colluded against an anticorruption movement in order to keep power, and to rescue Italy's participation in the euro.

Letta wants a looser fiscal policy, along the lines of the one Berlusconi campaigned for—but minus the anti-German rhetoric. The property tax that Monti's technocratic government introduced to help balance its books is not, Letta promises, gonna happen. The Italian people will like that. Letta has won himself some breathing room. But he has merely replaced Monti's strategy (solving economic problems by creating political ones) with something equally risky (solving political problems by creating economic ones). Europe's leaders still have not figured out a way to send the bill for recapitalizing the continent's banks to anyone other than the continent's voters.

Alexis Tsipras, leader of the Greek leftist party Syriza, told voters during his country's last elections that they needn't ever worry that an anti-European vote would mean the cutoff of European bailouts, because bailouts are for the bankers, not for the people. For a couple of years now, this viewpoint has been a mainstream one in Greece. It is now moving to Italy, and thus to Europe's core. The consequences won't be long to await. ♦

The Talent Contest

What makes a political winner?
Ideology and party platforms are overrated.

By Noemie Emery

The GOP may have a problem, but few seem to know what it is. Such appeal as the party had, it seems to have lost. In the later-stage Cold War, between 1968 and 1989, it won five out of six presidential elections, four of them with more than 400 votes in the Electoral College. Since the Cold War ended, the party has won two elections and lost four, lost the popular vote in five of these contests, and never took more than 286 votes in the Electoral College—while the Democrats four times have won more than 300 votes in the Electoral College.

One can look at this history and see two liberals, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama (of different stripes, but still liberals), pounding on or hemming in the conservatives, and decide that ideology must be the trouble. Or one can look through an alternative prism and see something different: two extravagantly gifted liberal candidates, who each ran two times against four poor politicians, bracketing one good but slightly less gifted conservative, who also ran twice against poor politicians, making the issue less one of theory and more one of candidate skills.

Mr. Malaise meets Mr. Congeniality.

This isn't to say that party and platform don't matter. They do, as do a number of other disparate factors, among which are timing and luck. But since 1980, winners have come from the left, right, and center; been rich and poor, young and old, black and white; been fatherless waifs or children of power; and through it all, there has been only one constant: Each time, the prize has gone to the better political animal. Let us go back and examine each contest to see how this pattern played out.

Early in 1980, Democrats believed they had found their dream candidate, or rather, the candidate they'd dreamed of running against. This was a 69-year-old, over-the-hill former actor who had worked with a chimp in one of his movies, was far to the right and a Goldwater backer, had lost two prior runs for the GOP nomination, and had been known to say some odd things. This partly described Ronald Reagan, but there was more. He was also a two-term governor of one of the biggest states in the union, and had been a political animal all of his life: a class president, head of the Screen Actors Guild in California, head negotiator for that union in battles with management; a campaigner and spokesman for Roosevelt and Truman, and later spokesman for General Electric on national issues when his screen career ended. Endorsing Goldwater in 1964—in a speech that was more widely praised than any the candidate himself uttered—he shunned the Goldwater bluntness for the more soothing style of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was his model of leadership for all of his life. Though he left the party of Roosevelt, "he refused to abandon the words and phrases which provided a shared language and a common bond with his fellow citizens," as his biographer Lou Cannon put it. This greatly helped him attract Reagan Democrats and, from his first race for governor, stymied the many attempts of his rivals to define him as a menace or "mean."

"Reagan almost always refuses to be threatening or to let his opponent make him look threatening," an aide for Pat Brown is quoted as saying in Michael Barone's *Our*

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Country. "He doesn't attack head-on very often. He . . . makes wisecracks, or pokes fun." Meanwhile, Jimmy Carter, who had his incompetence going against him, managed to make his own "meanness" an issue, and to cite his 13-year-old daughter as an expert on the nuclear arms race in the one debate of the season, while Reagan, using the FDR tactic of framing huge themes in commonplace language, probably won the election by asking voters if they felt better off than they had four years before. Four years later, people *were* better off than under Carter, and Reagan made short work of Carter's vice president, Walter Mondale, a stolid, mundane, and conventional liberal who clung to FDR's remedies years after they ceased to be relevant, while Reagan dazzled with FDR's savvy and skills.

But if Reagan was a political talent second to one in his century, his vice president, the elder George Bush, was the perfect example of the good public servant who loves to hold office but basically hates to campaign. An Eastern aristocrat whose transfer to Texas had not made him folksy, he struggled to connect with the average voter. He performed well in the high-ranking posts that he held by appointment—CIA head, RNC head, ambassador to China—but had won only two races for office (for a House seat from Houston) before losing a Senate race to Lloyd Bentsen and then the nomination in 1980 to Reagan himself. His bad luck was that he wasn't a very good politician.

Only one of these men is enjoying the campaign.

AP / GREG GIBSON

His good luck was that he had a skilled team that made him pretend to like pork rinds, and that his opponent was Michael Dukakis, a man whose common touch was even less obvious, and who had the misfortune to ride in a tank; to preside over the furlough of a murderer who proceeded to assault a young couple; and to exhibit indifference, in a TV debate watched by tens of millions, to the hypothetical murder and rape of his wife. This was enough to elect Bush, but not enough to let Bush prevail over William J. Clinton, a political prodigy who became governor of Arkansas before he was 30 and had planned to be president since, as a teenager, he had shaken John Kennedy's hand. Added to this were the facts that Bush was elected president when he was 67, was diagnosed with Graves' disease in his third year in office, and, after successfully overseeing the end of the Cold War and ousting Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in a brilliantly engineered action, seemed to have run out of things that he wanted to do.

A generation younger, Bill Clinton could think of hundreds of things, and was one of the most gifted of all politicians, blending the empathy skills of the eager glad-hander with the policy chops of the nerd. "He was capable of constant emotional scans of everyone in the room in real time while he was thinking," one of his associates told Sally Bedell Smith for her book on the Clintons, adding that "he could recognize, quantify, and calibrate a response to the emotional state of the person with him" and of every new person he met on the trail. These were not the traits of the people who ran against him, and once he centered himself after the '94 midterms, he made short work of Bob Dole, the Senate majority leader, who belonged to the same generation as George Bush the elder and was still more laconic. What Dole proved was that "senator's senators"—men who, like himself and Edward M. Kennedy, know, love, and are attuned to the slow pace and rules of the Senate—tend to make less than good national candidates, as they seem to have the wrong skill sets and message to run on the national scene. As it was, the man whom Joe Klein would describe as "The Natural" faced two opponents who were not in his league when it came to campaigning. And the spotlight moved on to his heir.

In 1952, when Prescott Bush and Albert Gore Sr. entered the Senate together, they had no way of knowing that their kin (along with that of their classmate, John Kennedy) would help to define much of the coming half-century, or that their grandson and son would fight for the White House against each other almost 50 years on. The difference was that Albert Gore Jr., who was not a born politician, was pushed into the role by his iron-willed father, while George W. Bush, who had better political skills than his father, jumped into the fray on his own. As a result, by 2000, the younger Bush, elected governor twice, had developed his own set of issues and style, while Gore, who had only won seats once held by his father before becoming Clinton's running mate, faced the first election he had to win wholly on his own at a time when he was still striving to find his own voice. Seeking a role that might fit, he hired a guru to dress him in earth tones, and may have lost the election at the debates, when he sighed in disgust and groaned audibly in the first; seemed almost comatose in the second encounter; and in the third, attempting to regain the offensive, left his chair, stalked over to Bush and loomed awkwardly, while Bush nodded at him, and the audience laughed.

John Kerry never tried such theatrics, but he too was an awkward and unloved politician, who, like Mitt Romney, injured his case with his maladroit statements, and did nothing to tone down his ultra-luxe style, which ran to numerous houses and mansions, ski chalets whose stones were imported from England, and yachts.

In 2008, two controversial yet much lauded icons made their long-planned bids for national power, one being the war hero John McCain, who had been tortured by the Vietnamese for several years in the late 1960s, and the other the feminist heroine Hillary Clinton, who had been tortured perhaps even longer by Bill Clinton's betrayals (which made her fans love her the more). Both had been planning their runs since 2000, when Hillary was elected to the Senate from New York and McCain had been narrowly (and bitterly) beaten for the nomination by Bush.

They had become friends, and were looking forward to running against each other, when they were blindsided by the hurricane known as Obama, who ran less as a pol than a homegrown messiah, a fashion statement, a brand name, a mystical symbol of transracial healing, and a secular prophet at once. Known as "The One" and the "black Jesus," he was a force they were wholly unable to cope with, who promised to quiet the rise of the oceans at the same time his canny machine operation was using the caucuses to undermine Clinton. His dual appeal as a wine-track academic and the first nonwhite major contender let him steal Clinton's constituents from under her nose. He was good, and when even that seemed to flag, he was lucky: When he briefly lost traction in early September, the fiscal collapse sandbagged the Republican party and tipped the election into his lap.

Four years later, his luck would get even better, when out of a dismal field of Republican challengers he drew as a rival not only one who was a subpar politician, but one who was no politician at all. Like Al Gore, Mitt Romney was a political son trying to force himself into a career groove for which he had no innate talent; like Gore, he had authenticity problems; like Kerry, he made no attempt to tone down his lifestyle, which included the $12 million house at the beach, the car elevator, and Rafalca, the wonder horse; like Kerry, who "voted for the bill before he voted against it," he impaled himself on his own verbiage, with phrases such as "self-deportation" and the "47 percent." With opponents like these, you may not need allies, and Obama cruised to his second-term win.

As we are told, liberals and conservatives both live in bubbles, in which their networks, their blogs, and their print publications shut out the fresh air of dissent and contention. But there's another bubble that both groups live in, where ideology counts for too much. They obsess over epic battles—big vs. small government, Keynes vs. Hayek, the state vs. markets—and assume that most people think likewise, and that every win they rack up means a total commitment, and that the public has thrown in on their side. But the people think differently. They care for results, not for theories; they never heard about Keynes and/or Hayek; they don't care about theories of large or small government; they simply want something that works. If theory X works, they will be grateful and reward its proponent. If not, they will drop him and back theory Y. If theory Y works, they will stick with that for a while; if not, they will move on to the next name on Angie's List, and keep going as long as it takes.

This divergence in outlook—religious conversion vs. Angie's List shopping—explains the sharp, sudden swings such as 1992-1994, 2004-2006, and 2008-2010, when voters blew up what ideologues had mistaken for realignments, on grounds of malpractice or worse. Ideologies didn't lose the voters' confidence, presidents lost it. Ideologies don't win elections, candidates do. This is why these internecine Republican battles—moderates vs. conservatives, the establishment vs. the Tea Party—are both one-dimensional and counterproductive, ignoring such elements as temperament, intellect, balance, and humor, which do not fall out upon ideological lines. Christine O'Donnell, Richard Mourdock, Tim Scott, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio are all Tea Party people and could not be more different. Barry Goldwater was a movement conservative who lost millions of votes from within his own party; Ronald Reagan was a movement conservative who lured millions of Democrats across party lines. Republicans need fewer autopsies and panels of pundits and poohbahs, and more entrepreneurship by their new class of political comers, who will rebrand, redefine, and rebuild their party, by their own exertions, themselves.

Political talent is both the best thing to have and the hardest to come by, as it can only be groomed, and not made. If will, money, grit, and a high level of linear intelligence were sufficient to get it, Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton would have been president, since if one could learn how to have talent, they would have learned it; and if one could pay money for it, it would have been bought. They thought ahead, planned, schemed for eight years, talked themselves hoarse and worked themselves silly, gave Obama a run for his money—and lost. They had the words, and none of the music, so they lost to a man who had all the music, and was better with words than with deeds. Candidates matter. They become the party; they give it their face, and they give its ideology their tone and their cadence and voice. If you want to win a political contest, it helps to have a good politician. Which is easier wished for than done. ♦

Special Operators at Work

Training the Afghan Local Police

EXCEPT AS NOTED, ALL IMAGES: SOJTF-AFGHANISTAN / RICHARD RZEPKA

Afghan Local Policemen receive certificates after completing a 21-day training program run by NATO Special Operators.

By Willy Stern

Undisclosed location in Afghanistan

Meet Captain John (last name not allowed). He's a bearded, thoughtful, and articulate young Army Green Beret. Since last summer, he's lived in a tiny, rough compound in the remote village of Shagowlay, in the Qarah Bagh district of Ghazni Province. That's Nowhere, Afghanistan.

John tells a story: In the dusty, scorching summer of 2012, he and 11 Special Forces colleagues showed up, wearing Kevlar vests, helmets, and carrying a lot of weaponry. The Taliban owned the village. "A young boy walked up to us and asked, 'Are you crazy?'" The kid's point was well taken. What could 12 American Green Berets do in the face of the many hardened Taliban fighters rooted into Shagowlay?

The going was nasty at first. John's team had a fight on its hands. A vicious fight. One of his buddies suffered a head injury; another, nasty shrapnel wounds. "There was a lot of activity," says the understated captain. "They threw just about everything you can think of at us." I ask for specifics: Are we talking snipers, RPGs, small-arms fire, IEDs, mortars? "Yeah," says John. Well, okay then.

John had a couple of aces in the hole. One, his team planned to stick around. And that skeptical local boy didn't

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count on John and his buddies training an effective Afghan Local Police unit. John continues his story: "Totally different today. We are invited to homes. We meet with the village elders. We have friends. We eat goat together." How about that scared kid from last summer? "Now we go out and play soccer with the kids."

Amid the messy, violent, and untidy state that is Afghanistan today, here's a functional story. It's about the unlikely but profoundly strong connection between the NATO Special Ops community and its partner on the ground, the Afghan Local Police (ALP). Slowly, quietly, but with deadly effectiveness, these two groups are chucking insurgents out of Taliban strongholds all over rural Afghanistan and bringing in stability, order, and economic development.

A coalition mentor breaks bread with tribal elders in Herat.

NATO Special Operators and friend

This story, in detail, hasn't really been told. Why not? Well, it involves those bearded, tough-as-railway-spikes dudes in the Special Ops community: Army Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and Marine Corps special operators. These guys are kicking down doors and killing hardened Taliban fighters in multiple missions every night in Afghanistan. They own the dark, and don't normally seek publicity; in fact, they slink away from anybody with a notebook in hand. But they are doing something extraordinary now in Afghanistan. So they decided to lift up their skirts—a bit anyway—and let a journalist take a peek inside their operations. This is their story.

First, the characters. The special operators are among the best of our armed forces. They were the first into Afghanistan, shortly after 9/11, and they remain in force there—more than 12,000 boots on the ground. They hang up their battered helmets at night in discreet corners of obscure bases and don't exactly advertise their presence.

Like Captain John, they have the intellect of Yale grads without the pomposity; the fitness of elite triathletes without the vanity; and a can-do, don't-screw-with-me attitude. They are lean, mean killing machines but also polite, modest, and respectful to a visiting scribe over many a meal. They have spent most of the last 10 years away from loved ones but don't complain (much). They are Type A to the hilt, but surprisingly subtle, and would dearly like to kick some Taliban arse in Afghanistan. One thing is certain: They didn't come to Afghanistan to lose. They make little money yet wouldn't trade what they do for any job on this planet. They operate in the shadows. They seek no acclaim for what they do. And they live, work, and train closely with the Afghan Local Police, the other heroes of this yarn.

The ALP has been ruthlessly hammered in the court of public opinion. Witness a *Los Angeles Times* report that the ALP has "a worrisome reputation for corruption and brutality." Or the *New York Times*, whose own headline screamed of "Abuses by Local Afghan Police Forces." Or Human Rights Watch, whose own shrill report spoke of "murderous tribal vendettas, targeted killings, smuggling, and extortion," as well as frequent rapes "of women, girls, and boys." Oh my.

The Special Ops community begs to differ. I spent a good chunk of time roaming around Afghanistan with the Special Ops community at a variety of secret locations that I've been asked not to name. I met with everybody from the enlisted ranks up to generals—Afghan, American, and coalition Special Forces partners from places like Romania and Australia. I was allowed into private sessions and shown the Joint Operations Center. The JOC, as it's known, has some 20-odd screens displaying real-time operational data about units all over the country.

A side note here on media ethics: We have eyes-in-the-sky in Afghanistan. When our Special Ops call in a precision airstrike and a Hellfire missile conveniently exterminates a Taliban commander with no collateral damage, you can see it all on the screen. Our special operators—men *and* women, mind you—can also see the Taliban showing up soon thereafter and scattering kids' toys around the kill zone, or showing up to plant other "evidence" that would lead people to

believe innocents have been killed. Their intent is to trick gullible journalists from both the Afghan and Western news agencies into telling a horrific story of civilian casualties. You can't blame the Taliban for trying, but wouldn't you think the AP and BBC would be too shrewd to fall for this nonsense? The special operators share some blame; for reasons to some degree beyond their control, they have done a second-rate job in sharing their side of the story.

These special operators are far from perfect. Ditto for the missions they go on. War is messy. There are, at times, civilian casualties, which we fess up to. But here's a news flash: The Taliban kill far, far more innocents than we do. These special operators are relentlessly aware of who they are and the problems they face, and are constantly trying to improve their tactics by way of protecting civilians. Two U.S. Army officers set the tone, Major General Tony Thomas and his deputy commander, Brigadier General Donald Bolduc. In charge of what? The military loves long-winded names, and these no-nonsense generals lead the NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan, known by its acronym, NSOCC-A.

A Special Forces commander responds to small arms fire.

Gen. Donald Bolduc, left, and Special Ops colleague

TOP: PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS CLAYTON WEIS

After 48 hours of travel, I arrived at the first Special Ops base after midnight, reeking like a piglet, and ran into a distinguished gent in casual dress in the hallway. Later I learned this was Gen. Thomas. This Army Ranger has had a superlative 33-year military career, and served closely with (retired) Gen. Stanley McChrystal in the Special Operations community for more than a decade. I heard a lot of nice things about Thomas from his troops in days ahead when nobody was being careful what he said; Thomas left the next day for meetings with allies in Brussels, so I can't tell you much more of him. The focus here will be on his second-in-command, Gen. Bolduc, a fact that will no doubt embarrass a man who habitually credits others. But it's Bolduc who fills up my notebooks.

Bolduc is unlike any general I've ever met. He grew up on a New England farm, was the first in his family to go to college, and traced the long arc from private to general. He seems to get by on three hours' sleep, appears fitter than SEALs half his age, is a toe-tapping hard charger—a raconteur who never stops talking, whether the topic is his mom's homemade maple syrup, or being caught out in a cornfield under a relentless barrage of enemy fire. He is the sort that compulsively runs towards incoming bullets. Gen. Bolduc is revered by his troops and his Afghan partners. After six hard years in country, he is steeped in Afghan culture. You can't help but like this guy, especially after he hops up onto the StairMaster next to you, plugs in his earbuds, turns on his music, and sings loudly along to ridiculously sappy music.

Although Bolduc doesn't much like the characterization because he doesn't have an ounce of pretension in his slight, wiry frame, he's something of an intellectual. He spent years reading in his hooch deep into the night, immersing himself in counterinsurgency campaigns from conflicts past—think Algeria, Oman, El Salvador, and so on. More to the point, he was part of a tiny group of warrior-scholars who figured out which doctrines worked and then developed a plan to apply these winning strategies to the dysfunctional culture of Afghanistan.

Their solution? The most effective fighting force you've never heard of: the Afghan Local Police. Yes, that same group that Western media and human rights agencies have weighed and found wanting. Oh yeah, there's someone else who doesn't like the ALP: Mohammed Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Mullah Omar says this of the ALP, speaking in Dari, of course: "The Islamic Emirate [the insurgency's name for Afghanistan] has made the annihilation of those social germs [the ALP] the priority of its military activities." Explains the plainspoken Bolduc as a huge grin spreads over his gaunt face, "If our enemy says crushing the ALP is their

number one priority, I'd say that's a pretty good sign we're doing something right."

Bolduc and his Special Ops planners looked out over the unstable turf that's Afghanistan and came to realize they had five massive problems to solve: (1) No Afghan ruler, ever, has been able to effectively rule the thousands of tiny and not-so-tiny villages scattered across this beautiful country. There was simply no connection between much of the country's population and its so-called federal government. (2) The Taliban were relentless in taking advantage of this vacuum, forcing themselves into these villages and establishing bases of power. This is the same Taliban that will bury a young woman up to her head when she is merely accused of sexual misconduct, and then pelt her to a gruesome death with rocks. Make no mistake: The Taliban are cruel and awful, and widely despised. (3) The villages could best be defended by those who live there, since they would be protecting their homes and loved ones and would be the first to recognize when a troublesome outsider showed up in the village square. (4) The villages needed training, guns, and ammo to fight back. (5) Any Afghan fighting force needed to be able to stand on its own legs as coalition forces continue to pull out.

Gen. Ali Shah Ahmadzai, right, of the Afghan Local Police

The solution Bolduc and company embraced: Village Stability Operations, or VSO, as they're called here. These operations go hand-in-hand with the ALP. Here's how it works: The village *shura*—the community elders who ran the town before the insurgents showed up—wants to get rid of the Taliban. They ask for help. If deemed to be strategically viable, the request for an Afghan Local Police unit is eventually approved by the Afghan federal governement (ministry of interior, to be exact) and by the NATO side as well. Next comes the "clearing" stage. That's the Special Ops euphemism for a strike force going in and using all means at its disposal to kill or capture insurgents in that village. Those that aren't whacked are detained and interrogated.

Then two things happen. The *shura* handpicks trustworthy men from the village to serve in their own Afghan Local Police unit. Our guys additionally vet these men—urinalysis and the whole nine yards. At the same time, a Special Operations team of 12 tough men (with a small support staff) set up shop in the village in a local compound. They eat, live, sleep, and socialize with the villagers. They drink tea. They eat goat. They make friends. They get shot at sometimes. (Often the team is joined by two American female special operators, a "cultural support team." These are highly trained, tough women who mentor and bond with the local gals. They might help set up a rug sewing business or help deliver a baby.)

Back to the Afghan cops. Those policemen nominated by the *shura* go through a 21-day training program and are provided uniforms, Ford Ranger pickups, AK-47 assault rifles, and other goodies. Then U.S. Special Ops teams hump it like hell to put themselves out of a job. They train their ALP partners with the idea that within six to nine months, typically, the 12-man team can move out and the ALP can provide security on their own.

In 32 districts so much progress has been made that the special operators are just keeping an eye on their ALP colleagues from afar. Even better, 17 districts are now totally on their own. An average district will have about 300 ALP guardians. And 104 more districts have been officially approved and are awaiting an ALP force. Another sign of success comes by way of the affable brigadier general Ali Shah Ahmadzai, the courageous Afghan cop in charge of the ALP.

Gen. Ahmadzai served the proverbial three cups of tea in his modest office and explained that his biggest problem arises from the dozens of outlying districts that are lobbying him for ALP forces; with limited resources, Ahmadzai can't come close to meeting the demand. Why is ALP so popular among Afghans? "Security by your own sons [builds] trust between you and your police," explains Ahmadzai. "They provide security. They work in your fields. They pray in your mosque. They serve you." What he is really saying is that the ALP is a classic—and effective—case of bottom-up security.

How does this bottom-up security work? Well, the Afghans run the ALP program. The Special Operations Command only does mentoring, a fact they remind you of about five times a day. There are 21,958 ALP guardians in uniform today. That's enough to protect 20 percent of the population, around 5.8 million people. Plans are to grow the ALP force to 30,000 by 2015. These ALP men guard checkpoints, go on patrols, maintain a presence, and, yeah, still get attacked by the Taliban. How risky is the job? Consider that the ALP has a casualty

rate of 6.2 percent, versus the Afghan National Army's more modest 2.3 percent rate.

Afghan men of all ages and backgrounds nonetheless line up for ALP jobs, and attrition is low. To be sure, the guns and trucks are a nice incentive. So too is the $125 monthly pay, and the $65-per-month food stipend. That's a sweet pile of change in a remote village where owning 10 goats makes a man rich. Still, the ALP is relatively cheap; it takes $6,000 a year to put an ALP cop in the field; it costs six times that to field an Afghan National Policeman. Okay, enough stats.

There are other positive signs. RAND Corp., the nonprofit that does much defense-related work, has been studying the ALP for some time. How effective is the ALP? Rand associate economist Daniel Egel, a specialist in program effectiveness in conflict-prone countries, explains: "Overall, we've seen consistent, modest, but statistically significant improvements in terms of the security environment, governance, and economic activity." The RAND data show that "kinetic activity"—that's Army-speak for the good guys and the bad guys trying to kill each other with small-arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, snipers, you name it—generally declines within 12 months after the Special Ops teams show up in a village.

Afghan Local Policemen preparing for village patrol

Bolduc leans heavily on RAND analysts. They sit outside his office and have been known to offer less-than-rosy assessments. Bolduc is like David Petraeus that way—bringing in smart outsiders for a fresh look at what he's doing right, and wrong. Outside agencies have taken note. USAID now partners with ALP. The do-gooders at the International Committee of the Red Cross now provide training to the ALP in the basics of human rights law and first aid. But Robin Waudo, Kabul-based spokesperson for the ever-neutral Red Cross, said these programs "cannot be seen as a vote of confidence or endorsement by the ICRC but a necessary part of our work to protect the victims of the conflict."

Of course there are problems. Virtually all ALP cops are illiterate. They enter the fray in nasty Taliban strongholds with only three weeks' training. A 30-year-old Afghan male has spent his entire life in a war zone—surrounded by ruthless cycles of death and violence; he'll never become Sheriff Andy Griffith of Mayberry. They make bad mistakes. I heard one senior ALP commander tell Bolduc proudly that his guys had "beaten the crap" out of a suspicious fellow who was writing down license plate numbers. Bolduc quickly reminded his counterpart, "You can't go around beating the crap out of people." The mentoring continues.

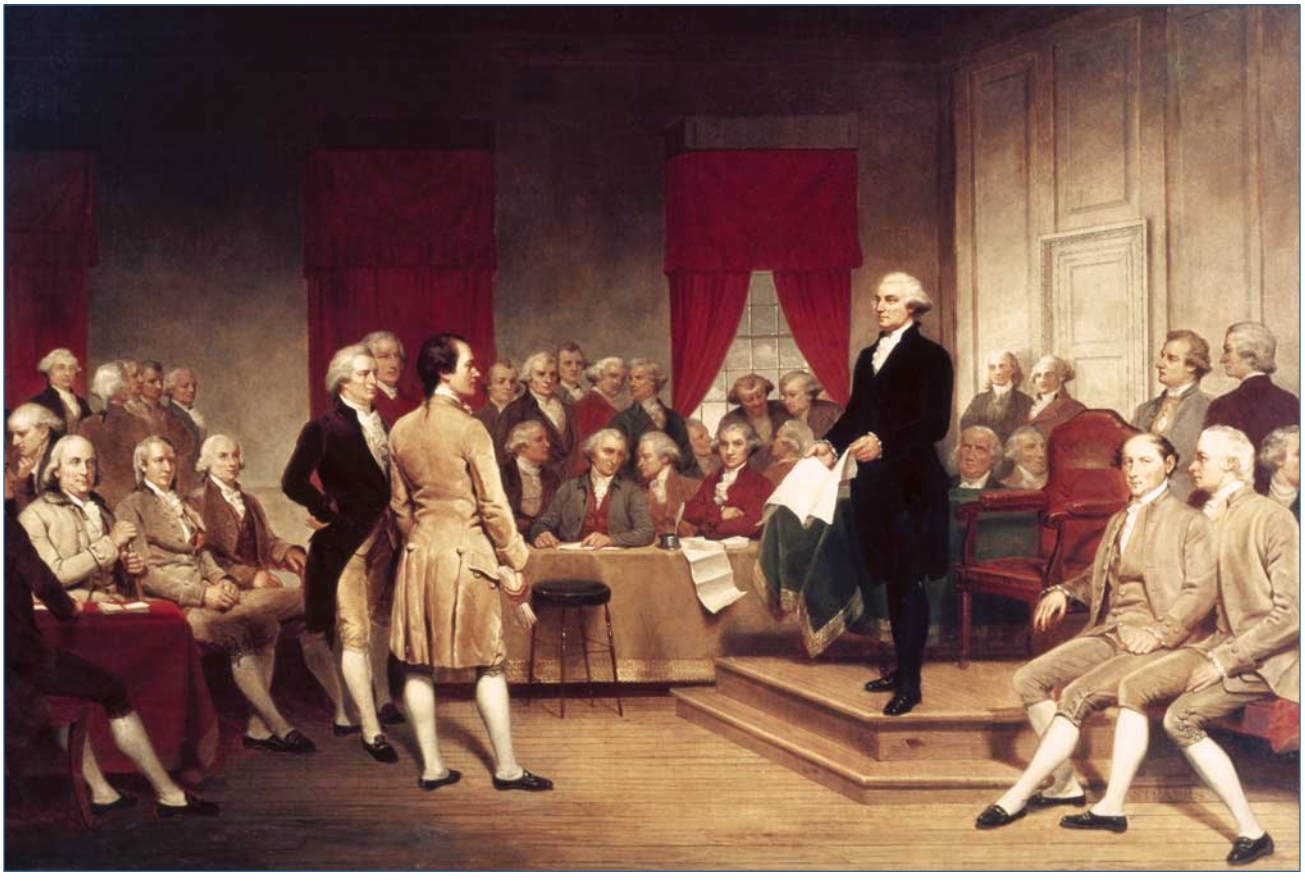
When ALP guardians step over the line, the case is supposed to be investigated and perpetrators brought to justice. Last November, four unbalanced ALP cops from Kunduz Province were convicted of raping an 18-year-old Afghan woman; they were sentenced to 16-year prison terms. There have been many other documented cases of abuse by ALP guardians, cases that the *New York Times* and other media harp on. The *Los Angeles Times* further reports that the ALP has "a shady reputation" and "has been implicated in human rights abuses and criminal activity."

Nobody at NSOCC-A headquarters will speak ill of the media. But I can. Why do the Western media fixate on the ALP's shortcomings? Could our left-leaning scribes be just a tad obsessed with taking potshots at the U.S. Special Forces community and their Afghan partners?

Major General Thomas and Brigadier General Bolduc are well aware of the challenges, past, present, and future. The ALP's gains are fragile. The Taliban are in Afghanistan for the long haul. The NATO military footprint in Afghanistan post-2014 is a question mark. Bolduc says the ALP is funded for years to come, but who really knows? With President Hamid Karzai, the NATO special operators are faced with the curse of the unreliable ally. Recall that the mercurial Karzai in February unceremoniously chucked all U.S. Special Forces out of the strategically key district of Nerkh, in Wardak Province. This is significant militarily since Wardak is the gateway to the capital; Wardak is often called here the "soft underbelly of Kabul."

Why would Karzai boot out his allies and protectors? Is he already hedging his bets—i.e., cozying up to the Taliban a bit—as he looks towards the April 2014 Afghan elections? General Ahmadzai, the brutally honest top ALP commander, told me that Karzai "gets his information from lots of sources, and is about 80 percent committed to the ALP." In the years ahead, might the ALP revert to unregulated militias, answerable to local, if brutal, warlords? Yes, real risks remain.

Still, given all the challenges, what the Special Forces have accomplished with the Afghan Local Police is awfully impressive: not perfect but pretty damn good. ♦



'George Washington Addresses the Constitutional Convention' by Junius Brutus Stearns (1856)

A Little Learning

The left-wing contribution to the shouting match. BY JOSEPH KNIPPENBERG

There is a genre of books about politics written by ideologues on both sides of the divide. Their aim is to inform their fellow partisans about the misinformation, misdeeds, and malign intentions of the people on the other side, offering talking points to rally the troops for the next confrontation. The authors are often prominent media figures—Glenn Beck, for example. To tell the truth, I don't pay much attention to them: Not only is my blood pressure too high already, but soundbites are really for television and radio, not for books.

Joseph Knippenberg is professor of politics at Oglethorpe University.

Wrong and Dangerous
Ten Right-Wing Myths About Our Constitution
by Garrett Epps
Rowman & Littlefield, 232 pp., $24.95

Wrong and Dangerous, written for "ordinary Americans" (at least those who regard today's conservatives as the natural heirs to Anti-Federalists, slavemasters, racist ideologues, and neo-Nazis, among others), is a left-wing contribution to this canon. Law professor Garrett Epps joins conservative talkers and liberal pundits in excoriating his opponents and offers a patina of scholarly respectability (there are footnotes, by golly!) to arguments and assertions that would be at home any hour of the day on MSNBC. I only hope for the sake of Rowman & Littlefield—a respectable scholarly publisher that has not added luster to its list with this volume—that the book sells better than MSNBC draws.

Epps's particular contribution to the shouting match—it's not really a debate, since he says that "when engaging conservative arguments [I've thought] I was talking to people who simply did not live on the same planet as the rest of us"—is his focus on the Constitution, a focus elicited in some respects by the self-conscious (if not always well-informed) constitutionalism of the Tea Party (the

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"lunatics [who] have taken over the conservative asylum"). What we have here, in other words, is an accessible version of "progressive" constitutionalism taking shots at what it regards as the most serious—or is it the easiest?—targets offered by its opponents. Not for him or his readers is the sophisticated (or sophistical) doctrinal legerdemain of the law reviews; for better or worse, he offers us the words of the Constitution and a rather self-serving version of the historical record.

Underlying it all is Epps's progressive constitutionalism, which can be summarized as follows: The Constitution is a flawed document, drafted to respond to the pressing exigencies of 1787, the chief of which was the weakness of the central government. The amendments have for the most part improved it by making it more democratic and egalitarian. Among those amendments, the Fourteenth has pride of place. As amended, the Constitution is the people's document, expressing their wish to promote the general welfare by pretty much whatever means they regard as appropriate at the moment. To be sure, the Constitution does contain limits, but those limits have to be read sensibly and rarely obstruct what the federal government wishes to do on the people's behalf.

Epps scoffs at those who regard the Constitution as a charter of limited government, preferring to emphasize the "general welfare" and "necessary and proper" clauses of Article I, Section 8 and asking how anyone could regard the laundry list of powers granted to Congress as reflecting anything other than the intention to empower the federal government. In his scheme, states are wayward children, to be trusted as little as possible and supervised very closely.

I would prefer to focus on the contrast between the opening words of Article I and Article II, the former referring to "all legislative powers *herein granted*" and the latter simply to "the executive power." How can the first formulation not imply that there are legislative powers *not* "herein granted"? Placed in this context, the list of powers granted points by implication to those not granted, and those reserved, in the words of the Tenth Amendment, to the states or the people. There may thus be powers that some government could exercise regarding some area of policy that is not within the purview of the federal government, regardless of how intimately connected some of us think they are with "the general welfare." The democratic will of the people would not necessarily sweep everything before it. States might fashion policies not available to the federal government in order to promote the general welfare of their citizens.

Epps seems to have a hard time with this distinction. For him, a stronger federal government—which I willingly concede that the Framers wanted—can only mean a government with the power to promote the general welfare in virtually any way the people want. He does not consider the possibility—much closer, I think, to what the Framers had in mind—of a government that is strong enough to be successful in achieving the limited ends left to it by the Constitution.

Of course, I do not regard a few lines here as dispositive of the issue; I mean only to indicate that matters are not as simple as Garrett Epps makes them seem. Indeed, in this respect, he mirrors some of the oversimplifications of his targets. Rather than laying the groundwork for a reasoned consideration of the issues, he simply provides ammunition to one side and prolongs the shouting match.

One more example of his method will suffice. In his discussion of religion and the Constitution, Epps takes as his target the hucksterish David Barton, who relentlessly popularizes the notion of the United States as a "Christian nation." Epps is right that Barton needs to be discredited, but he is hardly the man to do it, for all he would do is replace Barton's exaggerations and distortions with his own. For Epps, the criticisms of Thomas Jefferson's "wall of separation"—a distinction that was read into the First Amendment by Justice Hugo Black in his 1947 *Everson* opinion—"ignore a historical fact" that, more than a century before Jefferson, the great Baptist dissenter Roger Williams used the same language.

Yes, that is indeed a fact; but its bearing on the matter at hand is far from clear. To be sure, Jefferson was telling the Danbury Baptist Association what it wanted to hear, and James Madison might have had his own reasons for opposing any kind of governmental connection with religion. But there were many equally distinguished Founders on the other side of the question, George Washington and John Marshall among them. More than once, Epps makes a point of arguing against the invocation of the Founders' authority, but when it suits his purposes, he is not above playing the same card.

What is important, in this case as in others, is not what one or another of the Founders thought, but rather what the language meant to those who voted to adopt it in the state legislatures and conventions. Indeed, we have an excellent indication of the meaning of the First Amendment religion clauses to those who proposed them. The First Congress, which proposed the Bill of Rights to the states, also re-passed the Northwest Ordinance. Rather inconveniently for Epps's argument, the Ordinance contains the following language:

> Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.

Whatever the prohibition of "laws respecting an establishment of religion" means, it was thought by those who voted for it to permit public support for schools that teach morality and religion. While Epps might prefer that the plain language of the Constitution squarely support his favored position (and squarely oppose the positions he does not like), it is not that simple. That the proponents of the "Christian nation" thesis are wrong (as they surely are) does not make the strict separationists right (as they just as surely are not).

Epps regards those with whom he disagrees as "not living on the same planet." He is right. There are, indeed, some fantastic elements in their constitutional world—nullification, for

example, and the assumption that if senators were elected by state legislators we would make great progress in restoring the balance between the states and the federal government. But sober students of the Constitution do not inhabit Epps's planet, either, as I hope I have begun to demonstrate. Furthermore, they do not have to resort to name-calling, exaggeration, and distortion to correct the misapprehensions of Tea Party constitutionalists.

The Constitution deserves a central place in our political discourse. Of course, partisans on both sides will always be tempted to find what they want in it. If there is no better antidote to partisanship on one side than on the other, then we are in much worse shape than I had thought. I would be quite happy if sound education would correct the fallacies of the partisans on both sides. Garrett Epps's effort gives me less confidence about the prospects that we can teach and learn our way out of this conundrum. ♦

B&A

Little Boy Blue

The brief, unhappy transit of Lorenz Hart.

BY KATE LIGHT

Alec Wilder met Lorenz Hart in 1942, while listening to Mabel Mercer at Tony's on 52nd Street in New York. At the time, Hart was working on *All's Fair*, to become *By Jupiter*, his last show with Richard Rodgers. Years later, Wilder would write:

> [Hart] told me that all his lyrics were concerned with character delineation and plot. He considered a lyric that ignored either of these to be unprofessional and untheatrical.

Gary Marmorstein, author of this new biography, explains that Hart's words were "revelatory for Wilder, who was used to hearing the Rodgers & Hart songs unmoored from the contexts of their shows." Those of us—that would be *most* of us—weaned, like Wilder, on unmoored Hart may now experience re-hitching the songs to the shows, and to the life. To imagine that this great master of wit and love felt pangs as each song left its family of character and context is to imagine only one of his varieties of loneliness.

A Ship Without a Sail
The Life of Lorenz Hart
by Gary Marmorstein
Simon & Schuster, 544 pp., $30

Unmooring song from show, for theater writers, is both a blessing and curse. Let's say a song enters the ranks of "standards"—as from Rodgers & Hart's shows, one to four typically did. ("Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" and "I Could Write a Book" from *Pal Joey*; "The Lady Is a Tramp," "Where or When," "I Wish I Were in Love Again," and "My Funny Valentine" from *Babes in Arms*; "This Can't Be Love" and "Falling in Love with Love" from *The Boys from Syracuse*; "There's a Small Hotel" from *On Your Toes*, to name a few.) Writers must then stand by as layers of context, subtext, and irony they had carefully built in are swept aside and the song begins its new, lone, yet thrilling, life.

Hart's own life was thrilling, until it wasn't. "Somewhere along the line," Alan Jay Lerner wrote, "there obviously did come a time when the joy of his professional success became drowned in the lost misery of his handicapped life."

Possessed from a tender age of breathtaking creativity ("pinwheel brilliance," Rodgers called it), Lorenz (Larry) Hart was born in Harlem in 1895. His father, Max, was a "career con artist" who was boorish and unstable, his ventures ranging from scheme to scam: kiting checks, signing his wife's name to shady deals, possible arson. Hart's mother, Frieda, was seemingly devoted and fun-loving, though not fleshed out in this book, and she lived with him until her death in 1943. Teddy Hart, a younger brother, was a character actor; Larry wrote *The Boys from Syracuse* for him. The brothers shared a bedroom until Teddy Hart married in 1938.

Teddy and Larry Hart grew up on Byron, Yeats, Shakespeare, and Gilbert & Sullivan, and attended the Irving Place Theatre (where they saw shows in German) and Yiddish theater. Adolescent Larry Hart wrote song parodies, short stories, and summer camp musicals, already combining classical references with contemporary ones. He enrolled in Columbia's School of Journalism, and then dropped out. Fluent in German and English, he translated for United Plays, earning $50 a week. (One such translation was Molnár's *Liliom*, later adapted into *Carousel* by Rodgers and Hammerstein.) After the First World War, Hart, then 23, was introduced to 17-year-old Richard Rodgers. "The boys" got to work, but as Hart eyed the liquor earlier and earlier in the day, Rodgers's mother predicted, "That boy won't be alive five years from now."

Their output, with shows running in the United States and in Europe, was jaw-dropping. In 1926, *Lido Lady* opened in London and *Peggy-Ann* in New York, along with *Betsy Kitsel* for Ziegfeld and *The Girl Friend* written with Herb Fields. In 1927, *One Damn Thing After Another* opened in London; *A Connecticut Yankee* opened here. Soon, Hollywood entered the mix.

Marmorstein's research is thorough. The early lyrics, with which he is impressively familiar, exude Hart charm; but the 1920s (*Connecticut Yankee* excepted) were awash in tepid plots and

Kate Light, poet and violinist in New York, is the author, most recently, of Gravity's Dream *and the libretto to* Once Upon the Wind.

now-vanished stars—not scintillating reading, though not the fault of the biographer. It's also a handicap that Hart, voluble in life and prolific in scripts and lyrics, left no memoir, no stash of letters, to bring himself back to life. But through a kind of cumulative imagining, the reader's sense of him grows. Many figures here are just . . . figures—and I don't know what might have remedied this. But after a few hundred pages, swept up in the momentum of the story, I didn't mind.

With Richard Rodgers and his wife so often apart, Rodgers's letters home provide snapshots of his work with Hart, revealing a none-too-gracious Rodgers. To Dorothy, in 1937: "Had dinner with the shrimp last night, and hit the hay at a very early hour while he went about his ne*fari*ous (get it?) business." The bigoted tone, just shy of insult, seems his default setting, and not just in private. On Canadian radio, Rodgers was asked whether the boys' music-making ever caused complaints from neighbors. "Whenever someone comes up to complain," Rodgers replied, "I just pick [Hart] up, put a bottle in his mouth, and walk the floor with him. 'Little Junior needs to be fed.'"

"The studio audience roared," writes Marmorstein. "Larry was used to this theme." Indeed, the press harped on Hart's five-foot stature: "Larry Hart has a silk hat that is as tall as he is," quipped Walter Winchell in 1927.

Hart was not writing home, but one's sense of him often comes from his lyrics. In 430 pages, he speaks only a few times, and he left behind very little prose. We see a silhouette of the man, reflected against smoky bars, backstage walls, and murky late-night comings and goings. Finally, replete with hospitalizations and rescues from the gutter, we see his final alcoholic days in heartbreaking detail.

Whatever Hart's chronic evasions, however, the boys cranked out songs in a few days or hours—in hotels, on trains, ships, planes, and in corners of a set. When present and willing, Hart was fluid; he'd prop himself against a piano or a pillar, write a few choruses, then disappear into a bar while the new material was rehearsed. As described in an unsigned *New York Herald Tribune* piece, "To watch Larry Hart write a lyric . . . is to become as exasperated as is possible to a mortal man who is also a writer." Asked to provide another chorus for the title song of *The Girl Friend*, Hart

> seemed to be disappearing behind pieces of the set; while dancers in rehearsal pounded the floor, furniture was being moved, lights were adjusted, and cast and crew were calling out to one another, he would finish the thing in minutes.

Hart and Rodgers, ca. 1930

Pal Joey cast member Stanley Donen reported that Hart, asked for extra choruses for the song "Zip," stepped to the back of the theater and wrote two great ones. He was photographed revising "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" on the mirror in Gene Kelly's dressing room. Hospitalized for alcoholism in 1942, he wrote songs for *By Jupiter* between therapies, with Rodgers at a piano that had been wheeled in once before, for surgical patient Cole Porter.

Opposites in build, temperament, sexuality, and lifestyle, and riding the waves of Hart's drinking, Rodgers and Hart partnered for 25 years. Hart's charms may have been lost on Rodgers, but not so the charms of the lyrics. Evasion-by-humor factored in many an interview: Was it true, a reporter asked in 1940, that they were dissolving their partnership after *Pal Joey*? Rodgers's answer: "We've been parting for 22 years and we still are." Richard Rodgers wrote a lifetime's worth of songs (800) and shows and film scores (more than 30) with Hart. He went on to write another lifetime's worth of shows with Oscar Hammerstein II.

The first partnership did not stop for death, but just short of it; Rodgers had had enough. Hart, the man who hated to be alone, was truly desolate. Between Teddy's marriage, his mother's death, and the misguided dismissal of his live-in cook of 20 years, Larry Hart was sinking fast. In 1943, to Rodgers's credit, having already begun his work with Hammerstein, he asked Hart to revise *A Connecticut Yankee*, producing it himself. Whether the project was meant to take the sting off *Oklahoma*'s success, provide Hart a reason to live, or simply to be a theatrical endeavor, Hart wrote brilliant lyrics for the revamped show, adding "To Keep My Love Alive" (seven choruses, all golden). But on opening night, he had to be firmly escorted from the theater.

These were not easy times to be homosexual. Though there was a gay culture in New York and Hollywood, it was deeply "counter," and Marmorstein, well versed in the social history of the time, handles the subject discreetly and compassionately. One wonders how Hart would have fared in a more tolerant era.

Ultimately, biographies end sadly: Men and women who have done wonderful things become sick and die—but usually after growing old. Hart cut to the chase, straight to deterioration and death, at 48. His last words were, "What have I lived for?" He was, by numerous accounts, funny and imaginative, generous and charming. Many consider him our greatest lyricist: love, life, irony, absurdity, loneliness, and loss, all cloaked in a smoke-and-alcohol haze. Said Hugh Martin, an arranger for *The Boys from Syracuse*, "The great tragedy was that he never found anyone." ♦

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B&A

A Scholar's Journey

From 17th-century Spain to the world at large.

BY JAMES M. BANNER JR.

J. H. Elliott awarded an honorary degree at Alcalá University, Spain (2012)

Historians' memoirs have become a distinct subgenre of the memoir form. They've even been the subject of their own study: Jeremy D. Popkin's *History, Historians, and Autobiography*. But why should historians' memoirs be of interest to anyone, even to historians? Because, in addition to charting the life, thinking, and scholarly contributions of their authors, they shine light into historians' practices, changes in historical thought over time, and the ways particular subjects metamorphose as new knowledge accumulates and generates new questions. They're pieces of the history of historical interpretation—what we call historiography.

The name of John Elliott, the author of this memoir, is not likely to be widely known. Sir John is a kind of historian's historian, a scholar who has made enormous contributions to historical knowledge without having developed much of a public following. Born and educated in Britain, and a member of both the Cambridge and Oxford faculties, he was also long resident in the United States at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. His career exemplifies the increasing passage across the world's oceans of scientists and scholars who hold membership in the international freemasonry of research and thought. He is also among the rare figures who seem both to sniff out intellectual changes in the wind before most others do so and then to embody those changes in their own work. His writings thus represent something of a mirror to their intellectual age: the past 60 years.

History in the Making
by J. H. Elliott
Yale, 264 pp., $26

Like so many other historians' memoirs, *History in the Making* is about its author's intellectual journey, for it's this journey that has left its mark on the world. The book reveals nothing about Elliott's inner life and offers only those biographical details necessary to fulfill his intention, which is to set down one man's effort to make sense of the past—that is, to show, as he puts it, historical knowledge in the making. A scholarship boy at Eton, then a student at Cambridge, he was educated in the days when his alma mater's history requirements were broad. He took an early fancy to 17th-century Spain and to its Catalan province, subjects little covered by British universities when he was a student. Encouraged to pursue his interests, this 20th-century Protestant northerner found "intense personal enjoyment" in "the alien world of the Iberian peninsula." He sensed, even when young, what usually proves to be true: that an outsider to any place and time can bring fresh perspectives to conventional thinking and insiders' assumptions.

Elliott soon found himself, while struggling to master Catalan as well as the history of early modern Spain, embroiled in the intellectual politics of that region, where he resided and studied for a time. While historians may not live the boisterous lives of race car drivers or rock stars, their lives are not always filled with serenity and ease. Much of Elliott's book is taken up with his struggles and frustrations in hunting down records of the century in which the Spanish empire faced off against Louis XIV's France and the emerging British empire, as well as the struggles that Spanish historians (and occasionally Elliott himself) encountered under Francisco Franco's rule. It's a story of unremitting pursuit and, if not full triumph, at least enough success to lead, among many other books, to Elliott's pathbreaking work on the Catalan Revolt of the mid-17th century—and to his later magisterial studies of the count-duke of Olivares and the British and Spanish empires in the

NEWSCOM

James M. Banner Jr. is the coeditor, with John R. Gillis, of Becoming Historians, *a collection of essay-length historians' memoirs.*

three-and-a-half centuries after 1492.

Someone wishing to learn how historians go about their work, how they face and overcome obstacles, how historical knowledge can quickly flow over into current politics, and how accidents as well as planning affect their efforts will find much to learn here.

The story of the life and career that Elliott relates is also a work of history in its own right—not in the conventional sense of an interpretation of parts of the past but, rather, of the history of the growth and transformation of the written history of Spain and its possessions over Elliott's lifetime. To be sure, there's much normal history here, too. Any reader will learn a great deal about metropolitan and overseas Spain during the past five centuries as Elliott takes us through the phases of his career by relating the development of the books he wrote, cowrote, and edited. But what that same reader will also gain is insight into how and why historical thought and interpretation change over time, especially in our era of fleet communication, easy international travel, and global interconnectedness. Elliott's unassuming review of his influential histories surveys many of the historiographical themes that characterize his own and others' works. What is astonishing about Elliott's career is the number of these large issues and emerging scholarly approaches his own work advanced as he pursued his principal interests.

Elliott started out deeply influenced, as many historians continue to be, by Fernand Braudel's *histoire totale*, a typically excessive French term for a genuinely powerful, if robustly contested, idea: that large forces, such as climate, geography, and deep enduring culture affect history more than individuals and passing realities like wars and regimes. Braudel's example led Elliott to sidle from the history of one early modern nation-state into transnational history, the history of "international contacts at every level, and of the mutual influence and interplay of beliefs, values, cultural attitudes and political programmes between two or more societies."

If going beyond individual nations and even regions to investigate the general forces affecting entire continents and large cultures (such as that of Europe) may now seem commonplace in historical thinking, it is due in part to Elliott's own work.

As a scholar of Spain, Elliott was also unavoidably drawn into reflecting on the rise and decline of empires and came up against the problematic explanations given then, as now, about the likelihood of the end of imperial governance and influence. Here, again unavoidably, he found himself part of the community of historians, thinkers, and political figures concerned about the breakup not just of the long-past Spanish empire but also more recently of the British. Permeating this debate in the United States, of course, has been the question of the fate of the world's single remaining imperial power. Elliott's deft chapter on the rise and decline of nations, a chapter thus relevant to us all, is a model of its sort: balanced and open to the many factors bearing in upon the life of powerful imperial nation-states.

A similarly clear chapter on the challenges of comparative history—of which Elliott's major contribution has been *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (2007)—should be must-reading for anyone seeking an introduction to the way in which comparing two nations or empires can yield understanding that a focus on a single one cannot. I regret only that Elliott neglects to point out that comparative history can yield riches at many levels—not just in the comparison of large entities like nations and empires but also of lesser and other things, such as two adjacent towns, different modes of portraiture, or competing manufacturing practices. As Elliott says, comparative history has not yet lived up to its promise; but it may do so if its subjects are broadened while its methods are retained.

You might think that contributions to transnational, imperial, and comparative history would be contributions enough. But then you would fail to take a true measure of Elliott's reach. He has also written a work of the most traditional kind of history, a biography of Olivares. His large body of writings has influenced and become part of the somewhat overworked yet valuable library on Atlantic history, an international effort to write the history of the interactions of people, cultures, tribes, and nations on both sides of a single ocean, from the Arctic to the southern tips of Africa and South America. Elliott's youthful fascination with the art of Velázquez has also taken him into cultural history and the history of art, about which he also writes here.

In none of these ventures has Elliott avoided identifying and trying to overcome the obstacles in his own and others' paths. He is as candid about what he sees as the limitations of his own writings as he is critical of aspects of the larger historical enterprises in which he has been engaged. The book is thus a model of dispassionate reflection on one's own life and work—a book that, while putting himself, as a memoirist must, at the center of things, avoids the self-esteeming claims and overexposure of so many memoirs, even, occasionally, those of historians.

A memoir like this—modest, unadorned, and candid—does not, however, speak for itself. No memoirist can cover every topic he or she may wish, and, of course, most humans are incapable of understanding everything about their own lives. One topic that Elliott might have addressed—and surely he is capable of doing so—is the widely misunderstood matter of revisionist history. If we take the term at its capacious best, then Elliott has been a "revisionist historian" from the start, even if he doesn't devote one of his limpid chapters to that fact. That is, he has altered existing interpretations of the Catalan and Spanish past, consequently challenging others to address his claims, and thus gathering controversy to himself.

Yet there is nothing unusual about this. Too many people associate the term "revisionist" with the left—and, to be sure, the term originated in late-19th-century German Marxist

circles—but, in fact, from the days of Thucydides, and from every point of the ideological compass, historians have tried to substitute their own views, findings, and arguments for those of their predecessors—on the right, left, and in the middle. Most historians, as often unintentionally as by design, have therefore turned out to be revisionist historians. Revisionism is woven into the very fabric of what Elliott himself calls the "elusive enterprise" of trying to pin down the past. Both the delight and importance of historical knowledge is its being unendingly open to new ideas and visions—always unstable, and eternally open to debate.

Were some paradise of agreement about the past ever to emerge, we could be sure that humans had given up thinking. And thus, even a historian as noncombative and nonideological as Elliott has found his work entangled in intellectual and public politics. As Elliott writes, reflecting on both himself and his fellow historians whose work his own has challenged:

> Because of the constant interaction between past and present, national historians consciously or unconsciously shape the image that nations have of themselves, and, by shaping it, become the largely hidden players in the unending drama of the politics of national identity.

This is the fate, and not an unhappy one, shared by all historians—to be unwitting participants, sometimes contestants, in the enduring effort to make meaning of the past. This means always being stuck in the present and trying, through study of the past, to make sense of one's own time, too. ♦

B&A

Fathers and Sons

'Special' children in a less-than-special world.

BY TEMMA EHRENFELD

Every Christmas I receive a charming letter from a college friend I'll call Doug. Because we live far from each other, I have never met his three children. Reading his letters carefully, I could see that one child wasn't flourishing as well as the others. So this past winter, when Doug and I met in person for the first time in years, I wasn't surprised when he told me that this son was "special." On certain tests, the boy is as bright as his siblings, who are racing through honors programs—yet he cannot remember the names of his classmates or teachers. He moves and thinks in slow motion. My mentally agile, talkative friend spends every night poring over homework with a son to whom words are like heavy stones.

Far From the Tree
Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity
by Andrew Solomon
Scribner, 976 pp., $37.50

His condition has a name I hadn't heard. When I asked Doug whether there was any biological understanding of it, he threw up his hands in despair.

American parenthood is becoming more heroic. There are more kids, like Doug's son, with odd, big problems. In the less clear cases, the "special needs" epidemic may be exaggerated, yet the parents are burdened nonetheless. The costs of raising any child seem to be soaring as well.

And parenthood is less taken for granted; whether by choice or circumstance, nearly 1 in 5 American women ends her childbearing years without having borne a child, compared with 1 in 10 in the 1970s, according to a Pew Research Center study of census figures.

So this study of extreme parenting comes at a pivotal moment. After 10 years of interviews with more than 300 families, Andrew Solomon describes the dilemmas, hardships, and joys of raising children with "extraordinary" needs or under extraordinary circumstances, for instance, the progeny of a rape. The book's grand scope, creativity, and style recall the gentlemen-scholars of the 19th century, accumulating data and pondering big ideas in beautiful prose.

Far From the Tree is a love song to parents and parenting (Solomon becomes a father at the end), but it is flawed by wishful thinking and unpersuasive on key points. Solomon comes dangerously close to saying that it's better to have a child with disabilities than one without them: "Life is enriched by difficulty," he writes. "Love is made more acute when it requires exertion." Many of the families he met, he says, "have ended up grateful for experiences they would have done anything to avoid."

While arguing with gratitude seems churlish, life always includes difficulty, and all love requires exertion. Solomon means *more* difficulty and *more* exertion, which is not a mere quibble. The outcome must depend on your starting point, the degrees of stress the situation elicits, and who you are. Solomon's own character and history, which he shares candidly, seem to influence his argument: He is introspective, beloved, wealthy, and well-connected—all examples of the kind of good fortune that may create high expectations for parents.

With much help, Solomon overcame dyslexia and profound depression. However, he chose the topic of parenting children who fall "far from the tree" because his own parents didn't want him to be gay. This vast volume is the end of "a quest to forgive my mother and father for pressing me to be untrue to myself."

The father in question is Howard Solomon, CEO of the pharmaceutical company Forest Laboratories. The author's earlier big book, *The Noonday*

Temma Ehrenfeld is a writer in New York.

Demon: An Atlas of Depression, attributes his depression to the loss of his mother and describes his father's tender round-the-clock care. The parents he interviews are also impressive, no doubt partly because parents who agree to interviews are self-selecting, and also because the book tilts towards Solomon's kind: people with significant resources.

Their voices are moving. "You go into Central Park with a special-needs child, and the other parents look straight through you," one father of a disabled daughter says. "They would never think to come over and suggest that their child could play with your child. I know how they feel, because until Maisie was born, I was one of those people." Solomon wants us to take our child over to play with Maisie because she will have something special to offer—special in a good way, without the quotation marks. He urges us, as parents and as a society, to embrace variety even when it's deeply risky or inconvenient—to let our kids be homosexual, or transgender, say, or rely on sign language.

His argument is clearest in his chapter on prodigies, who often suffer from dyslexia and asthma and acquire language late. Extreme musical ability may actually be the hypersensitivity to sound associated with autism, and taking music away from a child can help relieve his symptoms. Solomon quotes Leon Botstein, a former wunderkind: "If Beethoven were sent to nursery school today, they would medicate him, and he would be a postal clerk."

The problem is that parents don't know how their kids will turn out—whether they'll be miserable Beethovens, just miserable, or happy postal clerks. Solomon's parents often face situations in which helping a child cope may require suppressing a trait, sometimes even surgically, which could cause pain.

Turning differences into difference—much as some in the gay movement have adopted the term "queer"—Solomon calls for a new civil rights movement in which members of the many stigmatized subcultures he describes rally together. "It's time," he writes, "for the little principalities to find their collective strength."

Imagine the Mall in Washington packed with people with all kinds of handicaps—some visible, some not—and, crucially, their parents: The crowd might simply look like humanity. That's Solomon's point, of course, but what exactly would they be marching for? Each of these groups has its own specific "special" needs.

Early on, Solomon points out that his subjects didn't want to be lumped together even in a book: "Deaf people didn't want to be compared to people with schizophrenia; some parents of schizophrenics were creeped out by dwarfs; criminals couldn't abide the idea that they had anything in common with transgender people." It's a comic moment, deeply revealing of his theme that bias is everywhere. Yet does it help people, politically or psychologically, to gather together under the banner of outsiderness or stigma? What we will surely see is more advocacy for the disabled. People with Down syndrome are living into their 50s. The many children diagnosed along the autism spectrum are growing into teenagers. The demands on social services, schools, churches, and extended families will grow.

The parent in this volume I will remember best is Sue Klebold, whose son Dylan seemed normal until his death: "He was a pretty-close-to-perfect child," she says. "He made you feel like a great parent, because he did everything right. . . . He was very malleable." She now thinks that malleability made him vulnerable to his more powerful friend, Eric Harris, with whom he killed 13 people at Columbine High School. The Klebolds stayed in town, where some of the victims' families sued them, but Sue Klebold could speak with people who knew and liked her—and more important, she says, had liked her son. Immediately after the tragedy, she wished that she had never been a mother, but over time, her feelings changed: "I know it would have been better for the world if Dylan had never been born. But I believe it would not have been better for me."

COLUMBIA TRISTAR TELEVISION / EVERETT COLLECTION

The Bundy family of 'Married . . . With Children' (ca. 1997)

In the end, I am most persuaded by my friend's take on Solomon's thesis:

> A lot of people find comfort in "everything is for the best" thinking. Had a disabled child? All for the best. A rocky marriage and divorce? All for the best. A past substance abuse problem? All for the best. I wouldn't stand in judgment on how other people cope with tough stuff in their lives. But from my hard-minded rational core, I'm not sure that anything, good or bad, is "all for the best." My son and I are going to relocate for a couple of months this spring so that he can have 10 weeks of treatments. The costs in time and family disruption are high, and the benefits are quite uncertain. So we'll see. ♦

B&A

Defining Vegetables Down

The more we know about, say, cauliflower, the less we like it. **BY JOE QUEENAN**

Recently I read a story in my local newspaper reporting that high school kids routinely throw out tons of vegetables because the food in their school lunches is so awful. It would seem that the youth of America particularly object to the lettuce.

Purists may argue that school lunches are always fairly repellent, so you cannot really hold vegetables' feet to the fire. But this raises the larger point: Aren't blandness and tastelessness and overall horribleness generally true of vegetables? Wasn't George H. W. Bush on to something when he talked about how vile broccoli is? If the price of being strong to the finish is having to eat your spinach, is it any surprise that so many kids have expressed little interest in being strong?

Although vegetable aficionados (and they are everywhere) may deny it, vegetables are a retrograde, vestigial anomaly in a society where everything else constantly improves. The record is clear. Cars constantly get more fuel-efficient. So do airplanes. And tractor trailers. And ships. This ceaseless improvement is particularly noticeable in the field of consumer electronics. Every six months or so, the iPhone gets a significant upgrade, as does the Droid and the iPod and the iPad. Every time you turn around, someone has come out with a sleeker, faster tablet that can run more apps and take better photos and just generally do more things. Software gets better. Hardware gets better. Apps get better. Life gets better.

Nor is ceaseless progress limited to the world of machines. Shoes keep improving in quality, especially footwear designed to be worn in the great outdoors. Today's running shoes are a million times better than they were a generation ago, and the same is true of basketball sneakers—which actually lend support and cushion the foot from shock, unlike Chuck Taylors of yore.

Under Armour and other perspiration-absorbing products constitute a huge improvement over generic T-shirts. And few would argue that contemporary lingerie is not a vast improvement over the tragic merchandise sold in bygone eras. Girdles? Garter belts? Granny panties? All those sad vestiges of the pre-thong era?

Get serious.

Why, then, is it that vegetables never get any better? Why do vegetables remain so stubbornly bland and awful? And don't try to pretend this is not the case: Who actually likes iceberg lettuce? Who invented lima beans? Are peas not the least ingenious, least culturally rewarding food ever invented? And carrots? Carrots? Are you kidding me? *Carrots?*

As the foregoing makes clear, I hold no brief for vegetables in general, and feel pretty much the same way about legumes and tubers. Yet, lest anyone dismiss me as a crank, I adore fruits of all varieties, gleefully ingesting everything from pygmy bananas to mangoes to kiwis. Every year for my birthday, my wife used to give me a box of bananas shipped out from a San Diego firm specializing in exotic fruit stuffs. No enemy of natural foods am I.

But vegetables are another matter entirely. Vegetables get my goat. Vegetables enrage me. Having devoted years to the study of vegetal cartels, I am struck that incredibly uninteresting perishables like zucchini and okra only hang on in this society because of evil middlemen and corrupt farmers and shadowy oligopolies, and maybe even organized crime—all of which prevent inventors of exciting new vegetables from bringing their products to market. There is literally no other explanation for the continued existence of cabbage in the 21st century. Celery should have died out 300 years ago. Ditto cauliflower, the most repellent of foodstuffs. Yet they have not. Why?

Well, when a maker of a new strain of cauliflower—one you didn't have to drown in cheese to make edible—tried to market his products a few years ago, he disappeared for several months and was subsequently found dead in an Iowa cornfield. I am not ruling out the possibility that murderous vegetarians may have been involved. Neither are the police. The fact is, conscienceless, ideologically twisted vegetarians will do anything to persuade the public that butternut squash tastes better than veal. Anything.

Earlier this year, a deadly frost in California wiped out most of the lettuce crop, making salad unbelievably expensive all over the rest of the country. As a result, restaurants are charging more for salads, and consumers, responding to crushing market forces, are almost certainly eating less of it.

Well, good. Very good. Maybe that will get this country back on the right track. For, as Deepak Chopra once pointed out, sometimes it is the universe that decides for you. In the end, those high school kids are on to something. Don't let the authorities force this stuff down your throat. Don't let the adults make the rules. You show 'em who's boss, kids.

Vote with your mouth. ♦

ELIZABETH WEST

Joe Queenan is the author, most recently, of One for the Books.

B&A

Idiot's Delight

The 'American dream' survives an armed assault.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Wildly successful movie directors often bemoan their successes and say they long for a time when they will be able to just make smaller and more personal films. Then they don't.

George Lucas said it for decades after *Star Wars*, and yet, despite the fact that he could have paid for smaller and more personal films with the loose change in his multi-zillionaire pockets, somehow he just never got around to it. Now that he has sold *Star Wars* and his whole business to Disney for a cool $4 billion, maybe Lucas will. I hope so—at least for the sake of camp, because who knows what inadvertent comedy might emerge from the mind of the writer-director responsible for the worst line of dialogue in motion picture history ("Hold me, Anakin, hold me like you did by the lake on Naboo").

Pain & Gain
Directed by Michael Bay

The Rock, Mark Wahlberg

The latest example of the "I need to make my passion projects" trope is Michael Bay, the unimaginably successful director of the three *Transformers* movies. For the last of those he earned—are you sitting down?—$125 million. Bay is the kind of person who was able to say, without any sense of shame, that he was moved to make *Pearl Harbor* in 2001 after having a really cool dream in which he saw how to film a Japanese bomb blowing up the USS *Arizona* and killing 1,177 Americans. His dream became that movie's "money shot," and the moviegoing public found the feast of destruction Bay was serving up somewhat disquieting: *Pearl Harbor* was a box-office disappointment.

Bay's new passion project is a $26 million movie called *Pain & Gain*, and it does not speak well of Bay that its repugnantly comic depiction of a group of idiot psychopaths who torture and kill people is so personal for him. This overheated, overdone, overstimulated, overdrawn, overlong piece of garbage is based on a completely crazy true story—so crazy that it needs no embellishment. And yet, Bay cannot resist jumping up and down, waving at us, making sure we know he's there with the slow motion and the fast cars and the strip clubs and the flashbacks and flash-forwards. All of it revels in the psychopathy of its lead characters and excuses their evil on the grounds that they had been fooled into seeking a shortcut to wealth by the false promises of the "American dream."

The story is this: In 1995, a Miami businessman named Marc Schiller was kidnapped by four men who knew each other from a muscle gym. For a month, they tortured him and got him to sign documents divesting him of his property and goods. Then they set him on fire and ran over him with a car, but failed to kill him. The hapless Miami police were skeptical of Schiller's story; only a respected private eye named Ed DuBois realized Schiller was telling the truth. The gang moved on to kill others before it was finally rounded up.

The movie version tries to turn this grotesquerie into a comment on the "American dream." The ringleader, Daniel Lugo, is played as a kind of unholy innocent by Mark Wahlberg; all he wants is success, and he fixes upon Schiller, here called Victor Kershaw. The depiction of Kershaw is the true outrage of *Pain & Gain*. Tony Shalhoub plays him as a greedy, grasping, vulgar New Yorker with a giant Jewish star dangling from his chest who has Shabbat dinner with his family. "You know who eats salad?" he says. "Poor people."

That Bay is himself Jewish does not excuse the stark anti-Semitism of his portrait of Schiller/Kershaw. Quite the opposite.

Now, it is true that Schiller ended up going to prison for Medicare fraud, though the chief witness against him was one of his kidnappers. Even so, there is no question that he was tortured for 30 days, that Russian roulette was played at the side of his head, and that he had a car driven over his head. Whatever Schiller's crimes might have been, Bay had no moral license to make it appear as though Schiller somehow deserved the unspeakable torments to which he was subjected. Indeed, no one seems to argue in real life that he was anything but a decent husband and father—and someone who cooperated with authorities for years without a thought to the jeopardy in which he might be putting himself.

In the words of Pete Collins, the *Miami New Times* reporter on whose series of articles the movie is based, "Not only had Schiller demonstrated extraordinary courage and endurance in surviving the Sun Gym gang's torture and attempts to kill him, but he later proved to be indispensable in prosecuting the case against his captors."

Pain & Gain is unspeakable. What Bay has done, in his distasteful version of a "small and personal" film, is expose his true passion: for the cheap and pathetic rationalizations he and others use to excuse their contribution to the coarsening of the country whose "American dream" he attacks so facilely—even as he, the man with the $125 million paycheck, is living it every second of every day. ♦

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

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

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