the weekly
Standard

ABSOLUTE, CATEGORICAL LIES
STEPHEN F. HAYES

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Bullet Train to Nowhere

The ultimate California boondoggle

BY CHARLOTTE ALLEN

WEEKLYSTANDARD.COM

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Back to Havana

Everybody's pretty excited about the resumption of commercial air travel between the United States and Cuba. Well, everybody in the media, that is: The Associated Press heralds "a new era of U.S.-Cuba travel," and the *New York Times* tagged along for the maiden voyage, taking note of one passenger who "choked back tears" and exclaimed that "it opens Cuba to the world." There were cheers at the baggage check-in at Fort Lauderdale and cheers when the JetBlue airliner touched down near Havana.

Part of the excitement, of course, is that last week's inaugural flight was yet another element of President Obama's historic rapprochement with the Castro regime. Obama has sought to end a half-century (and more) of mutual suspicion between Havana and Washington, and The Scrapbook is bound to concede that he has half-succeeded: Official Washington is now treating official Havana like a potential lover, and the Castro dictatorship is responding with its customary hostility and opportunism.

But never mind: As Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said last week, commercial air traffic "opens the door to further exchange between the American people and the Cuban people. We think that's ultimately good for the expansion of freedom and democracy."

Here The Scrapbook must pause to throw a small bucketful of cold water on the runway. To begin with, if commercial travel between the United States and Communist tyrannies were "ultimately good for . . . freedom and democracy," then the Soviet Union would have collapsed several decades before it did. We've lost count of the number of daily flights available between innumerable American cities and Beijing. Indeed, pushing the parallels deeper into the past, there were never any travel restrictions between, say, Washington and Mussolini's Rome or Hitler's Berlin. Commercial trade and tourism have various effects in relations between nations, but the evidence is thin on "the expansion of freedom and democracy."

Air traffic controller in Cuba, back in the day

And the fact is that, despite the official ban on U.S. travel to Cuba, it was never very difficult to make the trip. The enterprising American merely journeyed to Toronto or Kingston or Mexico City, caught the next flight to Havana—and asked the Cuban authorities at the airport not to stamp his passport, please. Which they were happy not to do, since impoverished, Marxist-Leninist, revolutionary Cuba was always (and remains) desperately in need of foreign currency, even in modest amounts.

That's why the argument about the devastating effects of the U.S. economic embargo has always been nonsense: Wealthy Asians and Europeans and Latin Americans have always been free to spend their money in Castro's Cuba and have done so for decades. The persistent poverty, repression, and squalor are exclusively homegrown and will hardly be alleviated by an influx of Yanqui visitors. The question now, as always, is an issue of conscience: In traveling to Cuba, and spending some dollars, do Americans see themselves helping individual Cubans—or contributing to the regime? It's the sort of choice, the kind of freedom, that remains unknown in Cuba. ♦

Something to Sneeze At

The terrible and terrifying news of impending climate-change doom continues to roll in. This week it was a study led by researchers at Britain's University of East Anglia: "Climate Change and Future Pollen Allergy in Europe." The scientists project that, because of rising temperatures and increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, "sensitization to ragweed will more than double in Europe, from 33 to 77 million people, by 2041-2060." So go ahead and add allergy sufferers to polar bears and small island nations on the list of global warming victims.

The eagle-eyed will already have noticed that something is amiss: The number of likely snifflers is quite precise—77 million—but the timetable for achieving that specific number is laughably imprecise, a range of 20 years. The Scrapbook is quite certain that the good professors crunched the numbers correctly, but if you're predicting something will happen sometime in a 20-year window—and a window that opens a quarter of a century from now, at that—perhaps a little rounding would be in order. But, of course, such scientific modesty would undermine the impression of certainty that comes from specificity, however bogus that specificity may be. (Give them this much: At least they didn't say there would be 76,895,352 sufferers.)

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The authors of the study, published in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, make quite grand claims for their work. "Globally pollen allergy is a major public health problem, but a fundamental unknown is the likely impact of climate change," the report begins. "To our knowledge, this is the first study to quantify the consequences of climate change upon pollen allergy in humans." Perhaps, but they are hardly the first (or even second, third, or fourth) to warn of the looming weed-pollen apocalypse. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for example, devotes a whole page of its 2016 *Climate Change Indicators* to the change in ragweed pollen season over the last decade. It is by now well-established that weeds, under the influence of global warming, will grow like weeds.

And not just pollinating weeds. Watch out for poison ivy, too. For a decade, scientists have been warning that climate change will mean a more menacing three-leaved menace—bigger plants, with bigger leaves, and perhaps even with higher concentrations of poisonous oil.

But why all the negativity? If ragweed is spreading, it isn't because climate change is creating conditions that exclusively benefit weeds. An atmosphere rich in carbon dioxide can have a "fertilizer effect." Warmer temperatures can extend the growing season in cool climes. These are assumptions that are built into studies such as the new ragweed report. It's also what goes into the poison ivy predictions—grow the stuff in greenhouse conditions and (surprise, surprise) it flourishes. Those same effects, however, will benefit a wide range of plants. Longer growing seasons and higher levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide have benefited Canadian farmers, who have been able to dramatically expand the acreage they devote to growing corn, soybeans, and other crops that used to flourish only south of the border.

To the extent temperatures change—whether that change is naturally occurring or man-made—there are going to be winners and losers, damaging consequences and beneficial ones. Cool climates may benefit from a little less chill; warm regions may suffer. Yes, in the northern parts of Europe and North America, weeds may expand their range, grow bigger, and give off more pollen. But so, too, will desirable plants enjoy the more-verdant conditions. Why is it that all we hear about are the downside consequences? Perhaps the negatives of climate change will outweigh or overwhelm the positives. But as things stand, we don't hear about the positives; they never seem to enter into the equation.

We are constantly being told that when it comes to questions of climate we must obey Science. Could it be that scientists would enjoy greater credibility if they made a better effort to give a complete picture of the consequences of a warming world, rather than just nurturing the negatives in their own little intellectual hothouses? ♦

A Sext Too Far

Well, the third sexting scandal was the charm. Anthony Weiner's wife, Hillary Clinton aide Huma Abedin, announced she was leaving him last week after the *New York Post* splashed a front-page photo of the former congressman sending provocative shots of himself to an Internet stranger. This time Weiner upped the

Hillary and Huma

NEWSCOM

ante; on the bed next to him in the photo was their sleeping child.

Vanity Fair called Abedin a "feminist hero," though of course the article also made clear that she was also a feminist hero for not leaving the prior two times Weiner was caught on his smartphone with his pants down.

"Abedin put her own desire to work to elect a female president before her own pride, before spending more time with her son, before disarming the firing squad of critics shooting at her for her personal decisions for the last five years," the *Vanity Fair* author writes. Feminists aren't usually as transparent about their desire to see marriage and motherhood take a backseat to politics. As for Hillary Clinton's prospects, just think how empowering it will be for future generations of women to know that being a dishonest buck-raker is no impediment to becoming the most powerful person in America.

Unlike with Abedin's slavish devotion to Clinton, Inc., The Scrapbook doesn't have much to say about her marriage. We presume she was trying to make it work despite Weiner's gross conduct; Weiner's perversion, from what has been reported, at least seems not to have involved physical contact with other women.

Which brings us back to Mrs. Bill Clinton. In contrast with Weiner, the former president has been credibly accused of rape, has had multiple affairs that he's lied about publicly, has almost certainly sexually harassed women, and racked up frequent flier miles on the private jet of Jeffrey Epstein, a wealthy man who pled guilty to soliciting sex from underage women.

Yet we're going on 25 years of Hillary Clinton's being hailed as a feminist hero not just for—apologies to Tammy Wynette—standing by her man, but actually enabling him. She had her husband's paramours dragged into the Rose Law Firm in Arkansas so her partners could threaten them into silence. And when it emerged that her husband was entertaining an intern in the Oval Office, she hit the talk show circuit and blamed not her lecherous husband but a "vast right-wing conspiracy."

What's more, other "feminist heroes" joined in this defense. A reporter at *Time* notoriously said women should bestow sexual favors on Bill Clinton in gratitude for his devotion to the cause of keeping abortion legal. And the passage of time hasn't changed things much. Rebecca Schoenkopf, a writer for *Wonkette*, recently forgave Bill Clinton because it was a less enlightened time "before we started telling them in the '80s, 'hey, that is rape, do not do that.' I can see YOUR NICE GRANDPA doing that, back then."

Despite all this, we're supposed to be cheerleading the election of a woman who willingly subjected herself to the repeated humiliation of her more talented husband's pathological satyriasis to use him as a stepping stone to the White House. If we must measure our "feminist heroes" by political success, we suppose Hillary Clinton qualifies. But by any other yardstick, she sure seems like a bad role model and a terrible person. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

'From our respective positions of rabbi-counselor and former *Playboy* model and actress, we have often warned about pornography's corrosive effects . . . " ("Take the Pledge: No More Indulging Porn," by Shmuley Boteach and Pamela Anderson, *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 31). ♦

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BPA WORLDWIDE

The New Not-Normal

Contemporary English is proficient at tossing up new words or phrases—"vogue words," H.W. Fowler called them, in his classic *Modern English Usage*—that convey less meaning than they seem to but that nonetheless apparently charm the multitudes who use them. Off tongues they come not so much tripping as slurring. Tipping point, outlier, iconic, meme, and more, the job of such words and phrases is to contort precision and, at no extra charge, distort reality. Confronted with the latest of these phrases, "the new normal," I hear gears grind, fingernails break, sight strange foreign objects floating in punch bowls.

A young man crosses the street in a Kim Jong-un shaved-sides hairdo, topknot added, the knot dyed electric blue, white wires connecting him to the smartphone plugged into his ears. "The new normal," one might say, though I think instead it makes more sense to say "the new mildly grotesque." One turns on the Chicago television news and is presented with an angry black activist, commenting on recent murders by black gangs in his neighborhood, saying, "They better get some programs down here fast." Some might call this dependence on searching for federal solutions to local problems "the new normal"; I would prefer calling it "the sad old foolish." A celebrity announces he is transgendering himself. "The new normal?" Better, I should say, "the new hormonal."

"The new normal" is, if you think about it, a phrase imbued with resignation. When one avails oneself of the phrase what one is really saying is, "I guess we might as well get used to this, because there isn't a damn thing we can do about it." I cannot recall "the new normal" ever being used in an approbative way. When confronted by urban violence, lying politicians, men in gray ponytails on walkers, people shrug and mutter "the new normal." When learning of an act of exceptional bravery or impressive altruism or pleasing decency, "the new normal" is not the first phrase that comes to mind. What the phrase "the new normal" actually means is "the new awful."

LEFT & RIGHT, NEWSCOM; CENTER, THE ALL-NITE IMAGES

What "the new normal" chiefly covers is changes in etiquette, dress, relationships, conduct—in short, morals, manners, and customs. One might think these items trivial next to the importance of changes in the law. Montesquieu, the great Enlightenment philosopher, thought otherwise. In his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Montesquieu wrote: "More states have perished by the violation of their moral customs than by the violation of their laws. Not always but often changes in customs precede changes in law." Changes in customs, in fact, generally pave the way for changes in laws.

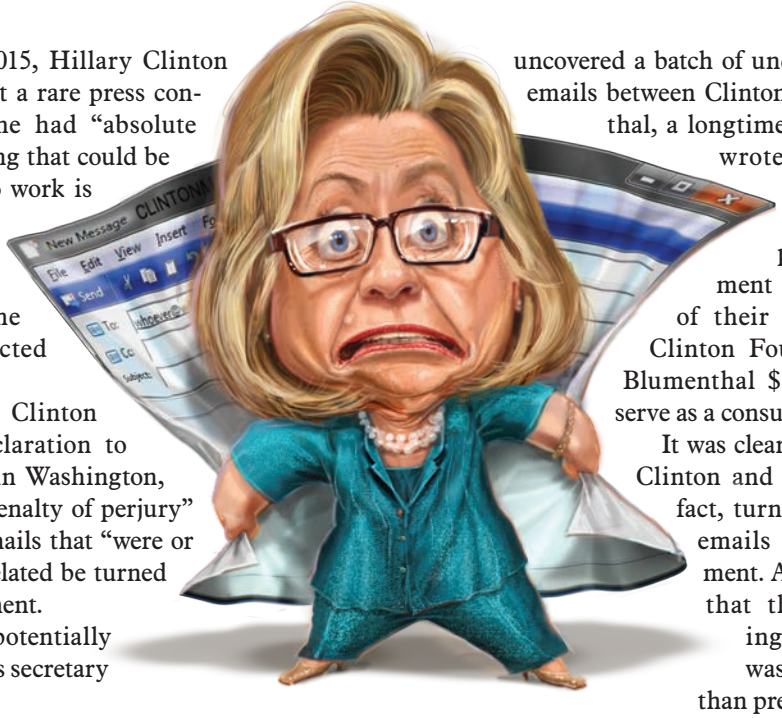
Jihadist attacks in France and Belgium and now in the United States are too often referred to as "the new normal." Yet even to use the phrase in this context is to concede the enemy ground that ought never to be conceded. The killing of innocent people, the chief *modus operandi* of ISIS and al Qaeda, however regular its occurrence, can never be regarded as other than the old ghastly, the behavior of barbarians, the antithesis of civilization. The same holds for blacks killing other blacks along with innocent bystanders in gang warfare, and the deliberate killing of police officers. Nothing normal about it; quite the reverse: It is the far from new heartbreaking. To grant any of this "new normal" status is to be partly resigned to its continuance. More and more regular it may become, but normal—never!

Laws can be blocked, voted down, reversed, vetoed, but changing customs on their way to formation is a trickier matter. One can shift into full crank and rant against them. One can mock them, hoping to laugh them out of existence. The best hope, though, is that they will die out of their own inherent silliness or aesthetic repulsiveness or moral loathsomeness. If the young man wishes to dye his topknot blue, let him. If the old gent wants to retain his ponytail, hey, however pathetic it makes him appear, isn't that his business? The same goes for those who choose to have their faces tattooed, or wear T-shirts that say "Zip Your Fly" and worse, or go about got up in youth-drag clothes hoping to be thought decades younger than they in fact are. May they all find joy in their choices. Let the games begin, let Paris be gay, let a thousand flowers bloom, but let us not, whatever we do, refer to egregious taste, vulgar manners, and offensively aggressive behavior, and especially to the slaughter of the innocent as "the new normal." Widespread as all this ugliness and horror may be, and whatever else one may think of it, normal it ain't.

Joseph Epstein

the weekly Standard

Absolute, Categorical Lies



On March 10, 2015, Hillary Clinton told reporters at a rare press conference that she had "absolute confidence that everything that could be in any way connected to work is now in the possession of the State Department."

No parsing required. Absolute confidence, she said. In any way connected to work.

On August 8, 2015, Clinton submitted a signed declaration to the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., swearing "under penalty of perjury" that she'd directed all emails that "were or potentially were" work-related be turned over to the State Department.

Emphatic. Were or potentially were related to her time as secretary of state.

Then on October 22, 2015, Clinton testified under oath before the House Select Committee on Benghazi. "I provided the department, which has been providing you, with all of my work-related emails—all that I had."

Unqualified, absolute. All that I had.

In May of this year, Clinton told ABC News: "I have provided all of my work-related emails, and I've asked that they be made public, and I think that demonstrates that I wanted to make sure that this information was part of the official records."

Categorical. All of my work-related emails.

Clinton used such unequivocal language on purpose, of course. It was meant to convey certitude about her disclosure of work-related emails, to signal to voters (and reporters) that she was unafraid of being contradicted and, most important, that she had nothing at all to hide.

We know now that her claims were false.

A report by the State Department's inspector general concluded that Clinton had not turned over any of the work-related emails she sent in her first three-plus months on the job, between January 2009 and April 2009. The Defense Department found 19 emails Clinton and General David Petraeus exchanged that were not included in her production to the government. The Benghazi committee uncovered a batch of undisclosed work-related emails between Clinton and Sidney Blumenthal, a longtime Clinton adviser who wrote to share privately sourced intelligence on Libya and other pressing State Department matters. (At the time of their correspondence, the Clinton Foundation was paying Blumenthal $10,000 per month to serve as a consultant.)

It was clear long ago that Hillary Clinton and her team did not, in fact, turn over all work-related emails to the State Department. And in July, we learned that the number of missing work-related emails was exponentially higher than previous reports had suggested. FBI director James Comey stunned even reporters who had long worked on the story when he disclosed just how many Clinton had failed to produce.

"The FBI also discovered several thousand work-related emails that were not among the group of 30,000 emails that were returned by Secretary Clinton to State in 2014. . . . It's also likely that there are other work-related emails that they did not produce to State and that we did not find elsewhere and that are now gone."

How could this happen? Comey concluded that Team Clinton did not intentionally withhold the emails and may well have just missed them because their search wasn't comprehensive enough.

We are skeptical. Is it possible that a search of 60,000 messages might somehow miss a few work-related emails? Sure. A few dozen? Plausible. But several thousand? In a search conducted shortly before Hillary Clinton would launch her presidential campaign and conducted by people employed to protect her interests? Dubious.

Then, this past week, we learned that there was yet another set of work-related emails Clinton had failed to produce. Up to 30 emails related to Benghazi were among those Clinton deleted from her private server. We haven't yet seen those latest emails. The Clinton

GARY LOCKE

campaign is downplaying their significance, arguing that they may well be duplicates of earlier emails posted by the State Department. Perhaps. But there's little reason to take their word for it. Given that the inquiry into Clinton's emails grew out of the investigation into the Benghazi attacks, one might expect that anyone searching for work-related emails would have included Benghazi as one of the most important search terms. Anyone searching for work-related emails whose goal was to find them, anyway.

It doesn't take much guesswork to understand why Hillary Clinton set up a private email server and why she has lied so aggressively ever since: She didn't want her emails available to the American people. In an email exchange back in 2010, Clinton herself cited that as the reason she did not want to use State Department email. When top aide Huma Abedin suggested "putting [Clinton] on state email" or providing her email address to State Department officials, Clinton wrote back to say: "Let's get separate address or device but I don't want any risk of the personal being accessible."

Clinton didn't provide that one. That email—with a top State Department official about State Department business and concerning the very email set-up that investigators were seeking to learn more about—was not included in the emails that Clinton considered "in any way connected to work."

She got away with it. And, as regards the latest revelations, she will get away with it again.

—Stephen F. Hayes

Studying the Unstudiable

There are two ways to challenge politically correct orthodoxies. One is to toss off outrageous remarks designed to *épater les bourgeois*. This requires little and accomplishes less. The other is to take the commanding orthodoxy, put it under a microscope, and dismantle it piece by piece. This is what Lawrence Mayer, an epidemiologist trained in psychiatry, and psychiatrist Paul McHugh have just done to the regime of gender and sexuality politics.

In a lengthy report for the journal the *New Atlantis*, Mayer and McHugh survey a broad expanse of the scientific literature on gender and sexuality and demonstrate that much of what has been foisted on the culture in recent years in the name of science has little solid basis in scientific research. Their conclusions: (1) "The understanding of sexual orientation as an innate, biologically fixed property of human beings—the idea that people are 'born that way'—is not supported by scientific evidence." And (2) "The hypothesis that gender identity is an innate, fixed property of human beings that is independent of biological sex—that a person might be 'a man trapped in a woman's body' or 'a woman trapped in a man's body'—is not supported by scientific evidence."

It may sound modest, but this is earth-rumbling stuff.

The Mayer-McHugh report is important for a number of reasons, beginning with what it is not. It is *not* a political document. "This report is about science and medicine," Mayer writes in the preface. "Nothing more and nothing less." If anything, the authors' primary concern is to serve the non-cisgendered and non-heteronormative: "I strongly support equality and oppose discrimination for the LGBT community," Mayer writes before dedicating his work on the report "to the LGBT community, which bears a disproportionate rate of mental health problems compared with the population as a whole."

It is also *not* a prescription. Mayer and McHugh are primarily concerned with establishing the boundaries of scientific knowledge—with making clear what we know and what we do not yet know. And to the extent that they offer suggestions, these are almost exclusively about where more research is needed and how such work might be more effectively focused.

The dominant mode in the report is humility rather than authority—of winching in extrapolations and interpretations and reminding readers that science doesn't always say what you want it to.

For instance: In 2014, Mark Joseph Stern wrote in *Slate* that "homosexuality, at least in men, is clearly, undoubtedly, inarguably an inborn trait." But this isn't true. For one thing, it can be hard even to define "homosexuality" in a scientifically rigorous manner. And once you work your way out of that cul-de-sac, the scientific evidence—as distinct from the political projections—is incredibly tangled. In 1991 neuroscientist Simon LeVay demonstrated some brain differences between homosexual men and heterosexual men. But even he cautioned, "It's important to stress what I didn't find. I did not prove that homosexuality is genetic, or find a genetic cause for being gay. I didn't show that gay men are 'born that way,' the most common mistake people make in interpreting my work."

Here is how Mayer and McHugh stress humility:

There is enough research (especially from twin studies) to suggest that "genetic or innate factors may influence the emergence of same-sex attractions." But inferring more than that is a mistake. There is evidence that environmental factors (such as prenatal hormone exposure) and experiential factors (such as being the victim of sexual abuse) also play some role.

And beyond that? No one knows. And anyone who insists that they *do* know is likely to be selling you a political agenda.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the imposition of the transgender project during the last five years. Mayer and McHugh demonstrate that research suggests there are genuine cases of gender dysphoria—that is, where a person experiences serious distress as a result of a feeling of incongruity between their biological sex and their gender identity. But research on whether hormone therapy or gender-reassignment surgery ameliorates this dysphoria is inconclusive. Some studies suggest these therapies are not helpful to the individuals; others suggest they can be helpful in some, if not all, cases. Very few of the studies have been performed with enough rigor to give a great deal of confidence in the results.

Mayer and McHugh aren't looking to "deny" transgenderism—they're pointing out that we do not actually understand the scientific roots of the condition. Just about the only thing the research is robust about is that this group is tremendously at-risk: Nearly all studies show them with higher-than-average rates of depression, drug use, and suicide. One 2011 study found that postoperative transgendered individuals were 19.1 times more likely to kill themselves than people from the control group. How much of this is due to the condition or to suboptimal treatment regimes, or to the burdens of societal discrimination? Again: *No one knows.*

Making these kinds of statements—that we do not fully understand homosexuality or transgenderism—has become a courageous act. Mayer and McHugh have already been attacked, both by LGBT activists and academics who should know better.

Warren Throckmorton, a psychology professor at Grove City College, rushed to publish a critique of Mayer and McHugh before he'd even read the full report. Why the rush? Throckmorton was outraged that "As far as I can tell, it is being touted most by conservative leaning and anti-gay organizations."

What's interesting is that if you read deeply enough into Throckmorton's hasty critique, it turns out that his substantive differences with Mayer and McHugh are reasonably small. His real concern is that some conservative,

somewhere, might use the report as a tool to question the political orthodoxies of the day.

An even more dramatic attack came from Dean Hamer, a man who is at once an academic and an activist, who wrote a screed against the report in the *Advocate*. After comparing the *New Atlantis* to the *National Enquirer*, Hamer gratuitously insults the Catholic church (because Galileo) before ending by saying that the very idea of scientists like Mayer and McHugh deviating from politically correct orthodoxy on sexual orientation and gender identity "disgusts me."

Such reactions are, finally, the other great lesson from Mayer and McHugh's paper. We have reached the point where science—like dissent and free speech—has become useful to the left only insofar as it furthers their political goals.

—Jonathan V. Last

Facebook Groupthink

As the *Wall Street Journal* reports, Facebook has been experimenting with its hiring policies "to help diversify its largely white, largely male workforce." Thus, two years ago the company began to incentivize in-house recruiters by offering them 1.5 points "for a so-called 'diversity hire'—a black, Hispanic or female engineer—according to people familiar with the matter." That was a half point more than the company offered for hires who were not black, Hispanic, or female—nor, by inference, Asian American. But when "the numbers didn't move," recounts the *Journal*, Facebook "sweetened" the deal and began awarding recruiters two points for each "diversity hire."

How about a 'like' for Title VII?

NEWSCOM

For a recruiter, points matter financially, since "more points can lead to a stronger performance review . . . and, potentially, a larger bonus." Yet even with the more generous, two-points-per-minority-hire incentive in place, the company has made "little progress," the *Journal* reveals, in getting the numbers it wants.

Facebook is managing, however, to violate federal civil rights law. Title VII of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 says this: "It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer to . . . classify his employees or applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities . . . because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."

Facebook classifies applicants according to race, color, and sex. And it does so to improve job opportunities for those classified as black or Hispanic or female—even if that means depriving (or tending to deprive) of job opportunities someone not so identified. That can happen when there is competition for a job, as surely, at Facebook, there is.

It's a wonder that no one has taken Facebook to court for violating Title VII. The statute does not include a diversity rationale for racial classifications in employment. No federal appeals court has interpreted Title VII to allow for a diversity exception in employment, and at least one—the Third Circuit in the *Piscataway* case more than 20 years ago—has explicitly rejected such a reading. The Supreme Court has never opined on the matter. Only in the field of education has a diversity rationale received the Court's approval. Yet the 2003 Michigan cases in which the Court granted that also stated its expectation that diversity-based admissions policies would soon be phased out.

Facebook "wants its workforce to better reflect the diversity of its 1.7 billion monthly users." But in pursuit of that goal it risks discriminating against applicants of the "wrong" race or sex. And as for Facebook employees of the officially "right" race or sex whose qualifications are such that the company would have hired them under a policy treating all applicants equally, without regard to race or sex, their achievement is obscured, indeed diminished, by the company's hiring policy. That's hardly what anyone could want.

Facebook needs reminding of a basic civil rights principle, which is, as the law professor William Van Alstyne once put it, that "individuals are not merely social means; i.e., they are not merely examples of a group, representatives of a cohort, or fungible surrogates of other human beings; each, rather, is a person whom it is improper to count or discount by race."

Since Facebook is "experimenting" with its hiring policies, one can hope that the company is not wedded to its current policy and might do the right thing. Which is to stop classifying applicants by race and sex and awarding its recruiters points for the "right" sort of hires.

—Terry Eastland

Of Mexico and Migrants

Is Trump walling off voters he needs?

BY FRED BARNES

GARY LOCKE

Donald Trump, brilliantly but perhaps not intentionally, created a political moment to modify his position on immigration. He didn't seize it.

The stage had been set by two weeks of hems and haws by Trump about how he might soften his immigration policy.

For him, this was a rare display of indecision, all the more unusual because it involved the most Trumpian issue of all. He was egged on by his new campaign manager Kellyanne Conway.

That drama was followed by his trip to Mexico City last week for a meeting with Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto. Trump handled their get-together in a statesmanlike manner. "In Mexico, he looked like a world leader," the *Washington Examiner*'s Byron York wrote. He appeared ready to take some of the sting out of the immigration issue.

And he stood to gain politically by mollifying suburban and college-educated Republicans and independents who wince at his harsh attitude toward immigrants. "You've got the skinheads, now go after the nerds," a Republican consultant advised. Trump seemed willing. Then he did exactly the opposite.

Rather than soften, he delivered a speech in Phoenix hours after his talk with Peña Nieto that echoed his hard-line exhortations during the Republican presidential race. Change? That was the farthest thing from Trump's mind. Rather than a world leader, he sounded like Ann Coulter.

It wouldn't have taken much for Trump to insist he'd eased up on immigration. He would have been aided by the yelps of outrage by his hard-line allies. He could ignore them. They wouldn't abandon him. "Nothing will drive away his people," says Jeff Bell of the American Principles Project.

No one should have expected him to jettison his demand for a wall along the Southwest border. Trump has won that argument. The debate is over. A wall—"an impenetrable physical wall" in Trump's words—is close to becoming Republican dogma. Nor was there the slightest chance Trump would embrace a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. Even Jeb Bush, still a leading voice for immigration reform, has rejected that convincingly as too big a reward for those who broke the law in entering the United States. So long as Bush isn't for it, Trump could never be.

The key opportunity for Trump involved the treatment of illegal immigrants who seek legal status. What's emerging as the Republican position would allow them to stay if they meet requirements such as paying taxes and learning English and don't have a criminal record. In polls, a majority of Republicans favor this.

Trump doesn't. In his Phoenix speech, he said: "In a Trump administration, all immigration laws will be enforced. . . . Anyone who has entered the United States illegally is subject to deportation—that is what it means to have laws and to have a country." It's also what's known as being unequivocal.

"For those here today illegally who are seeking legal status, they will have one route and only one route: to return home and apply for reentry under the rules of the new legal immigration system" that Trump would impose. Returning through this process would be next to impossible if the number of legal immigrants accepted annually is reduced.

Trump suggested it might be. "Within just a few years immigration as a share of national population is set to break all historical records," he said in Phoenix. "The time has come for a new immigration commission to develop a new set of reforms to our legal immigration system." In its list of goals, this was first: "To keep immigration levels, measured by population share, within historical norms." Thus the immigration queue would

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surely be long and probably slow-moving as well.

"There is only one core issue in the immigration debate," Trump said, "the well-being of the American people." His immigration policy—the unsoftened one—will achieve great things, he promised. "Crime will go down, border crossings will plummet, gangs will disappear, and welfare will decrease. We will have a peace dividend to spend on rebuilding America, beginning with our inner cities."

While Trump blew one opportunity on immigration, he may have gained on another. Far more than Hillary Clinton, Trump is savvy about the issue of security. Americans are worried as they see their security jeopardized abroad and at home by terrorist attacks and in their neighborhoods by the weakening of police.

"We are in the middle of a jobs crisis, a border crisis, and a terrorism crisis," he said. "All energies of the federal government and the legislative process must now be focused on immigration security. That is the only conversation [on immigration] we should be having at this time."

Trump says President Obama and Clinton are guilty of "gross dereliction of duty by surrendering the safety of the American people to open borders." He credits the *Boston Globe* for reporting that thousands of "criminal aliens" were released into communities here because "their home countries wouldn't take them back." Clinton, as secretary of state, could have stopped many of these but "she didn't do it."

There's also the matter of steadfastness. By refusing to change on immigration, Trump came across as strong and defiant. This reinforces the idea that he can be trusted to give higher priority to protecting Americans than to assisting illegal immigrants. The contrast with Clinton on safety and security is striking.

After a year of Trump as a presidential candidate, we know it's tricky to predict how he will affect voters. When he vowed to block Muslims from entering the country, he was widely criticized. But polls showed a majority of voters agreed with him.

On immigration, Trump passed up an opportunity that's not likely to return. I think he made a mistake, more for practical than political reasons. But "he hasn't lost the election doing what he's doing," Bell says. And with two months to go, Trump may yet change his position. It's happened before. ♦

Who's the Greatest?

An exceptional election about exceptionalism.

BY TOD LINDBERG

One noteworthy feature of the ideological divide in Washington is how immune the country's foreign policy practitioners have been from the disfiguring aspects of hyper-partisanship. Take any random left-wing specialist in constitutional law and a counterpart from the Federalist Society, and odds are they will believe they have little to say to or learn from each other. Something similar holds on questions of inequality and the tax code, and on social issues, if any of those are left to argue about.

On foreign policy matters, this hasn't generally been true. It's not that the intensity of the party identification of those working in this arena is lacking. But Democrats and Republicans alike have to work in a world in which U.S. foreign policy is subject to external constraints in a way domestic policy is not. The constraints on domestic policy are mostly up for grabs; this intensifies partisan feelings. The constraints on foreign policy are not only beyond the reach of any American ability to dictate terms—even for the "sole superpower"—they are also dangerous and need to be understood. Both sides have to do business with the same world.

It doesn't mean they reach the same conclusions on the particulars. But they understand that the most dangerous threats to the United States come from abroad, not across the aisle. And when something isn't working, the first alternative to explore usually comes from interlocutors on the other side of the American debate. In the first Bill Clinton term in the 1990s, for example, Senate GOP leader Bob Dole was a huge spur to more effective action from the administration in the former Yugoslavia.

The disaster that is the 2016 presidential election seems to be disrupting this general pattern. It's going to take some time to sort out the new landscape in foreign policy. We will have to wait for the election results, then for the process of recrimination and the exaction of reprisals to work itself out. Twitter will face its greatest test as the premier medium of our times for deliberation and debate. Meanwhile, however, the dimensions of the problem are starting to come into relief.

Consider, for example, these statements by a senior foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign in response to a question about the United States imposing a no-fly zone to try to tamp down the violence in Syria: It's "off the table because of the implied military commitment that it would require in order to effectively enforce it. . . . It would be dangerous" and "would likely require a greater U.S. military commitment. And all of that would come at the expense of our

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ongoing efforts to focus on . . . destroying" the Islamic State.

Apologies. Those are not actually the statements of a senior foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign. They are the statements in late August of Josh Earnest, President Obama's White House spokesman. Likewise, when Donald Trump called out our NATO and Asian allies as "free-riders" who fail to pay their fair share for security, it was not Trump but rather President Obama himself who used that term to exactly that effect. So maybe retrenchment, resentment of entangling alliances, and the tendency to wish international problems away is not a Trump innovation after all. These views are hardly those of the foreign policy practitioners' mainstream, but they seem to be growing in salience outside of it and on both sides of the partisan divide. And, of course, those articulating it on each side have thoroughgoing contempt for their opposite numbers.

Consider, also, the apparent Russian hack of the email servers of the Democratic National Committee. In the good old days, you could count on Republicans like John McCain and Lindsey Graham to be out front on criticism of Russia. Democrats would be busy urging everyone to put the Cold War mentality to rest, as President Obama urged Mitt Romney to do in their 2012 debate. But though neither McCain nor Graham seems to have changed spots, many Democrats now describe Russian behavior in conspiratorial terms at least as paranoid as those making the rounds in Moscow. And it remains the case that perhaps the biggest Washington hotbed of anti-Russian sentiment these days is the State Department. Career Foreign Service officers who made their bones expanding the frontier of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe now denounce Russia as a threat worthy of the Cold War. Trump, while hardly consistent on this or any other issue, plainly admires Putin as a strong leader and seems to favor a realpolitik according him due respect for his sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, a number of former senior GOP foreign policy officials have repeatedly and emphatically broken ranks with the Republican nominee. Some of them have endorsed Hillary Clinton, left the GOP, or both. Clinton, for her part, seems happy enough to have them—though the left-wing base of her party, which has barely gotten past her support for the Iraq war, will never forgive the neoconservatives.

Rather than confronting the surging antiestablishment sentiment on foreign policy within her own party, a President Hillary Clinton may simply try to reconvene the old foreign policy establishment around her administration as if nothing has happened. That won't sit well with the left, and she will accordingly have a vexing internal problem to deal with. Will she foster a new generation of foreign policy professionals from the left—and well outside the current, soon-to-be-former mainstream—by giving a new cadre of people jobs in her administration? If so, they will likely be deeply suspicious of their own Old Guard, let alone of the Republicans, whom they tend to perceive not as acting on principle but as having opportunistically deserted a sinking ship.

NEWSCOM

. . . one political party at a time.

In any case, it's hard to envision a straightforward return to the old spirit of bipartisanship, given the unprecedented break many Republicans have made with their nominee. To have split with the party over the foreign policy views or leadership temperament of its nominee implies at least that one regards the other candidate as no worse. To know whether defectors from Trump will reintegrate into the GOP foreign policy mainstream, one would need to know what the GOP mainstream will look like after the 2016 election. No one does.

Finally, this presidential season has been fraught with a more comprehensive disingenuousness than is typical. You can see it in reelection-seeking John McCain and in House speaker Paul Ryan and Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell. They all clearly despise Trump. Yet they see no path forward in which they oppose the nominee of their party. And, indeed, there is no such path. The most basic definition of a political party is a group whose purpose is to advance a slate of candidates for office: *one* slate, and "advance" in at least the minimal sense of "not oppose."

Members of a party can vote as they please. Top party leaders can do so only in the privacy of the voting booth. Those who have been denouncing Ryan and McConnell for refusing to repudiate Trump evidently have a novel view of what a party is, at odds with its basic principle, and they should probably explain how that would work. Ryan and McConnell can apologize for supporting Trump after he loses. It will be an especially painful reminder that the classical root of the word "hypocrisy" lies in playing a role.

The disingenuousness this year, though most notable in the GOP, is not confined there. And on this point, we have data. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs's now-annual public opinion survey (on whose advisory board I sit) has for some time been asking a fascinating question on American exceptionalism or greatness: "Some people say the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. Others say that every country is unique, and the United States is no greater than other nations.

Which view is closer to your own?"

In 2012, 70 percent of Americans said the United States was "the greatest country in the world" and 29 said "no greater than other nations." Two years later, the figures were 65 percent and 34 percent, respectively—a noteworthy decline in the perception of American exceptionalism. I have this year's figures for you: 61 percent "greatest country," 38 percent "no greater." The decline continues.

The question gets even more interesting broken down by partisan affiliation. Among Republicans, 78 percent now say "greatest country" and 22 percent "no greater than others"—down from 85-15 four years ago. Democrats have grown significantly more skeptical in the same period: from 66-34 in 2012 to a pretty close divide in this year's survey, 55-43. (The split among independents is now 53-45, down from 63-36.) So Democrats are about twice as likely as Republicans to be skeptical of the "exceptionalist" view that the United States is the greatest country.

Donald Trump wants to "Make America Great Again," which suggests that the country isn't as great as it ought to be. This doesn't directly contradict the proposition that the United States is "the greatest," because that's a comparative judgment. But the emphasis is on a current-account deficit in greatness in a party that breaks almost 4-1 in favor of the view that America is the greatest.

Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, has emphasized her view that America is indeed currently a great country (though again, not necessarily the greatest)—accentuating the positive notwithstanding that 43 percent of Democrats feel no special sense of American greatness.

So those inclined toward skepticism about American exceptionalism are getting a steady diet of American greatness from their candidate, whereas those most inclined to embrace American exceptionalism are getting a stream of negativity from theirs. That's politics American-style, 2016, in an election whose lessons are going to take a long time to process. ♦

Carrie Nation, M.D.

The neo-prohibitionists are on the march.

BY KEVIN R. KOSAR

To a degree, the British government's recent freak-out over alcohol is understandable. The nation's tabloids regularly carry stories featuring individuals getting falling-down drunk and doing stupid things. "Drunk chef, 23, who used an aerosol deodorant can and lighter as a makeshift flamethrower to set his neighbour's head on fire is jailed" is just one of the recent stories. Do a Google photo search of "London binge drinking" and pages of appalling images appear. So too with "Liverpool binge drinking," "Manchester binge drinking," etc. The photos are modern versions of Hogarth's *Gin Lane*.

Calm down—have a drink.

U.K. media reports on binge-drinking stupidity are not limited to lads and yobs. The nation's best and brightest turn up in the news for puking in the streets. Women also regularly star in these sordid media tales: "Furious judge blasts a drunk mother-of-five who 'offended veterans around the world' when she urinated on a war memorial TWICE as she REFUSES to apologise to families of the war dead" and "Drunken woman who attacked a policeman with a bottle as he tried to break up a fight outside a bar is spared jail because she is now pregnant."

Read such things day after day and it's no wonder some of Britain's elites have panicked. "There is no safe level of drinking," declared Dame Sally Davies, the U.K.'s chief medical officer, shortly after releasing new guidelines that told Brits to cut their intake. Any alcohol consumption could cause cancer, she warned. Talk is in the air of government imposing higher prices and mandating scarier warning labels.

This is a crazy overreaction to alcohol abuse, which critics inside and outside the medical profession have pointed out. The initial public reaction was to hoot at the "drink and you'll get cancer" scare tactics (and many rolled their eyes when media found Dame Sally enjoying drinks with her family).

But the neo-prohibitionist anxiety isn't going away. If anything, it's begun to spread, washing up on our shores. Last December, the *Washington Post* ran a bogus piece on the perils of alcohol with the ridiculously alarmist title "Americans are drinking themselves to death at record rates." This past week, the *Wall Street Journal* produced its own article on the topic, repackaging the U.K.'s flip-out as a global movement. "For decades, beer, wine and liquor producers have been helped by a notion, enshrined in a number of governments' dietary advice, that a little alcohol can provide modest coronary and other health benefits," the *Journal* wrote. "Rapidly, that advice is shifting as health-policy officials around the world scrutinize their previous advice in the light of research pointing to possible cancer risks." No doubt the notoriously anti-alcohol World Health Organization was delighted to read that neo-prohibitionism is on the

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march around the globe. There may not, as yet, be any such march, but spread the story and it may be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The "no alcohol is safe" argument ignores the fact that just about everything—even activities with obvious and abundant benefits—carries a risk or cost. Shall we forbid individuals from jogging because they sometimes have heart attacks or injure their knees or feet? Shall we warn people that eating can produce death by choking? (A few thousand die from gagging each year in America—step away from the dark green leafy vegetables!)

And then there's the fact that—Dame Sally's extreme position notwithstanding—reams of studies do show health benefits from moderate alcohol consumption. Indeed, the U.S. government's 2015 health guidelines affirmed alcohol as a healthful part of the diet for various reasons.

And the benefits aren't just matters of health. Responsible drinkers are not drags on society. On the contrary, drinkers tend to earn more than teetotalers and are twice as likely to exercise.

Most annoyingly, the neo-prohibitionists take the troubles caused by binge drinkers and alcoholics—a small minority of drinkers—and use them as an excuse to punish everyone else. This, even though the binge drinkers and alcoholics would be the last people to be dissuaded or discouraged from drinking.

Americans would be wise to keep a close eye on our government officials to see that they do not get sucked into the U.K.'s madness. Already the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has become a little mealy-mouthed on the long-established cardiovascular benefits of moderate drink.

Full-on prohibition of the sort we had a century ago is unlikely, but a slow, creeping version is all too possible. First, government declares something to be dangerous; then it ratchets up the taxes on it, reduces access to it via regulations, and demonizes its consumers. (See tobaccoless e-cigarettes for an ongoing example.) Will it happen? It would be foolish to assume it won't. ♦

Putin in Crimea

Back to the good old days with Uncle Volodya.

BY **PRISCILLA M. JENSEN**

COURTESY OF KREMLIN MEDIA SERVICES

Putin autographs a mural with the text 'May there always be Tavrida.'

Late in August, during the run-up to Ukraine's 25th Independence Day, Vladimir Putin held a meeting of the Russian Security Council in Sevastopol, Crimea. Before and since, the Russian defense ministry has overseen military exercises in the region, as well as naval maneuvers by the Black Sea Fleet. There have been signs for months of the positioning of sizable Russian military units along the Ukrainian border and considerable belligerent posturing by Russia about its determination to protect itself from NATO, as well as unsubstantiated accusations of Ukrainian incursions into Crimea.

Putin's visit ultimately appears to have been a saber-waggling exercise for the world's consumption, timed as it was to overlap Ukrainian Independence Day. The carry-on about NATO was clearly calculated to rub salt into Ukrainian wounds from the 2014 showdown over closer association with the West and its institutions, notably NATO and the EU.

But if the official meetings to discuss new "security measures" for Crimea were the overt part of Putin's assertions of Russian power in the Black Sea region, a little-noticed side trip strikes a nostalgic chord in the minds of those who remember the Soviet Union.

Covering the Crimea visit, the *Washington Post* headed an article with a photo of Vladimir Putin autographing what it called "graffiti" at "a youth educational forum in Crimea." He's actually signing his John Dzerzhinsky on a wall mural of the Russian flag surmounted by the slogan "May there always be Tavrida." And thereon hangs a tale.

Iphigenia, if she escaped as Euripides suggests, ended up in Tauris, on the northern coast of the Black Sea. Prince Grigory Potemkin named his spectacular Petersburg palace Tauride, after the peninsula he was instrumental in annexing from the Ottoman Empire in 1784. The khans who had ruled it, descendants of the Golden Horde, had a different name for the area—they called it Qirim: Crimea.

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When the Russian Empire annexed Crimea in 1784 it was renamed, dropping the Turkish name and adopting a version of its classical one as Taurida Oblast. When Putin's new Russian empire grabbed Crimea from Ukraine 230 years later, there appears to have been a sort of neoclassical revival. According to the Ukrainian government at the time, "some Russian politicians" proposed a change of the usage "Crimea" to "Tavrida" precisely to "eradicate any links of the Crimea to . . . the Turkic history . . . of the peninsula."

In the case of the Tavrida International Youth Forum, the full name of the camp Putin was visiting, the name may not have been anti-Turkic but it was most certainly pro-imperium. The TIYF is one among several international summer camps held in Russian settings run by the Russian Federal Agency for Youth Affairs. The camps recruit hundreds of young participants from, according to a video, "more than 50 countries" and offer the opportunity to "Open up yourself, discover the world, and make it better."

Tavrida IYF, in the vicinity of Sevastopol, had its first session in summer 2014, only months after Russia grabbed Crimea in late winter. This year's attendees, whose participation is paid for by the Russian government, studied the creative arts, including architecture, painting, music, and writing. All of this was in the context, according to the description offered by the Russian Cultural Centre in Washington, of "Russian identity" ("heroes of our generation"), "myths and facts" ("Russia in today's information space"), "cultural heritage" ("culture as an international language," that standby of innumerable bridge-building exercises during the fuzzier bits of the Cold War), and, not least, "Crimea for all" (which, along with marketing Crimea, implies quite clearly who is the proprietor of the exercise).

If any question about that remains, it's resolved by a look at the other camps that participants in the Russian-sponsored International Youth Fora may attend. Surely it is no accident, comrades, that two of the three other IYF are in contested locations as well. One forum, on "the islands," held on Sakhalin and Iturup, is about the development of Russia's far east. Another, the "Baltic Artek" camp in the Kaliningrad region, offers seminars for schoolteachers and has held sessions on Russian identity. (The last of the four camps, a session along the Klyazma River called Terra Scientia, appears to be an inheritance from the organization that formerly conducted these summer camps.)

It's quite a lineup. One camp is in Crimea, at the heart of the area that Russia clawed back from Ukraine. Sakhalin and Iturup, in the Kurile Islands, have been the subject of bitter sovereignty disputes between Japan and Russia beginning in the 19th century and continuing, still unresolved, after the Second World War. And the Baltic nations, just north of Kaliningrad along the Baltic Sea, have recently, like Crimea and Ukraine, seen a Russian military buildup in the area after centuries of acrimonious relations and a prolonged period of Soviet occupation and oppression.

These summer camps, for enthusiastic youth (up to 30 years old) from all sorts of places, are not far removed at all from the versions produced by the USSR when soft propaganda and international self-congratulation served their purposes. Putin, the old spook, knows all this very well, and his visit to the seaside surely must have been one great big catfish expedition. ♦

Bullet Train to Nowhere

The ultimate California boondoggle

By Charlotte Allen

Madera, Calif.

In December 2015 a Pacific Ocean weather condition known as El Niño, in which unusually warm equatorial water temperatures interact with trade winds and generate huge amounts of rainfall, halted, at least temporarily, a blistering five-year drought in California. The rain was still falling in drenching torrents on the Wednesday morning in early January when I visited one of the two sites in the state where construction had begun in any substantial way on the controversial high-speed rail system that is supposed to connect California's two largest cities, Los Angeles and San Francisco, via trains running 220 miles an hour. Around the time that the state's voters approved the train in a 2008 referendum authorizing a $9.95 billion bond issue to help pay for it, its supporters had promised a completion date of 2018 for this "Phase 1" of a still more ambitious high-speed rail network that would eventually hurtle Californians all the way from the state capital, Sacramento, 95 miles northeast of San Francisco, to San Diego, near the Mexican border.

Central Valley farmer Kole Upton wears his opposition to California's $68-billion high-speed rail on his bumper.

But the bullet-train project has moved more slowly—far more slowly—than its boosters anticipated. What I was to see consisted of a 1,600-foot viaduct spanning the Fresno River on the rural outskirts of Madera, a rundown city of 63,000 in the heart of the state's agriculturally rich but economically parched San Joaquin Valley—a landscape that is geographically, topographically, demographically, and culturally far away from the bustle of the two coastal metropolises that the train was supposed to be designed to serve. The Fresno River viaduct is part of an initial 130-mile stretch of track through the valley that would allow passengers to travel from Madera, 164 miles southeast of San Francisco, to Bakersfield, 110 miles northeast of Los Angeles. Well, actually not quite all the way to Bakersfield, California's ninth-largest city, with a population of 364,000, but to the edge of an almond orchard on the fringes of Shafter, a sleepy farm town of 17,000 some 19 miles to the north. That was because the California High Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA), the autonomous state agency in charge of planning and building the train, didn't have quite the money in its budget to take the train to downtown Bakersfield, and passengers bound for that city would presumably have to board a low-speed connector bus to actually arrive there. The estimated date for completing this initial stretch was September 2017, the deadline for spending $3.5 billion in "stimulus" money from the Obama administration. Actually linking San Francisco and Los Angeles with a southerly terminus in Anaheim on a total of 520 miles of track had been pushed out to the year 2022. Critics have dubbed the high-speed rail project the "train to nowhere," and it was easy to see why.

Those *longueurs* are only part of the story. The rest of the story is the astonishingly widespread political opposition to the train by California voters these days, even though 53 percent of them approved the idea when it was on the state ballot in the November 2008 election. The opposition spans ideological left and right and demographic rich, poor, and middle-class: from wealthy Silicon Valley technocrats horrified that the ultra-fast rail lines, with overpasses only every 10 miles or so, would wreck their leafy, bicycle-friendly upscale-suburban neighborhoods, to Latino-majority

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working-class towns in Southern California's San Fernando Valley that would be split in half by the train corridors, to equestrians in the San Gabriel Mountain foothills who would see their horse trails destroyed and environmentalists concerned about wetlands destruction in Northern California and threats to wildlife and endangered plant species in Southern California's Angeles National Forest, through which several of the proposed train routes would plow.

Thanks to this near-universal hostility, the CHSRA has so far succeeded in acquiring only 60 percent of the 1,300 parcels of land that it needs just to run those 130 miles of track from Madera to Shafter. Meanwhile, polls conducted from 2013 to 2016 have consistently shown that at least 52 percent of Californians want the state to ditch the high-speed rail project entirely and use the 2008 bond funds for something else, possibly for water storage or for beefing up conventional rail and public-transportation systems in the traffic-clogged Los Angeles and Bay Area "bookends" of the projected bullet-train system.

Agriculture uses 40 percent of California's water, so the drenching rains I encountered were welcome as a general proposition in the San Joaquin Valley, the southern half of California's 450-mile-long Central Valley, a 60,000-square-mile plain running between the coastal mountain ranges to the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east. But alongside the still mostly unbuilt rail viaduct, at this point just a handful of massive 25-foot concrete columns plus steel rebar cages, the pelting rain meant construction-site mud and plenty of it. Indeed, owing to the rain, work had already halted for the day when I arrived in a CHSRA-rented Jeep Grand Cherokee, accompanied by Toni Tinoco, the public information officer for the authority's regional office in Fresno, and Michael Leongson, one of the five staff engineers assigned to this part of the project (the actual general contractor is Tutor Perini, a Southern California entity that specializes in large-scale infrastructure). A lone hard-hatted workman sloshed through the ankle-deep mud to ask us what we were doing there, and Tinoco and Leongson duly pulled out their state ID badges. The workman advised us not even to try to get out of the Cherokee and into the sludge, so we drove a little farther up a slight incline behind the machinery where we could see the stout gray columns, flared at their rectilinear tops like the pillars of ancient Egyptian temples and displaying their own brand of engineering elegance, marching from the horizon down a grassy, empty landscape dotted here and there with eucalyptus trees to the river's western embankment, and then beyond the river on the other side where the rail-bed would taper off to grade.

"The pedestals of those columns are 80 feet deep and 10 feet in diameter," Leongson said. "They'll support the deck for the train." He explained that the viaduct was part of an elevation six or seven miles long that would enable the bullet train to swing high over not just the Fresno River but California Route 145, which runs through the heart of the San Joaquin Valley. The 29-mile stretch from Madera to downtown Fresno to which Leongson was assigned was the very first phase of the high-speed rail's construction, with two more phases contracted out to other private construction entities that would connect Fresno to that almond orchard near Bakersfield at the valley's southeast end. "We broke ground in January 2015, and we're 50 percent complete," he said. The bullet train's planned rail-bed for the valley roughly parallels two conventional diesel-powered freight lines, the BNSF running from Madera to Fresno and the Union Pacific running south of that. As we talked, a serpentine BNSF train clattered heavily over the river on its old-technology trestle bridge. "You won't hear that on *our* train," Leongson said. "Ours is electrified, so there's no noise, and no train-whistles because we won't be crossing any roads at grade." He pointed out that the bullet train required the most parsimonious of right-of-ways: just 50 feet on either side of its tracks. "Electric-powered trains are lighter than diesel trains, and they're quieter and faster."

Supports for an HSR viaduct outside Madera, California, February 26, 2016

The construction that Leongson and Tinoco had shown me was indeed impressive—but so was its exiguous nature compared with the overall project and the slowness with which it was proceeding. Construction had begun only in June 2015, two years behind schedule and six months after a showy ground-breaking ceremony in Fresno in January 2015, presided over by the train's biggest

booster, maverick Democratic governor Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown Jr. Concrete-pouring for the viaduct's "deck"—the rail-bed itself—began in March this year. Photos show a horizontal structure that is equally impressive as an engineering feat—but a 1,600-foot overpass that still lacks train tracks is only a minor part of that 119-mile segment.

Besides the Madera viaduct, there wasn't a lot to show of this ambitious undertaking when I visited, and there still isn't. Shortly after starting construction in Madera, crews began work on a second project relatively minor in scope: demolishing an automobile overpass in downtown

Fresno known as the Tuolumne Street Bridge. It allowed Union Pacific freight trains to run through the city center without disrupting street traffic but wasn't high enough to accommodate a bullet train and its electrical superstructure. Replacing that bridge with a taller one is supposed to take "under a year," Leongson said. Construction has also recently begun on two other viaducts that will span two rivers south of Fresno.

Besides the glacial pace of the project, it was hard not to notice an element of confusion as well. While we were driving north from Fresno to Madera on Highway 99, made famous by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the artery that funneled Okie farmworkers migrating to the valley during the Great Depression, we had passed a huge yard filled with soaring cranes and other construction machinery. The machines had been sitting idle—and depreciating—since the CHSRA had purchased them more than a year before my visit. "It's top-notch equipment, so it was a business strategy to buy them," Tinoco explained. But "we needed the design to be completed and to obtain the environmental permits before we could use them," she said.

It is undoubtedly unfair to perceive as metaphors the rain, the mud, the never-used equipment, and the solo unfinished viaduct over an isolated rural river in an agricultural valley more than a hundred miles from the heavily trafficked coastal corridor that connects Los Angeles and San Francisco. But the metaphors are irresistible because they point to reality. The out-of-the way location of this first segment of construction was, by all accounts, the product of a political decision while the train was on the drawing board during the 1990s, one that weighed the flat terrain plus a much-touted economic boon to the jobs-starved valley, along with the fact that the valley is one of California's less-populated areas, with relatively few NIMBY-minded residents expected to complain about blocked-off streets and superfast trains whooshing through their neighborhoods at all hours of the day and night. The valley's total population is only about 4 million, compared with 7 million for the San Francisco Bay Area and 19 million for greater Los Angeles. Many coastal Californians have never set foot in the valley, partly because its basin shape makes it the air-pollution capital of the state during the smoggy summer.

And indeed, the poverty of the San Joaquin Valley is startling, belied by the tidy rows of nut and stone-fruit trees that make for a pleasant vista along Highway 99. According to a study by the webzine *24/7 Wall Street* of Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, half the dozen U.S. metropolitan areas with the highest rates of unemployment in December 2015 were in the valley—including Madera (No. 12), Bakersfield (10), and Fresno (9)—all with jobless rates in the double digits, compared with an overall U.S. unemployment rate of 4.9 percent. Low-skill, low-paying farm work in the valley has for decades been a magnet for Latino immigrants, legal and illegal, but agriculture's increasingly mechanized efficiency has left less and less for the immigrants, and especially their offspring, to do.

Driving or—even worse—walking through the central streets of Fresno (a city of 520,000 and the unofficial capital of the San Joaquin Valley) is a dispiriting experience. Fresno's economic heyday was the

ORIGINAL, COUNTZ / THE WEEKLY STANDARD

half-century that preceded the Depression, and its downtown, despite periodic fits of demolition, has managed to retain numerous fine examples of urban commercial architecture from that period: office buildings, (mostly empty) storefronts, lavishly decorated defunct movie palaces. The CHSRA's regional office occupies five floors in one of the handsomest of those structures. But the streets surrounding it were nearly empty of both foot and auto traffic on the Wednesday I visited. A corner sign proclaimed "Downtown Business Hub Fresno CA" in what looked like bitter irony: Practically the only operating "business" in evidence was a mega-church occupying a former movie theater and operating a latte shop that closed in early afternoon—although across the street construction workers were busily building a condo complex that looked geared to New Urbanism dreams surrounding the high-speed rail station slated to be built nearby. A block or two away, Fresno's main financial and retail district along Fulton Street never recovered from a disastrous 1960s experiment in converting it into a no-cars-allowed pedestrian mall, and boarded-up and otherwise unoccupied storefronts were the rule.

Local officials—and especially CHSRA officials—bristle at the suggestion that the California bullet train might be at least in part a jobs program for the Fresno area. But the fact remains that Fresno officials and construction unions have been among the biggest boosters of the project. The January 2015 ground-breaking, from which the general public was barred, featured strong contingents from both groups. Tinoco and Leongson drove me around central Fresno pointing out decrepit warehouses and defunct restaurants in the projected path of the train, businesses whose owners, they said, had gladly accepted generous condemnation and relocation funds to rebuild elsewhere.

Officials bristle at the suggestion the California bullet train might be at least in part a jobs program for the Fresno area. But the fact remains that Fresno officials and construction unions have been among the biggest boosters of the project.

"They all want the money," said House rail subcommittee chairman Jeff Denham. The Republican represents Turlock, a city of 70,000 about 80 miles north of Fresno, and is a longtime opponent of the bullet train. "Every consultant and every engineering firm got hired, including Republicans. In the city of Fresno they like it, because they want the grade separation, and the property owners are now 90-10 percent in favor. And why not? They all got together on those relocation fees—they're really overpriced—and checks were written everywhere." (CHSRA officials counter that the authority aims to pay fair compensation to all displaced owners.)

It was on the farms and in the smaller towns outside of Fresno that nearly unanimous opposition to the bullet train appeared, along with widespread complaints that CHSRA's compensation offers are far from adequate, reflecting what many residents regard as city-slicker disdain for agriculture and a lack of understanding of the value of agricultural land and the way it is used. Thanks to excellent soil, a long and sunny growing season, and a near-perfect day-to-night temperature ratio, the San Joaquin Valley and its northerly extension, the Sacramento Valley, yield around 300 different crops, about a quarter of the fruits and vegetables grown in the United States. There was widespread suspicion among valley residents that one of the ultimate goals in routing the bullet train through there was to develop the vast fields into low-cost commuter subdivisions for Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento, essentially terminating the valley's agricultural viability.

I spent the next few days in one of those towns, Hanford, population 55,000, about 33 miles southeast of Fresno. As with Fresno—and as with Madera, for that matter—Hanford's historic downtown enjoys attractive and well-tended classic civic architecture attesting to the happier days of the early 20th century. Hanford is the county seat of Kings County, on the valley's western side and regarded as the ground zero of high-speed rail construction, through whose farms and residential properties the train would slice to connect Fresno with points south. Hanford's downtown already houses an Amtrak passenger station and a Union Pacific freight line along whose ties the engine horns moan day and night. The country roads were sprinkled with handmade protest billboards: "Dams Not Trains."

I visited the extensive operations of Tos Farms, one of Hanford's most prosperous family-run agribusinesses. John Tos, lean and balding and in his mid-70s, has been a lead plaintiff in one of the most contentious of the lawsuits against CHSRA, in and out of various state courts since 2011. The Tos family, descendants of Dutch immigrants, has been farming in Hanford since 1912, and Tos rattled off a list of the crops that he, his brother, Bill Tos, and their two sons, Jeff and Mark, were raising: "Walnuts, almonds, table grapes [the Fresno area is America's raisin capital], peaches, plums, nectarines, pluots, cherries, apricots, alfalfa, corn." His spacious office was a pleasant and orderly mix of sturdy oak furniture and prominently displayed photos of grandchildren. Tos wouldn't say how many acres his family farms these days, on land it either owns or leases, but his business

employs more than 250 people, and it is safe to estimate that the Tos acreage ranges in the thousands.

About the high-speed train, which would run diagonally through seven of Tos Farms' cherry and almond orchards, Tos seethed with low-level rage and sardonic wit. Bluntly outspoken, he once, at a CHSRA meeting, compared the authority's plans for the valley to the Holocaust (although he immediately apologized). One of the things that infuriated him most, he said, was the rail authority's assumption that farmland is essentially empty land, and that carving a 100-foot-wide diagonal corridor through the farms of the western valley would be minimally disruptive. "If this was 150 years ago, it would be no problem," Tos said. "But right now the valley is 100 percent developed. This land has been farmed for 100 years. It takes a long time to make a land perfect."

Fresno's Hollywood Bar makes way for HSR, July 14, 2014.

A few minutes later we clambered aboard his massive black Ford Super Duty truck to see what Tos meant. One of the major problems of the bullet train is the on-the-ground conflict between the physical and the political geography of the Central Valley. Although the valley indeed runs roughly north to south, it also tilts to the west as it approaches San Francisco, more or less paralleling the California coast. All of the north-south rail lines in the valley, as well as its major highways, 99 and Interstate 5, the big-rig-centric freeway that hugs the valley's western edge, curve westward along with the valley itself as they climb to the north. And so will the projected bullet train, which roughly parallels the BNSF and Union Pacific tracks. But the towns, cities, and farms in the valley are laid out more or less on a strict north-south-east-west compass grid that dates to the 19th century, as if one were in Kansas. The major rural roads in Kings County, for example, are a precise mile apart. The practical accommodations between this artificial grid and the natural tilt of the valley were made long ago, and most of those who live there say that disrupting them would be devastating.

Tos drove me to the 160 acres of almond trees, bare-branched in early January, where the CHSRA plans to plant a four-leaf-clover overpass. He pointed out a sprinkler-irrigation system running through the rows of trees that would be destroyed (along with a pump-driven well) because "they're going through the fields diagonally." He added, "We rent this ranch on a 20-year lease. They will pay the owner for the land, but they won't recognize us as the owners of the trees and the loss of 20 years of production." (Almond trees don't bear fruit until about four years after they are planted, and they stop producing and must be replaced after a maximum of 25 years.) Adjacent to his almond orchard Tos pointed to a neighbor's cherry orchard. "A full one-fourth of this will be blocked," he said. "There will be no access by road" to that part of the orchard because the bullet-train's projected route would seal off part of the existing road-grid. Economies of scale come into play, Tos explained: It costs almost as much in equipment and infrastructure to farm 20 acres of fruit as to farm 40 acres, so when a farmer loses half his trees, or even a fourth of them, it makes little economic sense to go on farming that particular parcel.

Tos said that he and other valley farmers have long urged the CHSRA to move the planned bullet-train line some 30 miles to the west of Hanford to run alongside Interstate 5, whose landscape is genuinely barren, whose local economy is pretty much restricted to cattle-ranching, and whose population is relatively tiny, owing to a general lack of water. (The more easterly parts of the valley are watered by snow runoff from the Sierra Nevada, but farmers in the Hanford area, including the Tos family, rely on pump-driven irrigation wells.) "The state already owns the land" alongside Interstate 5, Tos said. CHSRA officials counter that Interstate 5 runs parallel to the San Andreas Fault, the mother of nearly all California earthquakes, and thus isn't a suitable location for a high-speed train. And of course Interstate 5 is a full 50 miles west of Fresno and its hopes for a train-centric urban renewal.

Two days later, I sat in Hanford's lone downtown Starbucks talking to 38-year-old Alisa Gomez, a high school teacher in nearby Corcoran who, together with her husband, Frank Gomez, who works for Future Farmers of America, owns a house on two acres whose living room is smack "in the alignment" of the train's projected path. The gist of our conversation pointed to reasons why the rail authority has had such trouble persuading rural property owners in the valley to agree to turn over their property voluntarily and why so many of those owners believe that the authority has no understanding of—and may even have contempt for—how people in rural California actually live.

"Our house is out in the country, so we have horses, two horses; they're one of my 10-year-old daughter's hobbies,"

JOHN WALKER / THE FRESNO BEE / AP

Gomez said, describing a dispute between her family and the CHSRA that had been festering since early 2015 over exactly what sort of compensation the Gomezes should be expected to accept when, if all goes according to plan, they are forced to relocate along with their four children. "It's a very unique house," Gomez said. "It was built for two families, so there's a huge great room for a party. It's got two master bedrooms—it's 3,300 square feet, with six bedrooms and four baths. They keep sending me comparables, but they're either in the city [of Corcoran], so we'd have to move into town, and where am I supposed to put my horses? Or they're 35 to 45 minutes away, so what is it going to cost in fuel? We looked at about 20 properties, and we found a house that's pretty close to where we live, but it's about half the size, so we want to buy that property and build a new house on it. But that would cost us $590,000 plus $480,000 for a new house." The CHSRA's on-the-spot appraisal of their existing house was only $300,000, plus relocation costs up to a total of $490,000. "They told us, 'Your house isn't worth it,'" Gomez said.

Even more humiliating than what she perceived as a lowball offer, Gomez said, was the highhanded way in which she said the rail authority treated her. "They even began contacting my ex-husband, who has no ties to the house. We divorced 10 years ago." And lately, Gomez added, the CHSRA had brought up, on at least two occasions, the topic of a Resolution of Necessity—an official declaration that is a prelude to an eminent-domain lawsuit in which she and her husband would have to hire lawyers and a judge would decide the value of their home, possibly at far less than it would be sold by arms-length negotiation. "That's just flat-out bullying," Gomez said.

The general resentment of the bullet train in the valley was so intense that I wondered to CHSRA spokesman Toni Tinoco if there were any farmers who actually supported the train's encroachment upon their properties. She sent me to 65-year-old Brad Johns, an ebullient, sometimes belligerent-sounding bearded extrovert with a booming voice who drove me in his GMC pickup to the 430 acres of Roma tomatoes adjacent to the valley's Kings River that he grows for the agribusiness Olam International, which operates a processing plant churning the red fruit into tomato paste and salsa in Lemoore, a town of 25,000 about eight miles southwest of Hanford. Johns, a graduate in agricultural mechanics of California State University-Fresno, boasted about the sophisticated drip-irrigation system he used for his farm that he said contrasted sharply in efficiency to the system of sprinklers and wells drilled deep into the valley's underground aquifer with which the Tos family watered its orchards. "He's my next-door neighbor," Johns said of John Tos with a note of evident resentment. "I put seeds in the ground and grow food that feeds Americans. He grows walnuts and sells to China. They're a dessert, a garnishment, and they're all exported." (In fact, the nut growers of the Central Valley came under intense criticism at the height of the drought for their thirsty but lucrative trees: Nearly every almond eaten in the United States comes from the valley, and Asian demand has turned those tasty nuts into California's most remunerative agricultural export.)

The CHSRA bought three of Johns's tomato parcels, totaling about 23 acres, including Johns's own house, whose front door lay in the center of the bullet train's path. Perhaps he was lucky—the house happened to occupy a minor corner of his property—and perhaps he got an unusually generous deal. It helped that there was already another house on the other end of the land that had belonged to Johns's late father, which the CHSRA paid Johns to renovate. The authority also planned to remove and store his displaced topsoil during the construction process and replace any damaged parts of his irrigation system. To Johns, the bullet train represented a welcome chance for rural dwellers to sample city life without spending hours on the road. "This is a great thing," he said. "I can go up to San Francisco in an hour and 15 minutes and see my boy up there."

The year 2008, when California's voters approved Proposition 1A, was more of a culmination than a starting point. Japan had been building bullet trains since the 1960s, and France opened its first high-speed line connecting Paris and Lyon in 1981. The electric-powered trains in both countries could reach a top speed of 320 miles per hour, and they made a profound impression on Jerry Brown, who governed California from 1975 to 1983 and began a second round of governorships in 2011. (Amtrak's Acela passenger trains, plying the Atlantic coast from Boston to Washington, have top speeds of only 150 miles per hour.) During his first two terms, Brown signed legislation funding a study of high-speed rail's feasibility for California, and he made bullet trains one of the themes of his abortive run for president on the Democratic ticket in 1992. In 2015, a full-scale mockup of the high-speed train was displayed in front of the California State Capitol in Sacramento as testimony to Brown's ambition.

As early as 1996 the California legislature, impressed like Brown by the fact that electric-powered rail systems in Europe could compete with plane and auto travel for distances between 200 and 500 miles, created a nine-member, virtually autonomous High Speed Rail Authority to develop and implement such a system for California. The state's population had more than tripled from the end of World War II to the 1990s (from 10 million to 32 million; it's now 39 million), and despite half a century of frantic road construction, traffic-choked freeways and automobile-generated air pollution were (and still are) bedeviling problems

in California, especially in the Los Angeles Basin and the San Francisco Bay Area. The idea was to move commuters, vacationers, and business travelers out of their automobiles and onto trains. In 2004 the Democratic-dominated legislature approved the referendum that was to appear before the state's voters in 2008 as Proposition 1A.

It was a measure carefully crafted to appeal to as many political constituencies as possible and to allay the fears of as many opponents as possible. Hence, although the aim was to connect the major coastal cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, Prop 1A also required the line to include stops

Joining lawmakers, Governor Jerry Brown, center, displays signed legislation authorizing the start of the HSR line, July 18, 2012.

in the economically ailing San Joaquin Valley, necessitating a major inland detour that seemed to be aimed mostly at attracting the support of San Joaquin Valley legislators. For example, it included a stop in Merced, about 34 miles north of Madera, that isn't even part of a Los Angeles-San Francisco route but could use an economic boost (it's No. 5 on the *24/7 Wall Street* list, with unemployment of 11.9 percent). The ballot measure stated that the bullet train would eventually stretch 800 miles, when a second phase extended it to San Diego and Sacramento. Those features turned the train from simply an ultra-fast connector between major population centers along the coast into a presumed economic jump-starter for inland California communities (proponents predicted more than 600,000 construction-related and other jobs). In a further effort to make the bond issue appetizing to voters, the ballot measure allocated nearly $1 billion of the proceeds to funding conventional urban and commuter rail projects.

Proposition 1A made certain promises of nearly magical specificity: that the trains would operate at speeds of at least 200 miles an hour; that the maximum travel time between Los Angeles's downtown Union Station and the Transbay Transit Center in San Francisco would be exactly two hours and 40 minutes; that trains would be running in either direction every five minutes; that state taxpayers would be on the hook only to repay principal and interest on the bonds; that no proceeds would be spent until federal and private investment had kicked in; and that the entire operating costs of the train would be paid for via passenger fares (then estimated to be about $50 a person, a bargain for the Los Angeles-San Francisco run).

In 2008 the CHSRA had estimated that the total cost to develop and build the entire high-speed rail system would amount to about $33 billion. Proponents were already counting on federal subsidies and private investment to cover the shortfall between the bond proceeds and the total estimated construction costs. Democrats had just regained control of both houses of Congress, and the expectation seemed to be that much of the financing for the train could be offloaded onto the federal government. According to some critics, that expectation provided an excuse for California to start spending money it didn't have on the project and to start making financially nice to—"buying off" might be too harsh a characterization—the cities at various points along the proposed line. "They [hadn't] even sold the bonds yet," complained Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, a California organization that opposed Proposition 1A from the beginning. "But the legislature [had] already approved $1.1 billion in spending for bookend projects in L.A. and San Francisco that aren't even high-speed rail but are basically fixed rail at the local level."

Ferocious opposition to the train surfaced long before the 2008 election, and it wasn't limited to antitax advocacy groups such as the Jarvis Association (named after the late Howard Jarvis, the activist who spearheaded a 1978 ballot measure that capped California's property taxes). The Sierra Club and other environmentalist groups for months fought a proposed Northern California route that would connect the San Joaquin Valley to San Francisco via a southerly route through the Diablo Mountains of the coastal ranges and then north along the San Francisco Peninsula, using a right-of-way already owned by the California Department of Transportation, which operates a commuter rail line from San Francisco to San Jose. The environmentalists argued that the population increases that would inevitably cluster around high-speed stations would endanger wetlands and grasslands harboring at-risk populations of waterfowl. They pushed for a more costly and time-consuming alternative-route through the thinly populated Altamont Pass on the east side of San Francisco Bay that would bypass the peninsula and descend into San Francisco from the north. To placate them while retaining the shorter southerly approach, the legislature eliminated a station proposed for Los Banos, a San Joaquin Valley town that sits adjacent to several state and federal wildlife refuges.

But the peninsula is also the home of Silicon Valley and its wealthy towns that house tech billionaires and their

DAMIAN DOVARGANES / AP

well-compensated employees. They dreaded the bullet train for reasons similar to those of the San Joaquin Valley farmers: They didn't want 200-mile-an-hour trains running high above grade and, shielded for miles by nearly impenetrable barriers, hurtling through their tree-shaded suburbs at five-minute intervals, lowering their multimillion-dollar property values. The wetlands-sheltering Los Banos compromise that had appeased the Sierra Club and other groups meant little to them. In August 2008, even before Proposition 1A hit the ballot boxes, the city of Atherton, adjacent to Stanford University and the very epicenter of high-tech luxury living, along with the nearby towns of Palo Alto and Menlo Park plus a number of environmental groups, filed the first of dozens of lawsuits lodged against the CHSRA over the past eight years. Their argument was that the authority had failed to comply with provisions of California's Environmental Quality Act. Those lawsuits were initially quite successful, at least in delaying construction. Superior Court judge Michael Kenny in Sacramento, who has overseen the lion's share of the litigation against the rail authority, issued rulings in 2009 and 2011 that forced the authority to write extensive revisions to its plans to minimize environmental damage.

In early 2013, however, Kenny dismissed the suits, ruling that the state had finally complied with environmental imperatives—and dashing the peninsula localities' hope that a court order would force the tracks to take the Altamont route. Meanwhile, in its 2012 business plan, the CHSRA had announced that it would scrap the idea of building an elevated rail-bed along the peninsula and would instead use a "blended service" system in which the high-speed trains would share tracks from San Jose to San Francisco with the existing Caltrans trains, which run at grade. The blended system would slow the bullet trains down to 125 miles an hour, raising the travel time from Los Angeles to San Francisco to more than three hours, which competes unfavorably with flying (even after factoring in airport hassles). But it would save California a lot of money. The estimated cost of the rail line had by then soared from the initial $33 billion to $98 billion. The blended strategy was expected to lower those costs to a more palatable $68 billion.

It's easy to mock the consternation of the *bien-pensant* Silicon Valley billionaires at the prospect of actually having to live with the bullet trains that have been a longtime pet project of auto-contemptuous progressives. And it's hard, too, not to be cynical about the peninsula dwellers' having managed to secure an exemption from elevated rail-beds for their high-end communities that Californians with less wealth and clout—such as the farmers of the San Joaquin Valley—cannot buy. Yet, in fact, the concerns of those upscale peninsula residents have exactly mirrored the concerns of middle-class and working-class California communities in the path of the train: that the close-knit towns in which they live will be split irrevocably. At public meetings earlier this year, peninsula residents complained that the current plan to run the CHSRA's contemplated 20 bullet trains per hour at grade would entail shutting down some of the 42 grade crossings along the Caltrain commuter line that give cars, trucks, buses, bicycles, and pedestrians convenient routes across the tracks.

A full-scale model of an HSR train at the capitol in Sacramento, February 26, 2015

RICH PEDRONCELLI / AP

Palo Alto resident Elizabeth Alexis, a founder of the liberal anti-CHSRA organization Californians Advocating Responsible Rail Design, told me, "More than half the kids in Palo Alto walk or bike to school," so overpasses at 10-mile intervals, or even 5-mile intervals, would put an end to the youngsters' self-transportation. "We're not for or against high-speed rail," Alexis said. "We just have different views on how it should be implemented. We believe that putting high priority on good transit is just civilized. The voters said in 2008 that they wanted high-speed rail, but at a reasonable price. But now we're in 2016, and there's been a huge investment of money, and we're at a crossroads. We need a conversation, and if you're not open, you can't have a conversation."

In November 2011 John Tos, another Hanford resident named Aaron Fukuda, and the Kings County Board of Supervisors, which had initially faced the prospect of the bullet train line's smashing through the center of Hanford's historic downtown, filed the most contentious and longest-running of the anti-CHSRA lawsuits. (San Joaquin Valley farmers, farm bureaus,

churches, businesses, irrigation districts, and localities from Madera to Bakersfield have lodged court proceedings to block the tracks, and while some of those cases have settled, others are still ongoing.) Fukuda, a civil engineer in his 30s, had bought a property (since sold) in 2006 on the east side of Hanford on which he and his wife had planned to build their dream house. Then they got hold of a CHSRA map indicating that their land lay square in the middle of the bullet-train alignment. With Frank Oliveira, whose family farms about 300 acres of cherry and walnut orchards in the same area, they formed a lobbying group, Citizens for California High Speed Rail Accountability, and started sending representatives to the rail authority's board meetings in Sacramento. I interviewed Oliveira by phone and Fukuda over lunch at the Superior Dairy, a popular ice cream parlor in downtown Hanford famous for its Matterhorn-size portions.

Above, cows lined up at a dairy owned by Lucas Loganberg and his family—which lies on a proposed HSR route; below, high-speed rail opponent Aaron Fukuda in front of his home, which also is threatened by HSR plans, July 16, 2013

Both Fukuda and Oliveira had been among the millions of rural Central Valley residents who had voted in favor of Proposition 1A in 2008, assuming that the bullet train would bypass their homes and orchards and run alongside Interstate 5 far to the west. Fukuda's discovery of the actual proposed route came as a complete surprise. "They never knocked on our doors and introduced themselves," he said. "We would never have known that we lived in the actual route of the train. The amount of anxiety that they've created in people's lives is incredible." The city of Hanford, he explained, had once enthusiastically supported a high-speed station—until it discovered that the authority planned to split its downtown in half.

The 58-year-old Oliveira, who grew up on a dairy farm, was particularly livid over the plan to run the train through a Baker Commodities cow-rendering plant on the outskirts of Hanford. "They were going to destroy it," he said. "This is a heavy dairy area, and it's the only rendering plant around. It serves about 600 dairies south of Fresno. Then they were supposed to move it, but to this day it's still in the alignment. They have no idea what it takes to run a dairy farm."

The Tos-Fukuda lawsuit was ultimately unsuccessful, but it did succeed in tying up the bulk of the $9.95 billion bond issue in Judge Kenny's courtroom for more than four years while lawyers wrangled over the suit's main contention: that the CHSRA was violating the terms of the 2008 referendum. In November 2013, Kenny ruled that Proposition 1A required the authority to identify all of its financing sources for completing the initial operating segment of the train—something the CHSRA, which had (and still has) little money on hand besides about $3.3 billion in federal funding, could not do. Kenny's ruling was a major victory for Tos and Fukuda, but a state appellate court reversed the decision a few months later, and the California supreme court refused to hear their appeal.

This past March, Kenny definitively declined to halt the train's construction, rejecting opponents' argument that, owing to the slower speeds necessitated by track-blending, it could never deliver on several of Proposition 1A's specific promises, such as topping out total travel time between Los Angeles and San Francisco at two hours and 40 minutes. Kenny agreed that the CHSRA had failed so far to show that its train project was either financially or logistically viable, and he noted that in order to shave its travel time on the shared peninsula track, the authority had abandoned the Transbay Terminal mentioned in Proposition 1A as its end point (a downtown transportation hub undergoing an ambitious reconstruction) in favor of a San Francisco station that was less convenient but slightly closer to San Jose. Nonetheless, Kenny ruled that those issues weren't "ripe for review"—that is, that the rail authority might be able to comply with Proposition 1A's restrictions at some point in the future as construction of the train continued.

IMAGES: RICH PEDRONCELLI / AP

Kenny's ruling highlighted what might be the CHSRA's biggest problem of all: a lack of construction money. Efforts to gin up private investment and federal subsidies that would trigger bond drawdowns have proved problematic. In 2010 California secured a $2.5 billion grant under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aka the 2009 stimulus pushed into place by newly elected President Obama as a way to end the recession by channeling federal dollars into so-called shovel-ready infrastructure projects.

Obama, like Jerry Brown, has been an enthusiastic bullet-train booster. During his first term he frequently referred to a coast-to-coast network of high-speed trains that would rival the interstate highway system in scope. His 2009 stimulus package had included $8 billion in construction funds to jump-start high-speed rail projects across the country. Nonetheless, Republican governors in Ohio (John Kasich), Wisconsin (Scott Walker), and Florida (Rick Scott)—three states that had briefly contemplated publicly funded bullet trains—turned down the stimulus money, worried about anemic passenger numbers and the soaring costs their taxpayers might face once the federal construction funds ran out. Those rejections turned out to be a windfall of sorts for California, which managed to snag an additional $1 billion from the Obama administration that other states didn't want, bringing the total up to the $3.5 billion that the state was expected to spend or forfeit by 2017. But if the train-skeptical Republican Congress maintains its majority this fall, no one expects more federal subsidies in the near future.

Not only does Proposition 1A expressly forbid the use of state tax revenues to fund high-speed construction, but the deficit-plagued state is already shouldering $400 billion in debt, largely in unfunded pension liabilities. In 2014 the Democratic-controlled California legislature, looking for ways to pay for the train, agreed to set aside 25 percent of "cap and trade" revenues—proceeds from a 2006 state law designed to curb greenhouse-gas emissions—to help fund high-speed rail. Clean-air groups have complained about the outsize state favoritism toward the rail authority, the largest beneficiary of cap and trade proceeds. The money might be better spent cleaning up buses and trucks that already operate, rather than underwriting an elaborate construction project that generates its own measure of air pollution. Nonetheless, the cap and trade deal, set to expire in 2020, was supposed to generate about $500 million a year in state funding for the train—until cap and trade auctions in May and August, expected to provide some $255 million, collapsed, yielding only $4.6 million. During the summer of 2015 the CHSRA put out feelers to potential private-sector investors. None expressed any interest in underwriting the construction without a state guarantee of expected operating revenues—impossible under the language of Proposition 1A.

Added to those shortfalls have been looming deadlines and massive engineering challenges. The plan had been that by 2022 the train would start accepting passengers for a 300-mile leg that would run south from Merced to Burbank in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, providing a model of service and passenger use that would finally attract the longed-for private-sector investment to pay for the rest of the construction. The authority had chosen to give priority to the Los Angeles metropolitan area over the San Francisco area because the former's larger population base could be expected to draw more paying customers, even though it was never clear why Southern Californians would want to take a trip to Fresno. To reach Burbank, however, would require tunneling through two east-west mountain ranges, the Tehachapi and the San Gabriel, that separate the San Joaquin Valley from the vast alluvial plain of coastal Southern California. The contemplated 36 miles of tunnels to be blasted through the two fault-pocked and potentially earthquake-prone ranges would be a geology-defying accomplishment that, as of January 2016, few at the CHSRA were quite certain how to effect. Indeed, some geologists deem it close to impossible. Diana Gomez, Central Valley regional director of the rail authority, said in an interview that she was counting on "engineering ingenuity and innovation, a lot of brainpower" to turn this ambitious drilling project into reality.

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And tunneling—if it works—is the only feasible way that a bullet train, which requires ultra-straight tracks to achieve its high speeds, can make it through the 7,000-foot-high Tehachapis to Los Angeles. The lowest feasible natural defile, the 4,000-foot Tejon Pass through which Interstate 5 descends into Bakersfield on a steep 6 percent grade known as the Grapevine, has been a death trap for decades for many a runaway truck and its driver. (Freight trains between Bakersfield and Los Angeles detour around the Grapevine

into the Mojave Desert along a time-consuming spiral called the Tehachapi Loop that reduces the grade, but there hasn't been any Bakersfield-Los Angeles passenger service since the early 1970s.)

The public opposition to the bullet train's planned alignment through Southern California turned out to be as vociferous as that elsewhere in the state. At a raucous June 2015 CHSRA hearing in downtown Los Angeles, about 150 residents and business owners along four alternative proposed routes voiced complaints about noise, destruction of homes and businesses, and, most poignantly, the chopping up of communities by the tracks, their high-voltage electrical systems, and the 20-foot-high proposed sound walls that one journalist quipped would

HSR foes protest during a Fresno groundbreaking, January 6, 2015.

give the towns "a real Berlin Wall vibe." Three of the proposed routes, which would link the desert city of Palmdale to Burbank, involved tunneling through the federally owned Angeles National Forest, which environmentalists complained would disrupt water tables and wells, threatening wildlife. An alternative overland route alongside a freeway would divide ranches nestled in the foothills of the San Gabriels where about 10,000 horses reside along with their owners. Joel Fajardo, mayor of San Fernando, a mostly Latino working-class town of 24,000 in the far northwest corner of Los Angeles County, complained that the train would bisect his city, with only two crossing points. "They would never propose a bullet train to go through Old Town Pasadena, Third Street Promenade [in high-end, Pacific Ocean-abutting Santa Monica], or Rodeo [Drive]," said Fajardo.

In December 2015, Patty Lopez, a Democratic assemblywoman representing San Fernando, broke ranks for the first time from the solid wall of Democratic legislative support in California for the bullet train. Declaring that the state had higher priorities such as water, jobs, and doing something about homelessness that outweighed super-fast trains, Lopez told the *Los Angeles Times* that the "money we are going to spend on it is crazy." It hadn't helped that in October 2015 *Times* reporter Ralph Vartabedian analyzed leaked CHSRA documents indicating that crucial deadlines would be missed and that Parsons Brinckerhoff, the New York-based main manager for the project, had predicted in 2013 that the total cost would rise at least 5 percent above the projected $68 billion—a prediction that didn't make its way into the rail authority's 2014 business plan. (Parsons presided over the "Big Dig," a tunnel through downtown Boston whose cost zoomed from a $2.8 billion estimate in 1982 to $14.6 billion by the time it was completed in 2007.)

On March 4 of this year, the CHSRA issued a drastically revised business plan. One of its features was exactly the sort of delay that the leaked documents had forecast: The starting date for the first operational leg of the train wouldn't be 2022 but 2025. The first main phase of the train—from Anaheim to San Francisco—wouldn't be completed until 2029, more than 10 years later than contemplated in the text of Proposition 1A. The even bigger surprise was that the authority had decided to turn its construction schedule upside down, dropping the difficult and expensive southerly initial segment in favor of a northerly initial operating segment that would cost less than half as much.

The CHSRA slivered off about $4 billion in estimated construction costs by using what it said were more accurate figures, so that the total cost of the Anaheim-San Francisco run would now be $64 billion instead of $68 billion. But a review of the business plan by the California Legislative Analyst's Office pointed out that nearly every single aspect of the proposed funding arrangements for the train was dicey—including the funding for the initial 130-mile segment where work is ongoing. For example, the CHSRA seemed to be counting on the legislature's continuing to funnel cap and trade proceeds in its direction through 2050, some 30 years beyond the expiration of its current cap and trade arrangement—and that's without even anticipating cap and trade auction failures like this past May's. The office also noted that the CHSRA had no concrete idea how it was going to pay for some $43.5 billion out of the total construction costs, which it would need to find by 2018 when the stimulus money dries up.

The Obama administration in May gave the CHSRA something of a break, handing the agency four extra years—up to 2021—to spend its existing federal stimulus grants. Technically, the 2017 deadline remains in place, and had the administration decided to enforce it, the state of California, which has spent only about $1 billion in grant funds so far because of delays, might have had to forfeit most of the rest. But thanks to some interpretive jiggery-pokery by the Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad

GARY KAZANJIAN / AP

Administration, California will no longer be required to submit invoices for work actually performed in order to receive the federal funds, as most grant recipients are required to do. The May reprieve essentially hands over all the grant proceeds to California in advance, allowing the state to spend them in a far more leisurely fashion.

Earlier the Obama administration had absolved California from another stimulus-grant requirement: having to supply matching funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis in order to qualify for the federal monies. That would have obliged the state to put up more than $3 billion, which, what with its bond funding tied up at the time and no hope of dipping into state tax revenues, would have been nearly impossible. Now, California gets to wait until it has spent the federal billions before it has to put up any money of its own. The latest change in the grant terms in May—essentially turning the grant into an open-ended cash advance with no federal monitoring of how it is to be spent—enraged congressional Republicans. Representative Denham, the rail subcommittee chairman, called this a "blank check" representing a "clear conflict of interest" on the part of train-booster Obama. "Not only do they lack a business plan, but they continue to waste taxpayer dollars without being held accountable," Denham complained in an interview with the *Hill*.

The Obama administration absolved California from some stimulus-grant requirements, including having to supply matching funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis to qualify for the federal monies. That would have obliged the state to put up more than $3 billion, which, what with its bond funding tied up at the time and no hope of dipping into state tax revenues, would have been nearly impossible.

Even more unpleasant surprises concerning the bullet train have recently dropped like so many other shoes. In late June the *Los Angeles Times*'s Vartabedian, having filed a freedom-of-information request, revealed that the CHSRA had apparently scrubbed from its website a pessimistic assessment by the Spanish rail-construction contractor Ferrovial that the train would never be able to operate without the taxpayer subsidies that Proposition 1A specifically forbids. The Spanish firm had noted in its bid that of 111 high-speed lines that it had looked at around the world, only 3 were financially viable without government aid. Then it turned out, in early August, that the relocation of a section of Highway 99 running through Fresno that is crucial to the construction of the San Joaquin Valley segment is running six months behind schedule and 15 percent over budget. The CHSRA is trying to persuade the state legislature to give Caltrans a $35 million increase over the $226 million it had granted the agency for the relocation in 2013. On Aug. 29 the House rail subcommittee held an oversight hearing in San Francisco at which both Republicans and Democrats expressed concerns that the line would never be completed, leaving California with isolated segments of track as politically powerful Los Angeles and San Francisco siphon off portions of the already scarce funds into pet "bookend" projects.

An initiative originally planned for the 2016 California ballot was heavily supported by San Joaquin Valley farmers. It would have diverted proceeds from the bullet-train bond issue to water projects but was withdrawn by its Republican sponsors when they discovered they couldn't afford the high cost of signature-gathering to qualify for the ballot. So right now train opponents in an overwhelmingly Democratic state are pinning their hopes on Jerry Brown's lieutenant governor, former San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom, who is expected to run to succeed Brown when his term expires in 2018 and who broke with him on the issue in a 2014 interview with a Seattle radio station: "I am not the only Democrat that feels this way," Newsom said. "I am one of the few that just said it publicly. . . . Most are now saying it privately."

But then, there's the alternative. I talked over the phone with the CHSRA's board chairman, Dan Richard, a longtime state official during Brown's first round as state governor who served on the board of the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District from 1992 to 2004. "They say we're destroying agriculture in the Central Valley," he said. "But over those 130 miles of track, we're taking maybe 4,500 acres out of 6.5 million acres. High-speed rail isn't a threat to agriculture."

Richard's charm was infectious, and when he said that private investment was the only chance that the California train has of surviving—and that the California train is a wonderful thing—I wanted to believe. He was the Music Man conjuring up 76 trombones.

"I was in China," he said. "The Chinese have 15,000 miles of high-speed rail. They bulldozed people out of the way to get it, and we're not going to do that. But there you are going 190 miles an hour, and you cover 800 miles in five hours. I thought: If we had this in California, I could go to San Francisco for dinner and a show, and I'd be back in time for bed. I could go from L.A. and be hiking up Half-Dome by noon. When people hear this, they say, 'Wow.'"

Yes. Except, well, $64 billion—or whatever. ♦

Lyndon Johnson visits the Fletcher family, Inez, Kentucky (1964).

Left Behind

An unsparing look at unheralded victims. BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

It is said that timing is everything, and it may even be so. It is certainly true that the timing of J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* has been perfect: This is the political season of white lower-class discontent, not to say despair, and this is the essential material of Vance's book. It is also his life. And it should be said, early and firmly, that the book is not just perfectly timed but also beautifully written, achingly felt, and true.

While Vance's style is lean and efficient, *Hillbilly Elegy* is not easy to read. The life he unsparingly details is so full of pointless violence and self-inflicted woes and, at times, so lacking in hope that if he were any less skillful in rendering it, readers would be tempted to give up.

Hillbilly Elegy
A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis
by J.D. Vance
Harper, 272 pp., $27.99

The author's family comes out of the Kentucky hollows where life is harsh—often violently so—and people have learned not to expect much more of it than that. If there is work, it most likely will be in the mines. Women get pregnant when they are still girls and the men who are responsible fail in their responsibilities. The children grow up without guidance or ambition. The void in their lives is filled with idleness and drugs. And this passes from one generation unto the next.

So, one thinks, why stay? Why not escape the Appalachian prison for a better life elsewhere? Well, Vance's people did, along with millions of others. As he writes:

> The scale of the migration was staggering. … In 1960, of Ohio's ten

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

WALTER BENNETT / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY

> million residents, one million of them were born in Kentucky, West Virginia, or Tennessee. This doesn't count the large number of migrants from elsewhere in the southern Appalachian Mountains; nor does it include the children or grandchildren of migrants who were hill people to the core.

The grandparents who raised Vance were among those who fled north to Ohio where there was work. In the case of Vance's grandfather, this turned out to be a steel mill in Middletown, Ohio. This is where his mother was born and raised, as was he—although it would be more accurate, in his case, to say "born and neglected."

But even as Vance's grandparents put together the material framework of a middle-class life—house, car, some disposable income, etc.—the pathologies of the hollow went with them: The grandfather drank, and the alcohol liberated the violence; the grandmother, who was a match for him in this department, warned him that if he came home drunk again, she would kill him. He did—and she tried. While he was passed out on a sofa, she doused him with gasoline and put a match to it. He survived with minor burns and eventually did get off the whiskey.

Meanwhile, their daughter, Vance's mother, finished high school but also got pregnant with Vance's sister. Her life then took a slow downhill slide into serial marriages and childbirth. She, too, carried the curse of easy violence and once threatened to kill Vance and herself by crashing the vehicle she was driving at high speed. When she finally pulled over in order to "beat the s—t out of me," he ran to a stranger's house for protection and his mother went to jail.

By this point in his life, Vance himself seemed headed down a bleak road taken by so many who, though they may have left the hollow, it had never left them. He might have failed in school since that was almost ordained for young people like him. But his grandparents rescued him: His grandfather coached him with arithmetic and his grandmother would not allow him to give up, would not let him fail at school, and coached him on the books when his potential could have been withering in front of the television or worse.

She also taught him how to fight: One of her rules was "to punch with your whole body, especially your hips." Few people, she told him, "appreciate how unimportant your fist is when it comes to hitting someone." Vance fought as she'd taught him to fight, and he put down the class bully in the last fistfight of his life. He also listened to her when she told him to "never be like those f—ing losers who think the deck is stacked against them. You can do anything you want to."

He could have been a dropout, like so many of his cohort. But the pushing of his grandmother and the attention of a dedicated teacher put him on another path, and college became, almost miraculously, a possibility. But for someone with his primitive social skills, even the application process seemed daunting. That was a matter of self-confidence more than anything else: Who, in his mind, was *he* to be applying to colleges when his proper destiny was to be another dropout and criminal or addict? Or both.

So he enlisted in the Marines. This was the last door through which he needed to pass if he were to leave the literal and psychological hollow behind. He returned to civilian life after his time in the Marines (which included a year in Iraq) and was accepted at Ohio State, where he blazed through to a degree in two years. From there, it was on to law school—Yale, if you please, where he became an editor of the law review. He is now a "biotech executive in Silicon Valley" and has given the world this book.

Which would be important for fundamental literary reasons, if nothing else. One cannot read *Hillbilly Elegy* without being moved, and honestly so: There is no cheap sentimentality in its pages, though there is a lot of uncomplicated love. In many ways, the book reminds me of another memoir of growing up in a broken and poisonous culture but surviving and escaping to tell the tale. That would be *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Claude Brown's account of life on the streets of Harlem in the 1940s and early '50s, as the nation's attention was being drawn to the stresses and pathologies of urban black life just as it is now focusing on the trials of those fugitives from the hollows Vance chronicles.

They are the Trump voters, of course, many of them: the ones who were left behind when the mills closed and the jobs went away. They are the ones who cannot find work, or say they can't, in the digital world. They are, in a word, victims in fact and, more important, in spirit. Victims, largely, of themselves. Which is one of the most compelling aspects of this book. Vance does not excuse and he provides no alibi for the people he comes from and loves. In his high school years, he took a job as a cashier in a supermarket and witnessed customers who

> gamed the welfare system. They'd buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps then sell them at a discount for cash. They'd write up their orders separately, so they could buy food with food stamps, then buy beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash. They'd regularly go through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones. I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largesse enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.

Vance is simultaneously unsparing and charitable—which is paradoxical, perhaps, but these are his people. He is a hillbilly, like them.

Vance doesn't propose grand solutions, perhaps because he doesn't believe that any are handy. When Claude Brown wrote *Manchild in the Promised Land* America was launching a War on Poverty and getting on with creating Model Cities. Meanwhile, back on the streets where Brown had grown up, heroin was taking over. In one of *Manchild*'s memorable passages, Brown wrote how

> Heroin had just about taken over. . . . It seemed to be a kind of plague. Every time I went uptown, somebody else was hooked, somebody else was strung out. People talked about them

as if they were dead. You'd ask about an old friend, and they'd say, "Oh, well, he's strung out." It wasn't just a comment or an answer to a question. It was a eulogy for someone. He was just dead, through.

The optimism of the Great Society was no match for the pathologies of the urban underclass. Heroin was stronger than hope, and heroin has now found its way into the lives of the people Vance loves, including his mother.

It is a mystery why people whose legend is for being tough and resourceful are (as Vance describes them) helpless and victims, ultimately, of themselves: "I believe we hillbillies are the toughest goddamned people on this earth," he writes, but "are we tough enough to engage with the world rather than withdraw from it? Are we tough enough to look at ourselves in the mirror and admit that our conduct harms our children?"

It's hard to know, on reading *Hillbilly Elegy*, what the answer might be. If there is an answer—and the black experience doesn't make one especially hopeful—it certainly isn't as simple as electing Donald Trump to the presidency. Or anyone else, for that matter. Public policy gives—as with those food stamps Vance took from his customers at the supermarket—but it also takes away, as with all those factory jobs, such as the one that Vance's grandfather worked at the steel mill, that are now gone.

The loss that Vance details here is measurable not merely as a function of reduced income but also as a diminished work ethic and a corresponding loss of spirit, a demoralization which manifests itself in an overarching spirit of denial.

It's not like parents and teachers never mention hard work. Nor do they walk around loudly proclaiming that they expect their children to turn out poorly. These attitudes lurk below the surface, less in what people say than in how they act. One of our neighbors was a lifetime welfare recipient, but in between asking my grandmother to borrow her car or offering to trade food stamps for cash at a premium, she'd blather on about the importance of industriousness. "So many people abuse the system, it's impossible for the hardworking people to get the help they need," she'd say. This was the construct she'd built in her head: Most of the beneficiaries of the system were extravagant moochers, but she—despite never having worked in her life—was an obvious exception.

Inspiring as his own story is, Vance leaves us wondering about the people whose lives are so badly broken and about whom he writes with affection, pity, and candor. What, if anything, can be done?

If J.D. Vance's people are to be saved, they will need to do it themselves. As they knew in the hollows, and know in their bones, you cannot depend on outsiders. ♦

B&A

Damn Yanquis

Good and bad intentions in the Spanish Civil War.

BY STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Spain in Our Hearts
Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939
by Adam Hochschild
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 464 pp., $30

Adam Hochschild is a prominent San Francisco leftist, cofounder of *Mother Jones*, and the successful author of books on the British anti-slavery movement, the Belgian colonization of the Congo, World War I, and the legacy of Joseph Stalin. In assembling this volume, he faced a formidable challenge: to add something new to the immense and varied record of the Spanish conflict that preceded World War II.

The Spanish war produced a memoir, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, that Hochschild admits gained unique standing as an account of the combat and its convoluted politics. In addition, other eyewitness reports, innumerable literary efforts of uneven quality, excerpts from Spanish, Russian, and other archives, and standard academic works such as those of Stanley Payne would, it seems, have nearly exhausted the Spanish Civil War as a topic. The war, as noted by Hochschild, from its commencement in mid-1936 to its conclusion in the spring of 1939, produced a thousand front-page headlines in the *New York Times*.

Lacking much in the way of fresh evidence or insight, therefore, Hochschild has settled on a sentimental quest for a legendary heroism by the American leftists who went to Spain. One cannot write about the war without drawing on Orwell, one of several Englishmen also described in the narrative; but here, nobody cries when they can weep. Hochschild seeks drama, not political clarity. This excludes, in the main, the experiences of the Spanish themselves, both defenders of the republic and followers of the military outfits that rose up against it and were eventually led by General Francisco Franco. Driving issues in Spain's history are handled peremptorily by Hochschild. And with discomfort, he defends the ultimate dependence of the republic on Russian arms, even comparing it as a "devil's bargain" with America's post-1941 military alliance with the Soviet Union. But the Spanish republic was undermined, and arguably lost the war, because of its inveiglement with Stalin. The same was hardly true of the United States in World War II.

Hochschild is taken especially with the personality of Robert Merriman, a Berkeley graduate student and "veteran" of the campus ROTC, in which

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he claimed rank as a reserve captain. The latter qualification, slender as it may have been in real life, led to Merriman's command of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, as one contingent of American volunteers called themselves. Another characteristic recommended Merriman as an officer of the "International Brigades," assembled by the Communist International out of the ranks of pro-Russians in America, Britain, France, and other countries, as well as refugees from Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy: Merriman had come to Spain from Moscow, where he frequented circles that witnessed and stayed silent at the progress of Stalin's famines and purge trials.

Robert Merriman was a confirmed Stalinist, an issue Hochschild seems to accept as a natural feature of the political landscape at that time: "That a star Berkeley graduate student should be capable of ignoring a monumental human disaster [i.e., Stalinism] in precisely the field he was studying [the Russian economy] may seem strange today." But it is not strange, as we see in the contemporary American academy where tenured experts seek to diminish the crimes of communism, radical Islam, and other forces arrayed against liberal democracy. Soviet advisers and officers soon appeared in Spain.

For the American Communists who had come to defend the Spanish republic, military life was difficult: The International Brigades lacked usable weaponry, effective helmets, warm clothing, decent food, and consistent medical care for the wounded. Recurrent diarrhea was caused by inferior rations and insanitary conditions. And the Internationals faced the Spanish Army of Africa, comprising Spain's foreign legion and its associated (substantially Moroccan) detachments, who were fully experienced in war and skillful in operating over the dry, broken soil of central Spain. Foreigners caught by Franco's Nationalists were typically executed; but inexperienced International fighters were mowed down in large numbers on the front lines. As the war continued, Soviet secret police began hunting anti-Stalinists such as George Orwell.

The sufferings of the International Brigade were among many inflicted on the Spanish republicans—and depicted by Hochschild in a panoramic, if inchoate, manner. Military supplies to the republic were embargoed by a "Non-Intervention Committee" that included Germany and Italy, Franco's enablers, and to which the Russians acceded. Madrid was the focus of a long siege by Franco's armies; Guernica was bombed by the Condor Legion, a Luftwaffe unit loaned to Franco by Hitler; civilians in Barcelona were targeted by German and Italian bombers. In retrospect, that the republic fought for three years, and that a large part of its militias escaped with their families into France when the war ended in Franco's victory, seems miraculous. But that is a point overlooked here.

ULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY IMAGES

General Franco (center) in Burgos (1936)

In Hochschild's account, blame for the defeat of the Spanish republic gravitates inevitably to Washington and the Democratic administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The president and his wife, Eleanor, are painted as sympathetic to the republic; but Roosevelt depended on Roman Catholic voters who were aghast at the anticlerical outrages committed in republican Spain. FDR could not, we are told, risk alienating the church by assisting the republic. Another aspect of American involvement—and the only element of *Spain in Our Hearts* that brings unexamined information to light—involves extended criticism by Hochschild of Texaco, the oil company. Texaco's Norwegian-born executive Torkild Rieber supplied American petroleum products to Franco on credit—and between 1939 and 1941, he provided maritime intelligence to the Germans as well. For those latter activities, Rieber was forced to resign. Yet it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Spanish Civil War was a feast for many predators. Among them, Torkild Rieber and Texaco appear insignificant when compared with Stalin and Hitler.

Adolf Hitler expected a great deal in strategic commodities from Franco, but he received little—aside from the participation of a "Blue Division" of Francoist veterans in the German Army on the Eastern Front. Joseph Stalin was paid for the old and unreliable military supplies he "sold" the republic by receiving most of Spain's gold reserves. As the end of the civil war approached, Stalin abandoned the republic and prepared for his pact with Hitler.

Hochschild does reveal small details showing that foreign enthusiasts of the republic did not understand its sociology very well. The companion (and third wife) of Ernest Hemingway, Martha Gellhorn, is said to have written to Eleanor Roosevelt that "the Catalans . . . are sort of fake Spaniards." Another individual profiled in these pages, a young Trotskyist from Kentucky named Lois Orr, complained: "If only they would make their revolution in some another language [than Catalan]." When these dismissive opinions were offered, Catalonia was the bulwark of the republican defense: Contempt for Catalan culture was shared with Franco and his generals, as it is shared by the Spanish left with the country's right today.

As others have shown, notwithstanding the skill of Francisco Franco and his armies, the Spanish republic was finally destroyed by its foreign "friends," chiefly the Soviet Union and its cadres. Recognition of that reality should have been the starting point of *Spain in Our Hearts*. As meddlers in a quarrel where they didn't belong, the International Brigades had more in common with today's Islamic State than with Abraham Lincoln. ♦

B&A

Pitch Imperfect

Is there a royal road to the pennant?

BY MICHAEL NELSON

The Only Rule Is It Has to Work
Our Wild Experiment Building a New Kind of Baseball Team
by Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller
Henry Holt, 368 pp., $30

"Sean," said catcher Isaac Wenrich to pitcher Sean Conroy, the first openly gay active player in professional baseball history, "slow down and let me put a dip in my mouth. That wasn't a gay reference. I said *dip*."

"In a normal workplace, these comments would be grounds for a lawsuit, or at the very least a sensitivity seminar," write Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller, the two self-declared "apostles of sabermetrics" who, as directors of baseball operations for the independent Pacific Association Sonoma Stompers, brought Conroy to the team in 2015. But in the locker room atmosphere of a ball club, "they represent a strange sort of progress." For any player, "it might hurt more *not* to be mocked, which would mean being beneath the team's notice." Conroy's own reaction: "'Keep doing that.' It's what makes me feel comfortable."

Sean Conroy

Signing the first gay player—a scorecard from his winning start was requested and put on display by the Hall of Fame last year—was the least of Lindbergh and Miller's accomplishments in signing Conroy. As a player for the Division III Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Engineers, Conroy had been passed over by every major league organization as a junkball pitcher with an odd delivery. What the authors saw in him, however, were stats showing he could get batters out.

Which he did: a solid win for the sabermetric approach that, since the publication of Michael Lewis's bestselling *Moneyball* (2003)—and eight years later, the movie starring Brad Pitt as the Oakland A's data-appreciating general manager Billy Beane and Jonah Hill as a composite of Beane's geeky numbers guys—has grown famous for urging that game and roster decisions be based on statistical analysis rather than tradition, experience, "gut feel," and lore.

Part of Lindbergh and Miller's success as operations executives came from insisting that Conroy, the team's best relief pitcher, not be pigeonholed as a closer, protecting "three-run leads in the ninth inning." Instead, he should be brought in to pitch in whatever inning the game was on the line. Other data-based achievements accompanied this one, including signing about 10 "spreadsheet guys" (that is, players no one in the Stompers organization had ever seen), deploying shifts in creative and generally effective ways (such as a first-ever five-man infield), and bringing scouting reports into the dugout, previously forbidden terrain for baseball executives.

The Stompers were 26-11 in the first half of the league's split season, well ahead of everybody else. "Our goal," Lindbergh and Miller had told the players, "is to win the first half"—done—"and go undefeated in the second half." Instead, they went 18-22 and then lost the championship game.

What happened? First, they fired Feh Lentini, the old-school manager who had led them to victory, because he kept stomping away from their advice-giving sessions while shouting things like, "This is just Baseball 101 because you haven't fucking played it." Beyond that, most of the position players Lindbergh and Miller found in their spreadsheets turned out to be duds—so much so, they realized at season's end, that if they had succeeded in substituting their own lineup for Lentini's, things "would have been significantly *worse*." Too late, they came to see that the manager, hidebound and hard-headed as he was, knew some things they didn't. Urged by Lindbergh and Miller to replace a player with someone they liked better, Lentini explained that a team was more than a collection of individuals: "If changes are made when guys are doing their jobs," he told them, "then every single person in there starts feeling the pressure because if guys doing the job get released [then] anyone can."

As Lindbergh and Miller's failures demonstrate, throwing out the

CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / PRESS DEMOCRAT / AP

Michael Nelson, Fulmer professor of political science at Rhodes College, is the author of Resilient America: Electing Nixon in 1968, Channeling Dissent, and Dividing Government.

accumulated wisdom of experienced baseball hands is just dumb. But as their successes show, it's only sensible to add data-based analysis to the traditional baseball toolbox. That's why they eventually concluded that what baseball needs is not a stale "stats-vs.-tradition debate" but, rather, an ongoing "conversation about the best way to make baseball decisions" that draws on the insights of both. It's a much wiser judgment than is made by either those who see sabermetric analysis as a hammer and every baseball decision as a nail or those who see statistics as the revenge of the nerds.

Sabermetrics is a path to the truth, but not the whole truth, about baseball. *Moneyball*, it turns out, wasn't nearly as on-the-mark as Michael Lewis had us believe. His favorite player among those scorned by the A's scouts, a squat catcher named Scott Hatteberg with an uncanny ability to draw walks in college ball, ended up seriously underperforming "the scout-certified prospect Carlos Pena," whom Beane traded so that manager Art Howe would have to play Hatteberg instead. And as *Moneyball* critic Alan Hirsch has pointed out, none of the eight players Beane wanted to draft in 2002 even made it to the majors.

The undisputed effect of *Moneyball* on baseball has been to make the game duller. Pitches per plate appearance—the soporific experience of watching a batter watch the pitcher and catcher throw the ball back and forth—have gone up, both to wear out starting pitchers and to increase the chances of drawing a walk. Stolen base attempts have gone down, along with the excitement they generate. Who cares about running when, the data indicate, walks and home runs are what matter most?

As for pitchers throwing complete games—the old normal—that practice has become laughably antiquated, based on statistics showing that, by the third time through the lineup, batters have figured them out. To the extent that *Moneyball* got some things right, as a fan, I'll take wrong almost every time. ♦

B&A

Westward, Oh

The prophetic vision of Wallace Stegner's 'Angle of Repose.'

BY MICAH MATTIX

If there's a novel that today's "microaggressed" students should read, it's Wallace Stegner's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angle of Repose*. Published in 1971, it focuses on the life of Susan Ward (modeled on the 19th-century writer and illustrator Mary Hallock Foote), who leaves her home in the Hudson River valley to make a life with her mining-engineer husband in the West. It's a story of how the American West was settled, how communities and individuals fought against isolation to create a new identity and place. But it's also a book about history—about how the past shapes us and, importantly, how it provides us with a proper perspective of our own lives. For Stegner, without any sense of the past we are unable to be either wise or just, because without it, we have no sense of "what real injustice" looks like.

The narrator, Lyman Ward (based on the New Humanist Norman Foerster), is a retired professor and amputee who has moved into his deceased grandparents' home in Grand Valley, California, to study and write about their life. Ward retraces their meeting in New York and their early years at various mining camps across the West, and how their "union of opposites"—East and West, "a romantic and a realist," woman and man—survived despite professional failures, miscommunication, and moral failings, and whether anything more than mere survival in marriage is possible.

The answer to that first question is a sometimes-fragile sense of duty informed by tradition. When Oliver Ward's venture to build a dam and irrigate a section of western Idaho fails (like his other, earlier ventures), Susan is crushed by her sense that she has given up her home on the East Coast and the future of her children for nothing. When Susan loses a child because she was distracted by the amorous attentions of an employee who became a family friend, Oliver shuts his wife out from his life. The two remain married but live lives of "quiet desperation," like particles on a slope at an angle that is just horizontal enough from them not to begin rolling downhill—an angle of repose.

Were the Wards a modern couple, they would have divorced; but convention—which is another word for civilization for Lyman—held them together. But what, if anything, could have *restored* their relationship, not just prevented it from dissolving? The answer to this question is not academic. Lyman's own wife, we learn early in the novel, left him shortly after he had the lower half of his leg removed. She has betrayed him in a much deeper way than his grandmother betrayed his grandfather, and now, having been rejected by her lover, she wishes to see Lyman again. He refuses but also senses that he may wish to see her at some point. Early in the novel, Lyman admits that there is "too much of Grandfather in me." After immersing himself in his grandparents' lives, he sees that forgiving his wife in a way that his grandfather never forgave his grandmother may be the key for such a restoration.

"I lie wondering," Lyman writes, "if

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I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather."

The marriage of Susan and Oliver Ward is a microcosm of an earlier America that Stegner contrasts with a 1960s version represented by Lyman Ward's son, Rodman, and Ward's assistant at the house, Shelly. Rodman is a progressive technocrat who believes in the power of data to explain and solve all of the world's problems, and who looks with bemused condescension at his father's interest in his obscure, mildly accomplished grandmother: "Rodman, like most sociologists and most of his generation, was born without the sense of history. To him it is only an aborted social science," Lyman muses. He continues:

> Like other Berkeley radicals, he is convinced that the post-industrial post-Christian world is worn out, corrupt in its inheritance, helpless to create by evolution the social and political institutions, the forms of personal relations, the conventions, moralities and systems of ethics (insofar as these are indeed necessary) appropriate to the future. Society being thus paralyzed, it must be pried loose. He, Rodman Ward, culture hero born fully armed from this history-haunted skull, will be happy to provide blueprints, or perhaps ultimatums and manifestoes, that will save us and bring on a life of true freedom.

The allusion to the birth of Athena from the skull of Zeus, but also the birth of Sin from the head of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, is, of course, intended.

Unlike Rodman, Lyman's assistant Shelly has no "blueprints" for a future society, but she is happy to support those of others. A moral relativist who thinks Lyman's grandmother's view of fidelity was a "hangup," she considers joining a hippie camp that promises to create "a new sane healthy world within the shell of the old"—a world without marriages, money, property, or class distinction, and that does not pollute the environment.

The problem with such "beautiful thinking," Lyman tells Shelly, is that it "ignores both history and human nature." In cutting themselves off from history, rebels develop a delusional sense of their own importance, which leads them to miscalculate their chances of success. "Civilizations grow by agreements and accommodations and accretions," Lyman tells Shelly, "not by repudiations. The rebels and the revolutionaries … [t]hey're always trying to reclaim a tropical jungle with a sprinkling can full of weed killer. Civilizations grow and change and decline—they aren't remade."

Wallace Stegner

What's interesting here is that Lyman admits that revolutionaries are sometimes necessary to correct civilization's errors to keep civilization healthy. He tells Shelly that such figures are sometimes "eddies, they keep the stream from getting stagnant, but they get swept down and absorbed." Stegner makes a similar comment in his essay on "The Writer and the Concept of Adulthood." The writer, Stegner remarks, is just as "responsible" as a priest or a public servant; the difference is that he is "responsible not to a tradition or a church or any sort of social stability and conformity, but to his personal vision of truth. … His vision and the integrity with which he pursues and promotes it are elements needed for a larger and more humane synthesis, which in the nature of things will again harden and will need once more the services of iconoclasts."

The difference between the revolutionary and the writer, however, is that the former, in his pride and ignorance, aims to burn the old way to the ground, while the latter aims to correct it.

The other problem with revolutionaries, for Stegner, is that their historical ignorance cripples their ability to recognize the errors of the present and leads them to mistake any thwarting of desires as evil. We need "a sense of history," Lyman writes, in order to know what you can't do, "what you have to accept," which can only be learned by studying the lives of others: "Somewhere, sometime," Lyman writes, somebody taught Shelly "to question everything—though it might have been a good thing if he'd also taught her to question the act of questioning."

Because of his high view of tradition, Wallace Stegner is sometimes labeled a conservative. One recent writer even called him "a visceral conservative." But he was a classical liberal and a conservationist, committed to social justice. In 1945, *Look* magazine published a volume of photographs of minorities; Stegner provided the text. The point of the volume, according to the editors, was "to present an objective treatment of individual minorities" to counter "a growing wave of intolerance and prejudice" during World War II. The book is neither "reactionary nor radical," the editors wrote, but "forthright, fact-finding, liberal."

Stegner's anecdotes of the lives of individual immigrants, and other religious and ethnic minorities, are largely that, even if also selected to demonstrate his argument that underlying "all our prejudice, racial or religious or cultural, is fear—the fear of being swamped, overrun, changed, or converted or diluted." He writes of Jewish

ALEX GOTFRYD / CORBIS / GETTY

boys chased off a South Boston beach, Filipinos slapped for looking at a white woman, Japanese evacuated to detention camps, segregated African Americans lynched in the South. While it is easy to demonize Southerners for their racism, Stegner writes, "None of us is so different from … the unreconstructed Johnny Reb."

> The Mid-West burgher who will talk to you in the most liberal terms about the necessity of giving equal opportunities to Negroes, Mexicans, Filipinos, Chinese, or Japanese—and will vote the way he talks—may show a chink in his armor when Jews or Catholics are mentioned.

For Stegner, America does not have "a Negro problem" or "a Jewish problem" as much as it has "one national problem of how to integrate all our diverse cultures or peoples into one society."

Prejudice, in other words, is a deep-seated evil, and Stegner's problem with 1960s progressives—beyond misunderstanding *all* limitation as oppression—was that they were often unable to recognize their own capacity for evil. In the novel, both Rodman and Shelly view Lyman's grandmother as a comic figure, mildly mocking her writing and her morals, unaware of their own mindless judgment of her as somehow inferior to them.

In the end, only Lyman Ward experiences some sort of enlightenment. Despite his physical limitations, his life seems much larger than the lives of either Rodman or Shelly. Lyman remarks at the beginning of the novel that "as a modern man and one-legged man, I can tell you that the conditions are similar. We have been cut off, the past has been ended and the family has broken up and the present is adrift in its wheelchair." But that doesn't mean we are without hope. If we are to avoid complete self-destruction brought on by a callow and ultimately self-centered reordering of society according to "data" and power relations, we must begin by looking to the past which, if nothing else, offers a partial freedom from the limited choices and wrongheaded questions of the present. ♦

B&A

The Art of War

An indelible eye on the life of the soldier.

BY JAMES GARDNER

New York

Antoine Watteau is universally admired as the painter of *fêtes galantes*, those rarefied scenes of the beau monde in the waning years of Louis XIV. But there is a corner of Watteau's career, his depictions of military life, that has received less attention and is now the focus of this fine show. Because Watteau's work in this field is limited to 10 paintings, a few engravings, and several dozen drawing sheets, the Frick exhibition, with 4 of the paintings and many of the drawings, is nearly definitive.

It is one of the oddities of our generation, compared with our forebears, that we are apt to know more about art history than about history, and thus to view the latter as a frame or context for the former. Seeing Watteau's courtiers and damsels embarking for Cythera, or flitting about the gardens of the ancien régime, we tend to forget that these images were conceived within a context of unceasing war. Most of Watteau's short life, from 1684 to 1721, passed under the shadow of Louis XIV's endless military campaigns. Watteau was born six years after the Treaty of Nijmegen ratified the astounding conquests of Louis's youth, and the painter was 13 when, after the disastrous battles of Louis's middle age, the Treaty of Ryswick revoked most of those conquests.

But the ink was scarcely dry on that document when Louis embarked on the War of the Spanish Succession. Among its more notable contests was the 1709 Battle of Malplaquet—perhaps the bloodiest day of the 18th century—fought only a few miles from Valenciennes, the northern town in which Watteau was born. As a Walloon, Watteau's artistic allegiances owed as much to Flanders as to France. Although it takes a practiced eye to see, the pearl-like flesh-tones and feathery foliage of his diminutive paintings originate in the maximalist works of his great Flemish forebear, Peter Paul Rubens. But if most of Rubens's followers—and there were many of them—were history painters, Watteau was nearly unique in applying the lessons of the master to genre scenes.

Even in these military works, Watteau does not depict battles but rather the slow, wearisome camp life that preceded and followed them. Occasionally a pair of female figures, as in *The Halt*, reminds us of the Watteau we know and love, the charming painter of *fêtes galantes*. But for the most part, these images are murkier than those we usually associate with the artist. Their often-twilit indeterminacy is a far cry from the sparkling light of his court scenes, while gray and brown earth-tones have supplanted the shimmer of velvet and silk. In general, Watteau puts on a brave face—almost like a conscript who, once in uniform, is determined to make the best of things, even if the circumstances of military life hardly conform to the bend of his nature. The perspective in these works is often a little skewed, some of the figures seem

Watteau's Soldiers
Scenes of Military Life in 18th-Century France
The Frick Collection
to October 2

James Gardner's latest book is Buenos Aires: The Biography of a City.

'The Halt' (ca. 1710)

disengaged from their spatial context, and matters are not helped by a frequently poor state of preservation.

What is most novel and striking about these works, however, is their depiction of individual soldiers going about their business. And in this respect, the paintings are greatly supported by an abundance of drawings at the Frick. When we compare the paintings with the drawings on which they were based, we find almost a split in artistic consciousness. Although reality tends to be fastidiously mediated in Old Master paintings, the preliminary drawings that underpin them often reveal an astounding clarity of observation.

That is surely the case with Watteau. But whereas earlier artists had brought that intensity of observation to a mother and child or a hunting dog, Watteau applies it, almost for the first time, to men at war. He observes and records how they stand together or apart, how they clean a musket or don a cloak or beat a drum, how they slouch in boredom amid the interminable pauses of military life. It is strange to think that so many of these poses, although part of the universal vocabulary of human gestures, were new to art when Watteau depicted them.

The result of all this observation as Aaron Wile, the exhibit's curator, writes in his learned catalogue—is that, although earlier painters like David Teniers the Younger and Philips Wouwerman depicted scenes of war, "Watteau's work is set apart from these earlier examples by its focus on the *experience* of the soldier." That is certainly and importantly true; but I am less certain of Wile's subsequent claim that Watteau's soldiers seem to be "endowed with an inner life, with subjectivity." These are genre scenes and, as such and by definition, they favor the general over the particular. It is with a remarkably dry and dispassionate eye that Watteau captures the poses of these soldiers. He observes them closely, but entirely from the outside, and it is their external existence alone that interests him.

I find little evidence of an "inner life" beyond our *a priori* knowledge that all men have one. It should also be said that Watteau reveals little manifest sympathy for those men he observes: He is almost like a journalist, reporting the facts. And yet, for all that, he cannot entirely suppress in himself that instinct to infuse even these unlovely scenes with much of the charm and perfume of the ancien régime. ♦

MUSEO THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA / FRICK COLLECTION

B&A

The Hiller Effect

How the comic Gene Wilder became the cuddly Gene Wilder. **BY JOHN PODHORETZ**

The death of Gene Wilder last week at 83 has led to the publication of many fond encomia to a performer who had ceased being of much interest 40 years ago, precisely at the moment when he became a movie star. It was the release of a romantic chase comedy called *Silver Streak* in 1976 that made Wilder a bankable Hollywood commodity in his own right and not just as Mel Brooks's secret comic weapon in *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles*, and *Young Frankenstein* (which Wilder conceived and cowrote). It also sealed his doom as a creative talent.

Brooks had seen some gleam of madness in the very earnest young Broadway actor with whom his wife Anne Bancroft had appeared in a 1963 production of Bertolt Brecht's intolerable *Mother Courage and Her Children*. And he went to town. In Brooks's hands, Wilder's sweet face and offhandedly humble manner were revealed as the thin mask hiding his true face—the face of a demented neurotic lunatic. The scene in *The Producers* when Wilder's mild-mannered accountant Leo Bloom suddenly turns into a tantrum-throwing 2-year-old is one of the greatest feats of comic acting ever recorded on film, as is his conversion from a skeptical doctor into a full-blown mad scientist in *Young Frankenstein*.

It was the director Arthur Hiller who took Wilder and put his cuddly persona at the center of *Silver Streak*. Wilder served as the straight man to Richard Pryor, whose own explosive comic talent made *Silver Streak* a huge hit. And that would pretty much be it for Wilder. He would support Pryor in three more increasingly bad movies when he wasn't playing just the most lovable teddy bear of a man you ever met.

He was a cuddly 19th-century- rabbi traveling through the Old West in *The Frisco Kid* and a cuddly cartoonist in *Funny About Love*. He wrote and directed several terrible movies and one decent one, *The Woman in Red*, which had the advantage of being a remake of a French farce. But even in that one, as a happily married man suddenly seized with adulterous passion for a beautiful woman he has never met, Wilder gave some killer crazy-person material to his costars, Charles Grodin and Joseph Bologna, and stuck with being cuddly.

Gene Wilder (1982)

He first showed his true inclination in 1971 with his only memorable non-Brooks performance as the reclusive candymaker Willy Wonka—who had, of course, been conceived by Roald Dahl but was brought to vivid life through Wilder's own eccentric and memorable acting choices. Wonka is wild and macabre and quite vicious (like the monstrous Dahl himself), but in the movie he ditches all that when he turns into the loving and generous father a little boy has never had. Wilder was great in the early going when he was putting flesh on the bones of the dark and rich Wonka, but it was the milk-chocolate Wonka of the movie's final moments he truly wished to be.

The man who helped Wilder find his happy place predeceased him by a week. Arthur Hiller died at 92 in August. Hiller had had a fascinating career in his heyday from 1964 to 1980. He made two wonderfully dark and literate comedies with the screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky: *The Americanization of Emily* in 1964 and *The Hospital* in 1971. He directed *The In-Laws*, the movie that probably has the funniest screenplay ever written by an American (Andrew Bergman). He directed a terrific New York tale called *Popi* with Alan Arkin as a Puerto Rican widower desperate to find a better life for his young sons.

But Hiller never earned any reputation to speak of because he worked in service of the scripts he directed and never adopted a signature style. *Popi* affects a neo-realist style, with hand-held cameras and a documentary feel. *The Hospital* is shot almost entirely in shadow. *The In-Laws* is overly bright, in the manner of a 1970s TV movie, probably because Hiller clearly knew his job was to make sure the camera was on Alan Arkin and Peter Falk as they spoke Bergman's peerlessly off-kilter dialogue. Hiller was a chameleon, and he was only as good as his material.

Hiller never did anything of note after *The In-Laws*. The 1970s had ended and, with them, Hiller's feel for the pulse of the American moviegoer. That was why he knew how to turn an unconventional performer like Gene Wilder into a light-romantic leading man—indeed, knew he would somehow be more convincing for the times than a more conventional type. *Silver Streak* is a really lousy movie, with a dreadful screenplay by Colin Higgins, but it made gobs of money in 1976.

So what if it led Gene Wilder down a path to movie mediocrity? Wilder made a lot of money along the way himself—and was happier getting to play the nice guy. Wilder was a genuinely kind man who wanted good things for everybody; his 2005 memoir, *Kiss Me Like a Stranger*, makes that almost painfully clear. Mel Brooks had uncovered Wilder's id and by doing so, had given Wilder a career, three classic roles, and a name that will long survive his death. But Wilder didn't want to be a lunatic. He wanted to be a mensch. ♦

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

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CLINTON STRAIGHTENS OUT WEINER

'Saving Private Ryan' reboot: All-female cast!
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Ex-Prez blames media, technology

BY DANIEL HALPER ¶ Who better than Bubba to offer advice to Anthony Weiner? The Post interviewed Bill Clinton following his lunch with the disgraced former congressman on Sunday. "He's sorry it got so out of hand," said Clinton, standing outside Robert's Steakhouse, a restaurant on the second floor of a gentlemen's club. "We had a good talk, over lots of pieces of meat." But the dining room had become too noisy, Clinton explained, which is why they moved to a quieter space called the Harem Room. "We needed more privacy. But I could have sworn the sign above the room said 'Stopless Dancing.'" According to the ex-prez, who smelled of sweet strawberry perfume, technology was to blame. "Camera phones are the demon rum of our time! So let's not be too hard on

SEE PAGES 6-7

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